

5-2023

## A Thin Line or Intimations of Violence

Saul A. Rodriguez  
*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, Saul A., "A Thin Line or Intimations of Violence" (2023). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1249.  
<https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd/1249>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

A THIN LINE OR INTIMATIONS  
OF VIOLENCE

A Thesis

by

SAUL A. RODRIGUEZ

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2023



A THIN LINE OR INTIMATIONS  
OF VIOLENCE  
A Thesis  
by  
SAULA A. RODRIGUEZ

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Eric M. Williamson  
Chair of Committee

Joseph D. Haske  
Committee Member

Jose A. Rodriguez  
Committee Member

May 2023



Copyright 2023 Saul A. Rodriguez

All Rights Reserved



## ABSTRACT

Rodriguez, Saul A., A Thin Line or Intimations of Violence. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2023, 102 pp, references, 13 titles.

This thesis is meant to be an honest discussion about the state of literature from the perspective of a student. Each chapter deals with a different aspect of writing, whether it be putting pen to paper, garnering sufficient experience to achieve verisimilitude, or dealing with critique. Interspersed between the essays are fiction vignettes.

The nonfiction aspects of this body of work are inspired by the voices of philosophers and traditional essayists alike: people such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, T.S. Eliot, Aristotle, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Adams, and Ralph Ellison. The topic of liminality regarding culture and migration is also addressed, mainly through a retelling of my own personal experiences as a son of two immigrants.





## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Kimberly. We got married while I was studying, and us being together has been all the reassurance I've needed to get to this point. You are my best friend. Thank you for struggling with me.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge my thesis committee for agreeing to work with me and helping me edit this manuscript.

My family, of course, has been a great source of comfort. Thanks Greg, for holding me accountable and helping me where I couldn't help myself. Regino, you are an astoundingly good brother and human being. Mom, I would not be here if not for you.

My thesis director, Eric Williamson has been a great inspiration, and his reading suggestions have shaped my progress as a writer. Thank you all.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II. INFANT.....	16
CHAPTER III. ACCEPTANCE.....	22
Bridge.....	31
CHAPTER IV. BALANCE.....	33
Bridge.....	41
CHAPTER V. NAME.....	43
Bridge.....	49
CHAPTER VI. HONOR.....	52
CHAPTER VII. SELFISH.....	57
CHAPTER VIII. SELF-REGULATION.....	63
CHAPTER IX. PROGRESS.....	69
Bridge.....	73
CHAPTER X. TREES.....	75

Bridge.....	81
Bridge.....	84
CHAPTER XI. INTIMATIONS.....	88
CHAPTER XII. VIOLENCE.....	97
REFERENCES.....	101
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	102

## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

There is no path forward that excludes the soul, much as we try to focus on what is seen, i.e., evidence. There is no commentary that can take all facets of life into account, as our attention is more akin to a focused beam than an all-encompassing array. The fact that we often forget this limit functions as proof of its existence. Books are an open admittance that discussion can open itself to limitless possibilities. They make an attempt, with their mass of prose, at omniscience. Additionally, there is a caveat implicit in the medium that there is often little point in the immediacy of in-person discussion. Conversations quickly turn into debates, and debates are won by those with the quickest responses. Academia can be much the same way. Part of my thesis is to enforce the idea that private contemplation constitutes the appropriate response to that product of tireless work that is or should be, a book.

Nonfiction employs the label of truth that appeals to our need for factual information while allowing us to empathize and suffer collectively. The problem with the label “nonfiction” is that it implies the absence of fiction, emphasizing the idea that what is contained within the reading cannot be disproven. This means that our emotional connection to the piece becomes bonded to its factuality – unless – we are somehow already aware that all stories are manipulated.



In creative nonfiction, two characters can be combined into one to tighten the narrative. This raises numerous questions about the label of nonfiction – such as where the line is drawn, whether or not the audience deserves to know of these changes, and most importantly, what the implications are of the label “nonfiction.”

In court, witnesses swear by their testimonies, only to be proven wrong by the evidence. Were these witnesses bought by the prosecution? Sure, but given the many stories and articles about memory reconstruction and “filling in the blanks,” it’s hard to say how many of them thought they were being honest.

I have, in writing my own story, found myself stumped by the inefficiency of memory.

To take a step back, we must always be wary of sharp divisions, such as that between truth and lie, or real and imaginary. Living in such a way as to only believe what’s in front of us does not leave room for honor, freedom, or the incontrovertible healing properties of faith, either in higher beings or whatever we choose to replace them with. These things are ingrained in us because conscious memory is short and fallible, but ancestral memory is lasting and tested past ages of evolution. To recklessly shun these concepts in the name of rational progress is inadvisable. Time is a truer test than the ephemeral thought process which berates the remains of what it has produced. Of course, that is not to say that all traditions are good. Only that we shouldn’t dismiss as arbitrary that which has persisted, as that can often become our only metric to determine what is worth learning and preserving.

According to T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.” The reason for this can be gleaned from anyone who has taken time to absorb classic literature and understood the simple influence of beauty, and the

melding of present and past through universal characters and archetypes. Creation demands comparison. The natural progression of art is one of constant evolution.

It is a mark of accumulated knowledge and wisdom to know that there are things we simply don't know. To doubt is rational, but to assume the negative with incomplete information is a result of bias. I ask that the reader consider whether fiction is disconnected from reality in any meaningful way.

What makes fiction different from a lie? Inherently, nothing. But real fiction – that which withstands the test of time, is more akin to a rearrangement of truth, which some may still call a lie. In order to write good fiction, it's not sufficient to pull information from the imagination and assemble it into a plot. True fiction, or literature, aspiring to greatness, draws from a deep need to find and exposit truth tied to the soul and experience of the writer. The value of this goes beyond simply adding to some "historical sense" for other writers and, of course, historians to draw on. Fiction sparks contemporary debate. Often about the works themselves, but also regarding ethical dilemmas, as it is almost impossible to discuss a piece of literature without also connecting it to reality at large. Following this form of reasoning, we can safely compare fiction to thought experiments.

In physics, thought experiments help conceptualize problems that are difficult, if not impossible, to physically recreate, which helps advance physics in ways that can have practical applications in the future. In moral philosophy, thought experiments help by drawing parallels to real-life circumstances, and consequently, defamiliarizing arguments in which neither side has gained any ground. Fiction often operates by similar merits.

If a scientist should find the secret to creating artificial life, has he now violated some sacred rule of existence? Is this artificial person now allowed to coexist with everyone else, or

are there certain tests of morality to undergo before he is allowed into society? It's easy to claim that the answers will come when that technology arrives, but a better way to begin the discussion is through a masterfully written book disguised as entertainment. The questions need not always pertain to the future. For example, what happens to a society that only seeks entertainment instead of knowledge? The answer is that someone else will think for them. This is what I learned from *Brave New World*, and it's why I'm a strong believer in teaching young people literature.

It's not uncommon in high-school literature classes to discuss the significance of a book in terms of the morality of the characters. Even more common is the discussion of symbolism to describe relatively neutral concepts such as hope and innocence. The morality of a character does not determine whether a piece of fiction can be called literature or not, but even when, say, the protagonist's morality is questionable, there is usually an implied tension that results from questionable behavior that is averse to our expectations of morality. So, the scrutiny of behaviors and concepts related to morality within an, admittedly, fabricated world that nonetheless includes experimental data (visual, tactile, auditory, etc.) and how this relates to both history and the world at large, is what ties fiction to thought experiments. Perhaps this similar construction can point us to why the inclusion of sensory data is not only important for immersion but is also a fixation of those who have read enough literature to confidently discern the good from the bad. This sensory information links fiction to thought experiments, at least in the ways that it connects to reality.

The main difference is, of course, the length of the content. A thought experiment that can summarize a dilemma succinctly is considered good because of its efficiency. In fiction, efficiency is also admired (hence the phrase "murder your darlings"), but it is acceptable to

amplify, defamiliarize, or extrapolate terms into longer phrases to extend the reader's understanding of what is being expressed, and often to enhance the musicality of the piece as well. So, it is my thinking that literature can be thought of as an incredibly complex thought experiment. There are limitless debates that can be had over any piece of literature, and the sole requirement is that the arguments stay within the boundaries of the world established within the story.

Although this dialectic is defined by this rule of fictional boundaries, parallels can of course be drawn to the world we live in.

We return to the Achilles' heel of creative writing when discussing its importance in policy, which is its need to entertain. It can never be a direct representation of reality. Events and people must be omitted to keep the plot central to the story, but upon reading about what makes literature sublime, it becomes clear that this is not necessarily a fault, nor is it true of all fiction. Cassius Longinus in "On the Sublime" (from which I referenced the term "amplify") states, "Accordingly, sublimity and passion form an antidote and a wonderful help against the mistrust which attends upon the use of figures." He then states "For although light and shade, as depicted in colors, lie side by side upon the same surface, light nevertheless meets the vision first, and not only stands out but also seems far nearer. So also, with the manifestations of passion and the sublime in literature." Sublimity stands in contrast to more mundane elements of literature, creating a delicate balance. Without elaboration – without the inclusion of details that might at first seem extraneous – what we would be left with is a fine-tuned projection, wiped clean of any excess strangeness.

One of the marks of good literature is the inclusion of sensory information at crucial points, but this is crucial only so far as it connects us to universal truth. Expressions of sublimity,

then, require both structured and unstructured expressions, as that is what we experience in life, and their confluence creates a contrast that enhances the overall piece. How far, and in what direction we skew from the center of the issue at hand is left to the author's perspective.

Experimental data, both in thought experiments and fiction, can be taken to an extreme where certain processes or people are described in minute detail. Ernest Hemingway's story, "Big Two-Hearted River," is a great example of this. The audience is treated to myriad descriptions of traveling, cooking, and fishing, all to achieve a sense of peace with nature. The meticulous details written regarding procedures and surroundings are the center of the story.

I mentioned earlier that part of writing is giving the entirety of the self to the profession. Does that mean that the writer is ever depicted as they are in real life within the story? The answer would most often be a resounding no. Even if, in a lot of ways, the piece is entirely composed of the writer's sensory and emotional experience, the inclusion of the writer would indicate a fixation on the self, and that is death to literature. However, to offer oneself up to the writing, and to hack away at oneself just as you would at any other piece of the puzzle, truly encapsulates what the whole process is meant to be. This, I hope, is generally acknowledged, and it leads to my next point, which is that the rearrangement of reality is, in fact, integral to the seeking of truth. To begin with, a simple rearrangement serves multiple purposes. For example:

A woman named Olga, thin, aging, yet vivacious, gathered her friends and went to a bar. Olga drank with her friends, free of care until a large woman and her group of rambunctious friends called out to her. She did not think she knew them, but they knew her. As she was looking at her phone, desperately trying to ignore them, they approached her and snatched it away. They threw it against a wall and began to take turns beating her. A tall man approached the flailing group of women while Olga's friends cowered in a corner calling the police. He told

them to get off of her. One of the large woman's friends grabbed a beer bottle and smashed it over his head. Everyone yelled, but no one else dared approach them as they pummeled her for what seemed like forever. They fled the scene, leaving Olga broken and beaten on the floor. Her friends picked her up and drove her home to a husband with severe kidney failure.

Now, if we rearrange this story, we'll see what the difference is:

Olga drank with her friends, carefree until a large woman and her group of rambunctious friends called out to her. As Olga was looking at her phone, desperately trying to ignore them, they approached her and snatched it away. A tall man approached the flailing group of women while Olga's friends cowered in a corner, calling the police. They threw it against a wall and began to take turns beating her. One of the large woman's friends grabbed a beer bottle and smashed it over his head. They fled the scene, leaving Olga broken and beaten on the floor. Her friends picked her up and drove her home to a husband with severe kidney failure. Everyone yelled, but no one else dared approach them as they pummeled her for what seemed like forever. A woman named Olga, thin, aging, and vivacious, gathered her friends and went to a bar.

The rearrangement makes it more difficult to read, but it enforces two ideas that possibly weren't as clear before. One is the chaos of the brawl. Things progressed so quickly that it was likely that Olga didn't have time to organize her thoughts, and now we may have an inkling of how she felt. Two, through syntax we can now see the circular nature of not only addiction but also life in a presumably rough area – the beginning became the ending, indicating that this will likely happen again. It's a rather vague story, but even if I were to embellish it, the heart of it would be the same.

Taking into consideration how many bars there are in so many rough neighborhoods in the entire world, does it matter whether this is true in the strictest sense?

To extrapolate further, given the sheer magnitude of the universe, there may be similar realities playing out at the same time on identical planets. Then you might take into account that the multiverse theory, used to explain the strange behavior of particles on the quantum level, hasn't been disproven. When taking all of this into consideration, it becomes rather arbitrary to delineate between what has and hasn't happened. What matters is the amount of tactile information and whether the piece is connected to what we know about the world, including knowledge gained from previous works of literature.

Still, due to our tribal sense of allegiance, or the wisdom of being primarily concerned with what is known, one of the requirements of literature is to have a place among the monolithic texts that have come before, which are primarily concerned with nature and experience. Even Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a surreal and brilliantly worded exploration of war and mental illness, brings us back from Tralfamadore to an old basement with a typewriter.

Again, it is better to enter a story knowing that there will always be manipulation in service of entertainment and truth, and it will likely never be quite as benign as the changing of names or a simple rearrangement of sentences. The key is to find the author known by his work to be trustworthy in managing this rearrangement. Someone who has a historical sense of their place among the great writers of the past. Someone who understands that reality is a malleable thing, but it can easily be perverted and mismanaged to produce material based on nothing more than an obsession with self-promotion. Someone who, through sheer force of sublime expression, can bring the question of truth from "what if" to "when."

The purpose of creativity, arguably, is to appease some tension between opposing forces. Emotion and logic, freedom and regulation, pride and humility – the list could go on forever. Without tension (also called asynchronicity, dissonance, or marginality) within a person's life, creativity suffers. I believe all writers know this on some level because from the beginning we're taught this in school, and we see it in every story, although sometimes a teacher here and there will jokingly challenge their students with removing conflict entirely from a story to prove that it can't be done. It only makes sense that conflict, which drives a story, would be the same force that drives its creation.

Literature should enable its readers to identify various conflicts at work in their lives. It should help people act in a way that benefits them, and ultimately the world at large. As for my novel, I don't know how well it will achieve this purpose, but I know that I've suffered from marginality and asynchronicity all my life.

The values which fictional stories attempt to articulate can be understood regardless of whether they accurately reflect any of their readers' experiences. For example, to read and appreciate *A Game of Thrones*, the reader doesn't have to accept that zombies can exist in our world, simply that the concept of reanimated ice corpses reflects something about the rules of our universe that merit a place in this alternate universe. This is, of course, without taking into account the ubiquity of zombies as a concept, softening the impact on the reader's suspension of disbelief, or the cross-generic implication of including zombies in a medieval fantasy series. White walkers are charged with symbolism because they reside in a region outside of the inhabitable/known world, the source of their power is mysterious, and they're meant to strike fear in the viewer. Fear is a constant fact of life, as are many themes within the rest of the book,



which means that themes, in a way, tether this medieval story to the present, allowing us to visit this world within a bubble insulated by relative unlikelihood and temporal distance.

The beauty of fiction is that it allows writers to explore complex themes, and freely associate concepts in a way that makes sense of the world we live in without worrying about adhering to the rule that only reality has meaning. Within the book's internal logic, one can safely say that ice zombies represent the existential threat of nature looming always behind our political and social games. In the same way, the internal logic of my novel is such that the pieces which didn't happen follow the same principles of existence as those that did, hopefully causing the reader to question what exactly ties the events together in a way that leads to a unified conclusion.

The conflict between fiction and truth in writing can be posited in several different ways. One, which I found interesting, was the idea that fiction somewhat aligns with primary process thinking. This term was introduced by Freud to describe the initial process of picturing a desired objective before planning comes into play. The concepts have evolved to signify something closer to intuition and analysis.

While primary process thinking is still associated with the id and immediate gratification, it can interact with secondary process thinking to produce wisdom and creative solutions to difficult issues. Intuition processes information in conjunction with previous experiences to perform rapid calculations with abstract concepts.

Part of why I decided to write a blend of essay and fiction was out of the need to fill in some pieces of an ongoing story. Out of necessity, and in the interest of forming an authentic depiction of my experiences as both a student and a worker, the novel cannot be completely based on real experiences, and yet to call it fiction does not seem in line with the style of

narration and the inclusion of real events. Furthermore, I think there is already too much division between what can be gleaned from intuition and objective truth.

As a person interested in both scientific and artistic developments, I am split between a desire to prove every statement I make and a frustration with an over-emphasis on proof. People who rely on data are often more than ready to disregard statements made based purely on intuition, while faith-based, intuitive people are often dismissive of data. In the end, we find that too often there are scientific studies supporting assumptions that could have safely been assumed *a priori*, and we have people on the other hand who make hasty assumptions based on insufficient data. The first is bad because they waste time and resources, and the second is worse because they have justified their position with false objectivity.

Intentionally mixing real events with reconstructions is my way of trying to bridge the gap between these two worlds. In other words, the real events in my book equate to data, and the addition of fictional elements are intuitive statements about life in general that align with that data.

Logic has an undeniable place in the way people consume and enjoy literature, but it can interrupt the difficult process of understanding systems of abstract and unknowable variables. How does one go about accurately quantifying the value of honor in a surreptitious environment where, say, prospective university board members are expected to donate to an incumbent governor's campaign to attain their seats? Though even that pales in comparison to what is occurring daily around the world. It would be a monumental task to accurately depict the importance of honor with all its variables in a quantitative study, but that doesn't mean that it's not an important subject to ponder over collectively. The immediacy of certain issues, especially in an age where technology advances at a breakneck pace, warrant consideration before the

demands of analysis and controlled discussion make the rounds. The purpose of poetry, if one must be named, is to promote virtues and prepare the collective consciousness for the responsibility of utilizing potentially apocalyptic devices.

While my novel doesn't speak overtly about cutting-edge technologies, it subscribes to the mentality that each person must always consider, first and foremost, how their actions contribute to the delicate balance of life. This can be interpreted in reference to environmentalism, as we currently live in a time where we are on the verge of irreversible man-made climate change. Acting in self-interest when the news is filled with tales of avarice will mean the premature death of our progeny. It remains to be seen if my novel will have the intended effect, but, as a product of a mind that very much intends to promote balance, it need only be well-constructed to suffice as a response to the inequity I've witnessed.

If it is allowed by the reader that fiction is a sort of thought experiment in which a seemingly improbable, and yet not totally impossible situation is being presented by the writer in order to reconceptualize axioms about existence and struggle, then fiction might be elevated to at least the same relevance to reality as philosophy. In a way, this framework is already taught in literature classes in the form of analogies. Characters and items represent more than they might at first appear to, and so students of literature are trained to look deeper into every text to decipher a theme that aligns with a posteriori knowledge.

The problem with applying truth in fiction to reality is that it's not true in the strictest sense. The purpose, in the end, is to reach the consumer, and in order for a story to do that it must entertain.

Fiction, in order to be enjoyed, must represent, and therefore rearrange reality in some way. In other words, to have a high degree of verisimilitude – whether it be through general

cohesion and consistency, moments of surprising insight about the human condition, or sometimes even visceral depictions of mindless violence that satisfy some primal revolt against logic and sanity.

I believe many people can relate to the battle between passion and thought, and often when dealing with it, one can run into the question of which path will lead to self-actualization. Self-actualization has been described as the complete attainment of inner potential, a definition that can seem rather vague, and ultimately unhelpful. However, what makes self-actualization so appealing as a concept is its focus on growth rather than deficiency.

I assert, based on my experiences and what I've gleaned from the popularity of books such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Great Expectations*, that too often what drives us to success is the desire to overcome or hide our shortcomings. Certainly, at times I've found myself alone in a backroom, scribbling notes in a journal, trying to create the perfect story to substitute a deep starvation. I have always had a predisposition for loneliness and depression, which made me reclusive and overly sensitive. I often maintained the delusion that finding one person to love would remove the bars that held me in my invisible prison. As I grew older, I kept that determination, but time after time I found myself alone. I wondered how people function with that amount of all-consuming desire in their souls. I even began to wonder, foolishly, if I was the only one who felt that way.

After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I was working at Barnes and Noble to stay close to books while I lingered in a miasma of entry-level jobs. I met up with a friend from high school regularly to exercise, a habit which I'm sure we kept up so we would never fall too far from what we felt were the zenith of happiness. I remember the red wall that framed his incredulous expression as he told me that a friend of ours had committed suicide. His method of

choice was a knife through the heart, the same as a talented musician named Elliott Smith. Stunned, I thought back to what I knew about this friend's life – how he had fallen in love with one of his best friends, only to be rejected time and time again; and how he had run away from home, only to be wooed back by the kindness of strangers he met along the way. Time and again it seemed he had set on a path and been sent back with barely a parting gift.

I realize that I wasn't feeling sadness or shock. I was envious. Death had always held a certain allure, but through various demands to my attention, I would often forget until something would remind me, and I would feel it again – a deep pull to jump from somewhere high and feel the wind for a few brief moments before the ground rushed up to meet me. In the sixth grade, I had a dream that I took as a premonition – if I climbed a snowy mountain, then I could die, painlessly. So, I climbed, and I struggled, and when I reached that summit, He spoke directly to my psyche. He said I wasn't ready. I hadn't lived enough. I couldn't tell anyone what I had dreamed. They could never understand what it meant. Yet I thought that one day I would have enough stories to jump from. My death drive had become my only drive. I wanted to erase all traces of my existence in a cloud of mystery.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly what caused me to idealize death. I think unrequited love might have had something to do with it, but I think even more intense was a serious affliction of anhedonia resulting from having lost my father. At two months old, when my father went away for the first time, I stopped eating completely. The doctors explained to my mother that I was depressed. I didn't resume eating until he'd come back. As time went by, I must've retained a form of that sadness.

I could not, for the life of me, imagine why it is that people carry on well into the hardest parts of life. I could only imagine that my innate frailness would extend to my adult years, where

I'd be expected to take the full brunt of the Leviathan's force. As a reward, I would get – nothing. Hard work had never truly paid off for me in any meaningful way. Working at my mother's warehouse, loading clothes into bales, got me several injuries and no acknowledgment. Reading books was painful because, in the end, I could no longer pretend that I belonged to the pages of whatever book I was reading. Winning the spelling bee in third grade made me a target for special tutors who wanted to prepare me for bigger competitions. My teachers expected more from me but gave less accolades. As far as I could tell, the fruits of any labor only led to more labor and suffering, and the purpose of life was to distract the conscious mind from knowing the tedious nature of reality. If I could have had the option to be shelved indefinitely, I would've done it.

Because memory works best through stories, we must create stories out of our lives if we wish to remember them. This is true as far as what has now been proven about the human brain, but it's also true in the way that it offers a glimpse into the human condition, the soul of our collective toil.

## CHAPTER II

### INFANT

I was sleeping over at my cousin's house. He had a game system, and he was taking turns with his older brother playing Mortal Kombat. I looked at the game for a while. One of the characters was ripping the spine out of the other. I was still in infancy – couldn't have been older than seven. The way they gathered around it seemed like they'd never seen anything like it.

Soon it was time for bed, but I forgot to bring pajamas. My aunt lent me some of my cousin's, who was a few inches taller than me. They fit me baggy.

In the morning we sat in a white kitchen yellowed with age. The metal door that led out to the backyard was open as it always was during the dry summers of Guadalajara. My cousin and I ate *Zucaritas*, or frosted flakes. We found a toy in the cereal box – it was a small rubber shark that squirted water.

We filled it again and again from the basin in the backyard where my cousin's mom was washing clothes. We kicked up dirt as we ran around. The wind tossed the dirt away, and we took turns shooting water at each other. A shady tree grew from the center of the yard, the bark crystalline in structure. A flat branch called to me, saying to climb and gain the high ground. Soon I would return to my grandma's house, from there to Oregon, and eventually from Oregon to Texas. We visited my grandma for a couple of months in the Summer and in the Winter every year. Because of this, I had the advantage of never needing anyone's approval. We were always passing through.

Soon after this, my brother and I walked to an arcade near my grandma's house. I hopped over an exposed tree root expertly. We'd been through there every day for the past week.

The walls of the arcade were colored pastel pink, and the floors had white tiles that had been cracked by the shifting earth. A drain near the middle called the original purpose of the room into question. It seemed big enough to store a couple of cars. My brother focused intensely on perfecting his technique in *Street Fighter*. I played a side-scrolling Simpsons game where I beat people up as Bart. I wondered I think for the first time, if things could always stay the same. Seeing how we'd recently moved to Texas from Oregon I should have known the answer to that already.

Those days spent at the arcade with my brother meant a lot. I felt chronically anxious and at night, a demonic imp would chase me through my dreams until I either stopped running out of exhaustion or was caught in a moment of vulnerability. I would die, and wake up to start a new day, with my sheets soaked from fear. My brother, being overweight and having night terrors of his own, must've sympathized with my timidity, but outwardly seemed always ready to laugh. Later he would fully embrace his appearance and personality, and I would learn to enjoy my time alone. Then, one day, nightmares would become vivid introspection.

We passed more than a couple of hours there until we ran out of money and had to go back to my grandma's house. She had food ready as she always did. The house smelled like *posole*. My aunts and uncles had already eaten and were sitting in the living room listening to ranchero music on the radio. The stereo took the place of where a TV would sit in an American living room. Bars of light on the front of it danced to the music, moving up and down to indicate the levels of sound it produced.



The living room sat a step below the kitchen, but other than that there was no separation, no wall. My mom washed dishes while the rest of them talked on old couches of polished wood and rough fabric. This was one of the rare days when I would see my mom, as she would always leave me in my grandma's care.

My grandma saw us and immediately offered to serve us food. "Should I serve you?", she asked with tired eyes. I don't remember if I said yes. I often said I wasn't hungry, but I'd like to imagine I served myself and pulled up a seat for her. Then I'd ask about her day, and she'd tell me about a *posada* or some party that might've taken place. The truth is I never knew what to say, and my Spanish suffered from a lack of confidence.

My cousin Omar had a giant house. Once when we were jumping on the trampoline in his backyard, he told me a story. He said a monster sometimes appeared there, sitting atop one of the high walls surrounding the yard. One day he was jumping with one of his friends, and his friend spotted the monster. He never came back down, and my cousin found that he was jumping alone. The monster had taken him to hell.

That monster was Pikachu. I can only assume his parents told him this story to scare him away from the demonic sensation sweeping our generation at the time. He internalized his parent's story and placed himself within it.

Sitting in his dining room, waiting for breakfast to be served I had a sense comparable to the scene in *Citizen Kane* when Orwell and his wife are sitting at opposite ends of the table in their mansion. The table was enormous and heavy. An indoor balcony overlooked the scene. Loneliness felt better in luxury. Emptiness seemed to reverberate toward the high ceiling, dispersing only with the rays of the sun. We ate sugary cereal for breakfast.

Omar had a “Playstation 2”, a game system that had only just come out. My older brother and I had owned the original “Playstation” for a while, and we enjoyed it. Once, we were heading to church and my mother was yelling at someone to get ready. I sat in my Sunday shirt finishing a video game called *Final Fantasy IX*, which I had been playing with a degree of emotional investment only possible at that age. The ending dragged on and on, as they tend to do in video games of that length. I didn’t get to finish it, and off to church, we went. I detested going to church, where sleep seemed like an inevitable sin, and the priest spoke only Spanish which invited my mind to wander.

Now that I think back, I realize my older brother was often with me. I was always dependent on him. Something about his presence allowed me to see and feel what was happening around me, and without that reassurance, I would be set adrift on a sea of grey matter.

I stopped visiting my cousins a few years later. My family and I went to Guadalajara on our yearly two-month trip and instead of going anywhere, I immediately shut myself up in my temporary room. Something had changed.

Before this change, I had seen my cousins mess with my brother. My brother, who I adored. My brother whose presence I depended on.

Two of my older cousins wanted to go to Carrefour, a shopping mall somewhere in the city. My brother had been invited. We all sat in my cousin’s living room watching TV while we waited for them to leave, and suddenly my cousins said they’d be right back. They urged my brother to stay, that they were just going to take care of something before they left.

They didn’t come back, and I sat there with him well into the day. I remember he didn’t seem to mind.

Soon afterward I started having vivid nightmares where four or five of my cousins would sit my brother in a chair, and they would surround him, taunting him because of his weight. He would laugh gleefully while they poked his belly and insulted him, calling him *estupido* and *gordo*.

I only know these were nightmares because I brought it up to my brother once, and he said nothing like that ever happened. For a long time, I had trouble discerning dreams from reality. It's a common occurrence among children, but that doesn't stop me from holding dreams in high regard now that I have begun to understand the interplay of subconscious thoughts and wakeful actions. The privilege of dreaming is that of glimpsing truths which we accumulate when the present demands our full attention, and the duty of record-keeping falls to a deeper faculty, deeper even than that of survival.

I believe connections between people transcend distance. I have felt string theory in action.

Somewhere along the way, I lost interest in my extended family. Part of the problem must have been the fear that someone would point out how quiet I was. I wasn't comfortable speaking Spanish, or English for that matter.

My *Tia* Francis, who had recently joined the family, taught an English class in Guadalajara. My mom figured if she sent me to this class then I'd learn Spanish by reversing the lessons. It made sense.

My aunt drove me to the class, accompanied by a girl whom I remember thinking had the most beautiful hair in the world. It was the color of deep woods and earthen clay.

When we arrived, Francis took her place at the head of the classroom, and I made my way to the back. The room had plenty of natural light. The air felt warm as I sat behind rows of

children half my age. My aunt, the teacher, held up a colorful image of a train and the class said “train” in unison. I sat and tried to understand how this was meant to teach me Spanish.

Afterward, my aunt took the girl and me to a park by her apartment complex. We played and ran around, and I had a feeling of catharsis. I had done what was asked of me and performed admirably, and now I was in a park that reminded me of home. My aunt sat on a bench and read her newspaper, pretending not to watch us.

## CHAPTER III

### ACCEPTANCE

I originally chose the creative writing major as an undergraduate student, thinking it would help me write a great novel someday. As I went through the program, I noticed that I found it nearly impossible to sit and formulate a story. Even when I was able to nail down a cohesive piece, it always seemed to be missing something – that vital spark that separates life from death. Now I'm at the end of my graduate career, and the only thing I'm confident about is my ability to express ideas clearly. For whatever reason, I'm unable to adapt my voice to fit the third person. Call it what you will – stupidity, lack of practice, or narcissism – I am obsessed with playing out the ideas in my head, to the detriment of my ability to adopt someone else's narrative. I wasn't always like this, nor am I always like this now. I can adopt a wider perspective, but not for the time it takes to write a short story, let alone a novel.

I sat among a retinue of scholars and writers. The gray sky of dusk hung flatly in the air, as I smelt the billows of smoke that flowed from half-burnt cigarettes. Williamson was talking about a book he was meaning to publish – an accumulation of aphorisms – and I held my journal full of half-finished essays, ready to present a few pages for their approval.

Nothing in my list of previous accomplishments, among which were a small award for scholarship and an honorary mention in a local writing competition, seemed to justify my position as one of their peers. I had simply happened upon this chance, after a sequence of brash, free-floating decisions. The first, and least risky of these led me to the industrial geometry of my

alma mater, seeking my MFA in creative writing. The second led me to inquire about a certain Eric Williamson, for the possibility of directing my thesis. The third was to send a letter to the dean of my department, admonishing a few exchanges that I had during my post-graduate career, which I believed highlighted a deeper issue with the department. The displeasure I expressed in this aforementioned letter might have come as a surprise to those it pertained to, which is why I feel it was an act of cowardice. Truly it was just a necessary release of my frustration with the non-existence of mastery, or its requirement, in a Master of Fine Arts program. This cemented my position, at least in my own regard, as someone swimming against the flow, while placing a target on my own back. Anyone, in any situation, who deigns to criticize a program openly where normally a veil of niceties is maintained at all costs will suffer from it. It is the same with family. I am not wired to maintain my composure in such environments – not anymore.

As bitter as I might seem to a third-party observer, I had never placed full fault on the department or its staff. Aside from the inherent lack of structure in a program meant to produce writers, they had the unpleasant task of filling seats to keep the program alive while trying to maintain some semblance of standards. They also had to adhere to a socio-historical method of judgment wherein writing was no longer valued for universality or aestheticism but for its demonstration of knowledge about marginality, whether it be in regard to race or other sources of personal strife. “Thus in the task of legislation, we find together two things which appear to be incompatible: an enterprise too difficult for human powers, and, for its execution, an authority that is no authority.”, writes Rosseau.

As a budding writer, I can say that it is extremely difficult to assess the poignancy of my own writing when there is not much expert feedback (that which I did receive was sparse and veiled). I think it’s because of this that one early acquaintance from this post-graduate journey

suggested I find a guide. Then I was provided with a thesis introduction, authored by Williamson, which resonated with me and helped to recall earlier experiences of coming in contact with singular and unique perspectives. It transported me to a time when I could meld with an author's perspective because the delineation of creeds and backgrounds had not been defined so clearly. I knew the person who wrote this piece was my best chance to find my writing voice, so I e-mailed him to help me with my thesis.

I've been told that the introduction of supernatural elements always indicates that the writer has nothing left to say. It is true in the way that defamiliarization can lead to escapism. That is, to me, the extent of its veracity. I believe the common adage that writing is subjective, though to a lesser degree than my peers: to the extent that the very same part of a story that loses all relevance to one reader, may be a crucial point of contact with another reader. It would take a great degree of familiarity with a beloved fantasy novel to declare with utmost certainty that it has nothing worth saying. Still, it is every person's right to make a declaration about the standards of their profession. Whichever voice rings loudest does so because it reverberates through pupils of a similar mind, and that accumulation of interest and awareness is the very thing public discourse is made for. Democracy is not just a governmental term; it is a suspicion that at least half of a given population can agree on the absolute best course forward. Stifling discussion is an act against democracy, and so, to a lesser degree, is refusing to speak. So, I speak on behalf of the supernatural, as well as any other fantastical element that can be introduced naturally and with cause.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, while not part of the Science Fiction genre, is a good defense for it. It utilizes the concept of aliens to defamiliarize a mental illness. It is partly autobiographical, and at the center of the book is Kurt Vonnegut's desire to tell a war story without any heroes. In the

book, aliens are a device to indicate separation from a matter that is too grave to express in just the telling – the bombing of a thriving city and the horror of being unable to outrun such an event – but what it also does is tell a sub-story that calls the reader to reflect on whether it matters. On the one hand, Tralfamadorians are not real, but on the other, their world operates within the logic of Billy Pilgrim’s mind, and his misadventures with them tell us that he is deeply dissatisfied with time and the way it limits our perspective. Insofar as these aliens promote a school of thought that puts even the almighty time in its place, while also giving insight into the inner workings of Billy Pilgrim’s brain, those aliens are very much real. When fictional things are bestowed with the right combination of chaos and structure, they begin to take on life and might be said to exist with about the same veracity as an online persona. It’s useful to believe Tralfamadorians are real because then we can interact with them and gain personal insight – insight that is essential to public discourse. I would argue against those who choose to read only nonfiction that it is not simply a matter of taste. The avoidance of fiction in its entirety shows a misunderstanding of the genre as one which engages a useless faculty. Imagination is anything but useless; I would go so far as to say that it is an essential component of empathy. Still, anyone would be more than justified in setting this boundary as long as that person has read enough books to have a sense of where the spark is generally lost on the way to a great story, and it may well be that fiction that calls attention to its spuriousness does so at no small cost to literature as a whole. In order for a profession to reach the higher auspices of art, it needs to garner respect. There is little respect for what is outwardly a distraction.

In truth, to disagree with someone is not to disparage their views, and this is a fact that is often forgotten.



I have reacted negatively, and possibly inappropriately, in classes where my perspective was downplayed. This of course comes from a place of pridefulness, which is useless in writing. The act of putting thought to paper as a career requires that a writer lose their sense of pride, and only recoup whatever parts of it they earn over time.

Perhaps a bit more controversially, I think escapism is a necessary tool for survival. Constant contact with reality is demoralizing, despite rationalizations about how the world is in a better state than it ever has been in the past.

When a book is able to engage a reader's imagination, that should be considered a desirable effect. I trust that reality will always show up to kick a dreamer in the teeth. I do not trust that imagination will always return once disposed of, and without the ability to create scenarios in the mind and bring them to fruition, life becomes a series of decisions being pushed on you. Of course, too much imagination can impose much the same effect, but that has been said by others many times over.

Perception, gained by gleaning the world, and insight, gained by reflecting, work in tandem but must be developed separately. Often, we cease reflecting to find that we need to act and that our inward view, omniscient as it seemed, was restricted.

I struggle when writing about dichotomies because pitting two ideas against each other often encourages the assumption that they are opposites, or that they cannot coexist. It is one of my constant complaints about scholarship that it is too straightforward in this way. We are charged with drawing connections, sometimes between seemingly unrelated topics. These connections, when found with an honest spirit of exploration and an even mind, give pause to the skeptic in us, and discourage the virtues that lead to their discovery.

Once defined, we respect this thread as a dog does a tree line. We cease to ask questions that stray too far from our original thesis, and when the writing is done, we await a response.

Scholarship is built on responses. Every paper is laden with footnotes and references, and a list of related readings. I see the necessity in it, and yet a great part of me wants to ask that we cease posing questions to each other as if every thought needed to be written. It is reflection that should be encouraged, which includes keeping an inner dialogue that checks every thought before it is fired like an intractable harpoon.

Reflection is often brought on by meeting a barrier, which causes indecision. As I have continued my stint as a student, I've often been surprised by the lack of barriers or even doors. A surprising number of assignments were graded on completion, which came to feel like every assignment bled into the other. There was no real mark of good writing, except the approval of my peers. What we were missing were experts on time-tested works. Instead, we would often read young adult fiction or works so recent as to be unusable for inspiration. As a result, every class seemed to lack a sense of seriousness. We all had our individual goals, and they were not to be judged by a unified standard of measurement. Obviously, this philosophy allows students leeway to explore subjects freely, but I can attest to some unintended consequences. Besides the blending of assignments and the looming uncertainty of whether anything has been mastered, feedback becomes the only data upon which a student can improve – feedback which will often be lacking because, while every perspective is valued, professors seem to be discouraged from insisting too much on theirs, though where this pressure comes from exactly remains a difficult topic to breach. What is true, is that without an expert to determine the desired outcome for a class (specifically what type of writing should be emulated and what type should be discouraged), it begins to feel like a waste of time and money. Without such an expert, works are

judged for the appeal of their outlines, as the material itself remains as a lockbox without a key. This is partly why it is the writer's job to universalize their experience. Specificity is only ever meant to be a starting point.

It becomes easier to make choices if you decide the outcome of those choices cannot truly be measured, but in such cases of academic free-fall, the average student, such as myself, will return to a predicament of self-imposed stupidity.

The truth is that it very well may prove true that we are all created equal, but it seems to me that the more important truth is that we should be assumed to be equal. Aside from diagnosed illnesses, students should be held to a high standard. Allowances for economic and cultural backgrounds are made, justifiably, during compulsory years of schooling and are set by administrators. As soon as education becomes transactional, there is an obligation to do everything on the institution's side to live up to their end of the bargain. Professional development is all well and good. Art is even more demanding and should take priority if there is any hope of producing it.

We will always find ourselves accosted by the opinions of others – opinions that are largely centered around the self. The only true restraint on judgments that can be made is that there is enough forethought behind them to defend if needed. The greatest challenges are those of uncertainty and time – will this judgment seem false given enough time?

When books were assigned, they had to be read quickly, making any sort of reflection a precious luxury. Although time, as I've learned from my conversations with other students, always seems rather slippery regardless of the pace at which assignments are given, this frantic digestion of literature seems to downplay the importance of the works studied and discourages the sort of reflection which should be promoted.

As I diligently protect my own state of tranquility in hopes that I can better serve when called to action, I hesitate to impose upon another's mental space. It remains central to our rights as Americans that we remain free to pursue our own happiness. Yet, it becomes difficult to determine where one's rights end when we consider the role of government and the idea of the common good, which it represents. Given the inherent variety of life within our species, no government, or regulatory body, can account for the myriad responses and emotions of every person under its jurisdiction. Often this results in compromise which, within the context of a graduate class, is a compromise between the expectations of the professor and the abilities of the students. Often those of us who resist value judgments, along with the visceral reaction they sometimes entail, are unfamiliar with this concept of implicit and abstract negotiation. Yet, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, and his predecessors John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, the people are sovereign. Students have chosen this fate for themselves, a concept that is strengthened by the apparent power of a bad evaluation upon the trajectory of a professor's career. When we can all agree upon the necessity of structure and the roles of both students and professors in deciding what that structure should be, we will find that real progress can be made.

Furthermore, to pass judgment on someone's ideas will always elicit an emotional response, and it is best we accept that as an inevitable facet of grading and feedback.

Emotion has its role in determining our investment in the material, how much damage will be done to our aesthetic sensibility should we choose to edit our work, and our perception of what our work should look like going forward. Without pathos, we remain blind to the numbing effects of facts and figures. The soul will always resist being tallied, thus showing the intellect

how much is at risk. This is abstract negotiation at work, and it bears real consequences on the trajectory of a writer.

Any work must take a significant amount of time to consume. The simple truth is that what is often easiest to commit to memory is that which we have spent the most time with. Dedication to a hobby, such as playing an instrument, can usually be measured by the amount of time spent with said instrument. Prioritization, judged after the fact, is often an equation of time spent multiplied by the value of said time. My priority is a slow and deliberate development of the mind.

## Bridge

A young boy stood along a large, three-paneled window, a long vinyl-covered seat running along its breadth. Next to him stood Elijah, an older gentleman with a grey demeanor standing with his hands behind his back. Outside, the autumn leaves had parted from their trees and began coating the backyard. A basketball hoop sat in the middle of the yard in sharp relief against a forest of pine trees. The home he stood in was not his, though it was familiar.

“Everything is changing again. Ponderous living and thoughts inconsequential, mixing.”  
Said Elijah.

The kid listened as the house began lifting off the ground – slow, as one would do when exhausted by a new day.

“Where are we going?” He asked, dumb with longing and regret.

“We’re leaving for good. Change is always for good.”

“I don’t want to leave,” said the kid.

“You can get off, but if I were you I would do it sooner rather than later. You might hurt yourself.”

The kid looked outside. The sky was clear, the short grass still. The wind had ceased completely. He looked at the small basketball court, where he and his friends would practice dribbling, and every other shot they made would fall several inches short of the hoop. He recalled how the snow would look as it started to grey – the crisp air of Oregon winter and the feeling of sinking his rubber boots into the snow as he made his way to the bus. The bottom of the window was now almost level with the bottom of the backboard.

“If I stay, will you be gone?” He asked, turning again, but Elijah had already disappeared. Tears filled the kid’s eyes as the house continued its ascent. He stepped toward the door, which

was left open. “Change is always for good,” he told himself, ‘And still for the chance to live here forever, oscillating between life and dream...’ and here the boy clocked their ascent once more, ‘I would trade whatever else might lie ahead.’

Thinnest strokes of color drowned in black globs, congealed darkness.

## CHAPTER IV

### BALANCE

We are often taught that writing with detail is vastly preferable to writing in generalizations. There is, of course, plenty of merit in this approach. The issue lies with encouraging students to eschew generalizing statements altogether. As D.H. Lawrence states in *Studies of Classic American Literature*, broad statements are the air beneath the story which blows away the excess to reveal the outline of the larger theme. The only way to understand the difference between useless exposition and an effective overarching statement is to read vigorously, and unfortunately, that is something that has become rarer as information has become more readily searchable through key phrases and targeted queries. Instead of reading widely in search of one fact or nugget of truth, we can simply find it instantly, and this leads to a population unaccustomed, and often unwilling, to read books – this predisposition enhances the sense of solipsism and self-aggrandizement in observational statements.

However, when used to cut through a haze of prose to hit the heart of a matter, we can employ exposition for great literary effect, as Kurt Vonnegut, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and any number of classic American writers can attest to through their work.

Writers must pride themselves on their minds while accepting that the material of their work is somewhat translucent. Great literature is simple in its material, and complex in its arrangement, although the arrangement is only as complex as it needs to be to serve the material. A reader would be perfectly justified in reading a book, and deciding that the work is inherently



flawed, to disparage it, however, their view lacks a crucial element: the arrangement of the work. If there was no excess in the telling of the story, and every character played their part within the piece, then the issue was simply with the writer's choice of material to work with. It's not likely that any amount of tinkering would remedy this problem in the eyes of the reader. So, it is essential to have peers with similar taste review your work, a fact that carries with it a warning: that insulation can often produce a lukewarm product.

If a writer can master the art of arrangement, free from deliberations about the subject matter, they now have evidence of labor, and so arrangement becomes a safe and marketable skill for them. It's no wonder that new writers sometimes have an aversion to structure and planning. The thought of our first piece being, not only bad but formulaic, is almost too much to bear. Better that it should be too ambitious than lacking thereof. It is preferable that a first attempt should fall into obscurity than for it to float just under the surface, overripe and forgotten. This fear seems to go away once success in the profession has been assured, or confidence is established. This, I would argue, leads to complacency, another cause of lukewarm writing.

I don't think much has to be said about the benefits and drawbacks of fear, as we all have plenty of experience with it. I am not a proponent of the use of fear as motivation, as it tends to produce the opposite of the intended effect. I believe there is a better way to educate – one where expectations for success are established and students are encouraged to measure their own progress.

Even with the winds of inspiration at a writer's back, the mind will follow familiar pathways to reach its destination. I'm a believer in writing without a destination in mind. I believe, and I think, for those who dislike faith as a basis for discussion, that the best writing is

borne from exploration. Additionally, or consequentially, we must believe that even as we tread the same path as explorers of the past, our cumulative experience will yield a peculiar insight, and thus our personal exploration will yield its value to the universal, collective consciousness.

However, I find that exploration requires a fair amount of tension between creative and destructive forces. Or, to put it in a different way, between self-confidence and self-doubt. Too much confidence and the work becomes a jumbled mess of ideas, or worse, a straight line from start to finish. Too much doubt results in a blank page or writing that seems choppy and stuttered. Confidence is a result of choosing to go forth with set principles and outward focus, relying on previous reflections and moments of doubt which served as moments of redirection, aimed at maintaining a path to whatever goal is most important to us. This is where life and games intersect: in the choosing of paths and the rewards of making progress on that path, whether it be to make money, build a family, attain status, or simply survive.

Distractions, and their role in creating tension, delaying our progress, and causing us to question the value of struggle, function as agents of doubt. Our inability to resist them comes from the internal knowledge of questions left unanswered – questions raised by the soul about existence, galloping through our minds and refusing the pull of our reins. The longer we refuse to reflect, the more displaced we become from a true state of assurance and satisfaction, until finally, we attempt to fully escape. Life, of course, is not a game, in the sense that permanence differentiates the two. However, much like a game, life seems to be about progress, which is a statement that can be proven by its dark twin aphorism: stagnancy is death. I have refused the call to write, for the pursuit of simpler passions, and watched the window of inspiration draw further and further away until I became forlorn – depressed by unfinished narratives – but those ruts were not without purpose. They caused me to empathize with people in similar

predicaments. Understanding the lost thinkers of the world seems imperative to move forward if only to lose my fear of joining their ranks. I also learned that there's truly no way back once you've become fractured – what is broken will carry that break, even after the healing effects of time and effort have taken place, and perhaps it's for the best after everything's been tallied. What doesn't kill us leaves a mark, and these marks accumulate to form a language. When each person has their own language, we are forced in getting to know them, to learn to speak again.

I can't help but see my experience as a graduate student as a product of an over-emphasis on student feedback, and to a larger degree, perhaps counterintuitively, an overemphasis on progress. Before I have demonstrated knowledge of the basics of writing, I am asked to compose a short story, and in return for my work, I receive vague impressions and hastily scrawled line notes, along with the occasional detailed summary. Because there is a general sense that the classics of literature are defunct – or at least that's how I explain their absence from the curriculum – the only real standard to measure myself by are comparable works within the genre that I fall into, and I use the word fall with every possible connotation. Reading suggestions are among the most useful and respectable approaches to feedback. Still, when I signed up for the MFA, I expected much more in terms of certainty, comradery, and passion.

It feels repugnant to say such things and to assume any sort of superiority, and yet I feel it is one of my responsibilities as a paying student. How many budding writers need to be sacrificed before we concede that there needs to be an adequate system of judgment? Not all of us adhere to the apparent preeminence of subjectivity. There is such a thing as a desirable balance of chaos and structure resulting in authenticity, or verisimilitude. This quote, from Karl Shapiro's "The Career of the Poem", illustrates what I mean:

There is nevertheless a true fame for the work of art, one which the poet himself values, one which the world values as well. This fame has nothing to do with the esotericism of myth or the power of public appeal. It has to do with authenticity. In art we refer to truth in terms of authenticity: that is the only way we have to get at it. How this authenticity is established and how it is recognized by the reader is another question. But suffice it to say that if this quality did not exist we would be living in a chaos in which every work of art would be the equal of every other work of art. This truth is personal truth. It is not universal truth nor is it merely what is called a point of view. It is a truth which the writer does not doubt and which the reader is convinced of in spite of himself; and the means of persuasion is beauty. Probably it is this relationship which makes some writers think of beauty and truth as interchangeable. In any case, in a work of art we as readers can vouch for the beauty. The truth we take on faith. If we doubt its beauty we doubt its truth. One of the worst criticisms we can make about a work of art is to say that it is unconvincing.

This can be paired with another of his quotes from “The True Artificier”:

Human experience itself is formless, chaotic; at any rate we cannot comprehend the “form” of human experience satisfactorily. The poet discovers an order for his own experience; the expression of this discovery is by definition formal....For he has entered into ties with the world where apparently no ties existed. He has not “sought” form not “achieved” form nor “invented” form: he has experienced it. He has entered its presence and it exists by virtue of his presence. And when it comes into existence it shows certain characteristics, which are these.

Beauty: a work of art is beautiful. Symmetry and harmony: beauty is symmetrical or partakes of symmetry, and is harmonious or partakes of harmony. Wholeness: beauty

must be whole, not fragmentary. Symmetry plus harmony plus wholeness equal formal beauty: that is our equation. And poetic artifice consists of finding the symmetrical, harmonious whole for a given poetic (personal) situation.

This system, as Shapiro describes it, is far from perfect, as it remains to be seen how personal truth becomes an objective metric, but it goes further in explaining elements of balance in literature than anything that has been enforced in some of my classes.

The establishment of this balance as a desirable outcome is a burden I place on higher offices. A unified system encourages a healthy sense of progress in students, and a fractured one does the opposite. It almost seems as if the creative writing program was never meant to produce great writers, but only good stories – meaning that the lack of overall consistency between classes and the sometimes over-emphasis on telling stories based on our cultural history can sometimes make it feel as though we are only meant to produce writing that promotes a perspective, which we are meant to accept without question. There is nothing outwardly wrong about this goal or message, but it seems to politicize what is, at its core, an extra-political profession. Fiction and nonfiction writers alike need to be free to present a story from any perspective, especially if it impedes any preconceived notions of the status quo. Again, this does not mean that stories from the border do not have value – I have written and read a few vignettes that helped me come to terms with my roots – but the writing program is saturated with these stories to the point that I wish I had applied elsewhere to route this all-consuming identity from which nothing can escape without being tagged and labeled.

It behooves me to elaborate on the dangers of labels to a writer but suffice it to say that I have often been tempted to follow in the footsteps of many writers and establish a pseudonym.

When I was in sixth grade, we read *Esperanza Rising* as a class, and it was eye-opening. Specifically, I remember the unjust burden of trying to stay out of the limelight as illegal immigrants, while earning enough money to live off of and also send home. Since then, I have read dozens of similar stories, of varying caliber, and after each one, I have become slightly more anesthetized. I will always care about the immigrant plight, but I am also horrified by the idea that I could tread the same ground with less decisive stomps.

My story, as someone naturalized into U.S. citizenship before I'd said my first word, is tame as far as immigrant stories go. That's not to say that my family didn't suffer from the transition – my father lost his mind, and my mother became incredibly distant, even, dare I say, bitter – but to present my story as anything less than a gray area would be disingenuous. My identity has always been predicated on the roots of humanity, not the humanity of my roots. This is a position I take knowing that not everyone is able to make the distinction.

They tell us if we fill up enough pages, we might be able to transcend the barrier. It makes us anxious to perform, those of us who do in fact care about our race. It seems there are not enough teachers to pull us out of our literary cocoons into freedom of expression before we are asked to restrict ourselves once again to the topic of culture with proper respect for literature.

There is a class of words that can take us away from the dark ages. There is also a way of using those words that keeps us from enacting change. As a writer and an occasional critic, I am a huge proponent of simplicity for its democratic effectiveness. Complexity should be strived for but never emulated. The wall of thought is a place of calibration. Behind it is the outside world. Do we intend to break through, or do we walk into it thinking it is a cave? Are we simply speaking to ourselves from atop a platform?

To live without understanding our motivations is to live in a dream. The birds multiply around us while we starve for their sound.

## Bridge

His experience with education would vary over time. Teachers would promote the act of critical thinking but test on memory. These conflicting points seemed to elevate the importance of private reflection, seeing how public knowledge could be gained by anyone. He thought, vaguely, as he watched his classmates from the back row, that he could not justify his existence as part of a function.

Ignacio seemed ridden with bad luck. In middle school, while working a summer shift at his mom's used clothes warehouse, he was sitting on the dais of a throne made of clothes packed into bales. Sitting next to him was his uncle Geraldo who was staying with them for an extended period in their small Texas home. His lively manner made him seem young, along with his height, though the sharp lines on his face betrayed his real age. He was easily frustrated by the boy's tendency to wake him up in the mornings by watching cartoons in the living room, which also functioned as a guest room.

Across from them was another uncle, Jose, who had his own clothing business in Guadalajara, leaning against a wall, discussing the day's transactions with the kid's mom. She would respond with formal levity which was so common to the kid he hardly registered it, and so they went for an hour or so at the end of a long day of work. Abruptly, and with the crinkle of plastic, the uncle next to him lifted off from his seat and moved to the wall. He had noticed Jose's children playing atop the pile and moved for his own safety.

Then, behind a smattering of laughter, one of the bales fell from up high and flattened the boy, causing his chest to slam against his knees. It weighed a hundred pounds and fell from over ten meters. Unlucky as it was, the incident could have been worse had he not been leaning forward.



Ignacio's vision went black, and suddenly he was laying on the ground. The affluent uncle, Jose, whose kids were playing atop the throne, lifted him by the arms and tried to put his feet on the waxed concrete, but the kid yelled of a pain shooting through his abdomen. They decided it might be best that he go to a clinic, but that he go to one in Mexico.

They loaded him into the back of a truck and left him for almost an hour, and during this time, he heard on the radio a man who claimed he was the devil, bringing tides of anger and destruction. This seemed a sure sign to the child that he was cursed. Luckily the doctor gave better news, after doing an x-ray and examining that nothing was fractured. He was young enough, around twelve, that he still held some flexibility of youth, though internally his sense of danger developed in spades.

## CHAPTER V

### NAME

I was named, not after the king of Israel from the Bible, but after some guy on TV that my mom thought was attractive. I was raised with the same *laissez-faire* attitude. I am like the king of Israel when he failed to do as his God commanded. The official definition of my name is inconsequential; meaning ascribed is always inferior to that which is lived and narrated.

Ralph W. Emerson, in his essay titled “Self-reliance,” wrote, “. . .if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.” Clearly, as a believer in the Christian God, Emerson understood the weight of his words. Still, it had to be said. Some of us are damned from the beginning, being of a certain nature that we must live by truth as we see it, not as it is given to us. If that makes us in some way akin to Satan, then we falling stars should be thanked for the contrast we provide. Meanwhile, our tumultuous words may still be proven right. It is one of the many paradoxes of life that anything could be timely and inopportune at the same time. And yet, these things exist in numbers immeasurable.

I have overcome the worst of me. What is left in the present is what has survived more than a decade of self-examination. I saw in my father the potential for destruction that a lapse in judgment can inflict. The other proclivity that he had – one for laziness and hatred of authority – is much harder to curb, justified as it is by the iniquity which is ever-present in the world.

I have spoken to students who, during the recent pandemic, had to take a sabbatical from their studies because even in this seemingly advanced age of technology, they couldn’t get

sufficient internet speeds where they lived – the lower class rarely gets proper respect for shouldering society, and the price of health in this country is inflated almost beyond redemption. Injustice compounded upon injustice, and I, charged with not only understanding myself but also my role in the larger machinations of government, must acquiesce to maintain a respectable trajectory – and for how long? On days when I can give my father the same credit I'd give to a stranger, I think that he must have had similar thoughts. He came to America for a reason, after all. Though it seems he didn't find what he was looking for, as he eventually returned to Guadalajara, albeit, only after beating my mom and then violating his parole. In a way, he lived his own Chthonic myth.

I've always valued the difficulty of overcoming hardships over sustained, preventive effort. Much of my history is merely the calling of bluffs between God, the status quo, and me. The obstacles I face come from within and manifest in ways that perpetuate their existence. If not a virus, it is something that mimics its patterns. Knowing this, I still cannot heed the advice of others for my own benefit.

I am torn between considering myself an inconsequential lump of matter, and believing that, with a little help, I can exert enough focus to address the world's problems. One denigrates the lens through which I see, and the other deifies it. I consider it a necessary battle and so I carry on. I am aware of how obsessed I am with my own consciousness. Until I learned outward focus, it was all I knew:

But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure?

Answer: Of himself.

Well, so I will talk about myself.

I have gone through several rotations of what I would call inward and outward focus. When I was young, I wasn't aware that I could switch between the two, but when I realized that I was falling behind socially, I kicked myself into a new awareness so that I could experience the world as others do. I started forcing myself to make eye contact and hold conversations, even though it felt as if my brain were going to explode. By junior year of high school, I could hold passing conversations with strangers, though it still took incredible effort. To this day, every experience I have is painted by that initial decision to switch. I know that there is a fundamental shift in values and perspective that is made possible by becoming numb to self and seeing the world as a concept independent of my existence. I know that those who are happy are usually focused outwardly. I'm confident that everyone has this ability, but to what extent others are aware of it, I can never be sure. I mention this because it is crucial to my understanding of balance.

Outward focus brings time to the forefront – the enemy is at the gate; a friend is at the door – while inward focus is the realm of space. Both modes of thinking form one adult. The difference between left and right is often not a gap, either generational or geographical – it is a shift – and that brings many of us closer than we think, that is if we share a proclivity for balance. I am hoping that this explanation is sufficient so that I am not dismissed outright. I am not of one school of thought. I choose one side out of what I know are many possible sides.

Karl Shapiro mentioned in one of his essays that writers must seek truth on their own. William Gass, in his “Kansas” essay, likened writing a book to conducting haphazard, and sometimes dangerous, experiments. Emerson, in his essay titled “History,” stated that those who defamiliarize and then re-learn granted knowledge can only benefit from the experience. There's a clear link here, speaking to the essential search for new topics in writing, but also to the

purpose of writing in general. Writing gives testimony to reality as it is perceived, a task that becomes pointless without giving agency to the individual. This legitimizes what I feel is a tendency on my part to act in a way that forces the truth from a situation, having always disliked the act of putting on appearances when reality would serve much better.

Part of the value of writing is determined by the degree to which it connects individual knowledge with universal truth, and there is little individual knowledge to be gained from blindly following directions.

The root of my frustration with the writing program, if I had to put it in simple terms, is that I've often felt I'm simply being passed along. I'm not even sure if most of my professors have criteria for good writing, much less if I agree with them. What then, is the purpose of interacting with others in a university setting, except to meet other students who seem equally confused? I'm forced to question the purpose of a writing program with no pushback, except to cheer on writers with sufficient natural talent while allowing mediocre writers (and their money) to sift through the cracks toward graduation. Perhaps it's my fault for not choosing a different institution with more structure and exorbitant tuition fees, though I suspect this is a wider issue than that. I suspect that professors everywhere are encouraged to overemphasize the importance of inward focus, making it difficult for them to choose a path confidently and direct students toward that path. One of the issues this leads to can perhaps best be understood from an example:

As an undergraduate, one of my favorite professors once explained tragedy and comedy in terms of physics. He said that a tragic narrative is centripetal in motion, meaning that the protagonist begins with a wide circle of acquaintances and slowly journeys inward by cause of death, injustice, or overall, the average tendency toward degradation which we know simply as life. A comedy, by contrast, is one where the hero begins alone and, by the end, becomes

welcomed into society by way of some ceremony, usually marriage, thus somewhat mimicking the pattern of centrifugal motion. What I learned later in life is that centrifugal motion is not a real concept in physics. What is felt as centrifugal motion is only inertia. Newton's first law tells us that an object will continue along a straight path unless acted upon by an external force. As a body of matter attempts to continue on a linear trajectory, and as it is continually redirected on a circular path, it feels as if it is being pushed outward. What this says about comedy, to me, is that it's little more than a head rush and just as temporary.

However, what this professor meant as a centrifugal force was actually a steady increase in radius, the term "centrifugal" simply being a useful shorthand to help students understand a concept that has nearly nothing to do with physics – a fact which restores the metaphor and negates any insight I might have gained from subsequent studies the literal term, "centrifugal." Add to this the fact that I almost failed physics in high school, and we find ourselves squarely back where we started. However, if I was writing a paper for a class, I would have continued with the analogy for the sake of time and might have even received an A. If we can allow this example to be somewhat representative of an average assignment, it seems we are rewarded for the chasing of wild geese because one: we are thinking, which is a miracle in itself, two: professors are overloaded with work, three: truth is subjective? or four: all of the above.

The problem with expression, both written and spoken, is that we often unconsciously relegate the purpose of something to the realm it occupies. Once something is out in the open, it becomes public property and falls out of the writer's control. On top of this, the mind does not tolerate an unnecessary breach of privacy. Once exposed, the mind becomes less contained, and therefore, less dense. A thought which held such importance contained within the auspices of private reflection is suddenly diluted, and likely it will fade as its importance is compared to

other, more well-formed thoughts. It's best to teach students how to cultivate a thought until it has reached maturity than to teach them that every thought expressed with half an intention is useful.

The issue with this approach, as anyone can tell, is time.

I have spoken to students, through my brief stint as an academic coach, who are exasperated with the perfectionist tendencies that keep them from completing assignments, especially written ones, in a timely manner. There is always mounting pressure to produce, even within the relatively insulated halls of a university, and this pressure has only increased as more students have begun graduating with their bachelor's degree after only two years of college. It is all some of us can do not to throw our hands up in surrender, even as we arm ourselves with calendars, and corner our hobbies into tight spaces where their unproductive roots do not interfere with the gardens of our future prospects.

## Bridge

He met, throughout his young life, many casualties of an invisible war: the first of which was his father, who came from a long line of mental illness – who, faced with the burden of providing income and security for his family, failed again and again, partly for lack of effort, and partly from a deep confusion and lack of introspection. First, his father worked at an electronics warehouse but had a nasty dispute with his boss and lost it. He spent months accusing his wife of gallivanting instead of looking for a job. She discovered his spurious accusations when, during one of her long shifts as a hostess, she was informed of the rumors by her boss.

When she told him she'd had enough of his duplicity, he grabbed a kitchen knife and held it over his heart, saying that if she didn't want him then he had no place in this world. As he was holding the knife, Ignacio and his older brother were returning from the arcade. They only saw him putting the knife back.

His father remained unemployed until he chose to fake a job as a McDonald's manager for two months. His façade fell apart when the checks from his supposed job never came. Then he chose the life of a truck driver, killing two birds with one stone. The first thing he accomplished was escaping his family, and the second was sending them money to alleviate guilt and responsibility for his past transgressions. This only lasted until his wife asked for a divorce. He responded to her paperwork with violence, so removed was he from his sense of honor. The police arrested him for domestic violence, let him out on parole, and then he promptly escaped back to Mexico.

The rage Ignacio felt was vacuous, in that it absorbed every moment that had not the momentum of action or thought to escape its grasp. Clearly, he hated his father for inflicting pain on his mother, but Ignacio had also been left alone with a family that he felt didn't understand



him and didn't want to. One of his first memories was of his dad taking him to the park with a soccer ball they had bought in Mexico with the Chivas mascot on it. He asked him to kick the ball as hard as he could – told him that he had the makings of a strong player, even when the boy's kick would only take the ball a meter or two.

In the books he read, children often overcame the loss of a parent or two by banding together with their siblings. But Ignacio's siblings grew tired of him – left him to lead their own lives – to seek acceptance from the world at large, as every growing kid eventually does. What kept him from following their example was a tyrannical presence hovering over him at all times, telling him to keep still lest something terrible happen.

Eventually, he realized that existence was less of a gift than a responsibility. This realization was subconscious, for outwardly he still grated against the idea. He was young still, when, walking through a forest with his family, he was told that they had paid a fee for the privilege. Voicing his dissent, they proceeded to inform him about the costs of other things, such as food and water. He almost balked straight into an early grave, simply at the idea that with so much history behind us, and with so much innovation at our disposal, we had not once chosen to create a future where nature could be enjoyed free of charge. With his discovery of the price of utilities, he would come to see the average life as one of indentured servitude – where the basic necessities of life were not guaranteed, and work carried always the tinge of death. He would come to realize that the word job is a euphemism for a staggeringly thin floor between you and the abyss, and the only possible security anyone can find rests in the illusion that its indefiniteness translates to longevity, or that another floor can be found before staring too long into the pit.

For Ignacio, and this was important, the terrors of life far outweighed its supposed rewards. He chose to plummet like a meteor unto the unsuspecting Earth instead of floating by the updraft of precepts on makeshift wings so as to possibly see an inch beneath the crust before being buried completely.

## CHAPTER VI

### HONOR

The time between inception and coagulation of thought can be determined by the initial chain reaction within its creator. The inner gods elect a champion based on the alignment of events into a singular narrative. Fascination with a monumental event aligns with the narrative that everything will be different going forward, which heightens our sense of purpose. Change is an affirmation of our existence and on a wider scale, of history. Thus, writers search for rare events to transform into a new perspective on current events. A perspective that cements an eternal, abstract concept, presented with a talent for arrangement and rhythm which fits the content – this is the ultimate goal of writing which strives for greatness.

Still, identifying the aforementioned singular event is hard work, and it's even more difficult to speak about it in a way that makes sense to the uninformed observer. However, it's due this coming Friday along with a calculus assignment, and no one explained how to write such an assignment, so best to write it in a panic two days before it's due.

*Growing up I would constantly cover my ears to block out screaming. I had no defense against such onslaughts except to block them out. One night, when I had already started college, my mom started yelling at my little brother. She grabbed a pellet gun that I had gotten him for his birthday and threatened to pistol-whip him. All at once, a wave of deep-seated anger overcame my senses. I grabbed the toy from her hands and released what must have been years*

*of built-up resentment. I had no awareness that I had even started yelling. By the time my conscience caught up with me, veins were popping out of my neck. All I remember saying was “This isn’t good parenting. How do you like being yelled at?” How we deal with others catches up to us eventually. I only regret being the mouthpiece.*

I have, more often than not, turned in semi-decent work that had the potential for greatness. I’m confident that many students do this, and it wasn’t until I was grading papers as part of an assistantship that I understood how damaging it can be. As a student, we simply call it survival and try to do better next time. On the other end, we feel that an opportunity is missed: an opportunity to come in contact with true expression, which hits at the heart of knowledge, and legitimizes the student-teacher relationship. Is it not right to help students by blocking them from presenting unfinished work, or is it better to cover our ears and take their money, until somewhere down the line they are forced to come to terms with their mediocrity?

There is room in this conversation to talk about sensitivity and the variety of human experience which calls for its practice. I am sensitive to criticism, even as it is expressed in body language as I read my work aloud. I understand what it is to be deeply offended and the frustration it can produce when the critique seems unjust or unfounded. This is why great classes are always the ones where expectations are defined well before assignments are given. Students become familiar with what is meant by great writing and are given leeway to deviate slightly if they should feel too limited by the curriculum. In a perfect world, no one would expect an A unless they had demonstrated a work that had been honed to its logical apex, where it can dwell among works of similar height; in view of the clouds though it remains firmly planted in the earth.

Once such work is completed, there is a sense of accomplishment, as well as emotional and intellectual exhaustion. The expectation is that students monitor this themselves and compare their own work to those they have previously written. This system falls apart as soon as a major roadblock is hit, and the student loses track of all the progress they've made. If they cannot recover, it would be better that they fail a few classes, so that they understand where they have deviated, rather than to let them continue producing lukewarm work.

I was sharing an apartment with three other friends when I heard that my godfather had died. He wasn't the godfather of my birth, but one I had chosen when I performed my first communion. I had chosen him from twelve other uncles because he didn't have any sons, and it weighed heavily on him that he'd never be able to pass on what knowledge he had about manhood and its trials. I also picked him because he worked for a certain beverage company, and as a child of eleven, that seemed like a perk.

The morning of the ceremony, he helped me get my tie on properly and taught me to tuck my shirt behind my back so that the excess fabric wouldn't show. The church where the ceremony was performed was of Gothic make and light brown stucco. It had a courtyard with murals painted on each wall, depicting scenes from the bible. I was familiar with the place, having been forced to go there every Sunday during the summers and winters I would spend in Guadalajara. It didn't prevent me from getting anxious and worrying about the words I had to repeat and the wine I'd have to stomach for the eucharist. Luckily, all the hard work had been done in the confession booth, where I had made up sins so as not to waste the priest's time and recited the prayers he assigned.

The communion itself flew by, and afterward, my godfather took me on a tour of the city, explaining the nature of several monuments. One of them was a statue of Minerva, where she

stands with one foot in front of the other in regal poise. He read the inscription behind her – *Justicia, Sabiduria, y Fortaleza Custodian A Esta Leal Ciudad.*

Later we ate at a fast-food restaurant and he asked what I wanted to do when I grew up. I said I supposed I could be a writer. I'd never been asked that by a family member. I remember committing myself to the idea simply because he seemed to approve of it.

We talked sparsely after that, partly because I didn't speak Spanish very well, and partly because I could never think of anything to say to anyone. He sent me a fountain pen one year, which cemented the idea that I'd become a writer. When I picked up the trombone in middle school, he sent me a silver one, which sadly didn't work half as well as it looked. I took both writing and the trombone seriously. It was how I paid respect to him.

My response to his death was to drown myself in music and smoke whole packs of cigarettes. As far as I can remember, no one asked how I was doing except for my late godfather's wife. We had a brief conversation where I offered my condolences and assured her that I would make him proud. Looking back, I know I didn't deal with his death well, and even now the whole thing is shrouded in a haze of confusion and misanthropy due to the way he went out. In his last days, he was ridden with shame from having lost his job, and he wouldn't leave his room for long stretches of time. To my knowledge, no one beyond his immediate family acknowledged his depression until he died. Depression is not something that's talked about during morning revelry at my *abuelita's* house. Change comes to even the most resistant people, but it always takes a few casualties. So it goes.

I saw a therapist at the university, who offered nothing in the way of insight. Just listened. Which helped, to a point. My godfather's death dislodged something in me. I couldn't look at writing the same way. His passing seemed to reify the hatred I had for pointless

discussions. I became impatient with myself. I no longer crafted essays but hammered them out with only my diploma in mind. I'm not sure if I've ever truly recovered, but at least now I'm holding myself accountable.

As someone who has been affected deeply by the death of a distant relative, I can't justify allowing students to produce semi-decent work and encourage a system where they alone are the arbiters of their progress. At least if I had failed, I would have been given the chance to pick up where I left off. As of now, I have only recently spotted a shore on which to land, and that is through the appreciation of works that have stood the test of time.

## CHAPTER VII

### SELFISH

When I was twelve, I went to a zoo in Guadalajara with my extended family. On this trip, there were a dozen kids to one aunt, and because there were so many kids, we were all assigned a buddy. My buddy was a cousin that I had often fought with. On the way home, she forgot to tell anyone that I had fallen asleep, so I stayed on the bus as it made the rest of its route. When I woke up, I was surrounded by strangers. In shock, I asked the bus driver where my family had gone. He looked at me sympathetically and shrugged.

As the bus kept going, I followed the driver's advice and kept my eyes peeled for signs of home. When we would approach a neighborhood that looked familiar, I would perk up, only to realize that there were a million corner stores in Guadalajara that looked exactly alike. After a few hours, I began to think the chances of finding my way home in a strange country, where I had only ever seen a block in each direction from my grandma's house, was near impossible. Then, in what felt like a miraculous turn of events, I spotted a corner store that was unmistakably mine.

When my mom saw me, she didn't hug me. She took my hand and led me inside, where soon everyone had forgotten that I had gone missing.

Often, when we'd spend summers and winters in Mexico, I wouldn't see my mother for weeks, and neither would my siblings. My brother and sister would spend all their time with our cousins, and I, being unable to muster the courage once I'd reached pre-adolescence, would sit



alone watching TV, until my grandma would call me down to eat. The terror I felt is not unique to me. Many others have overcome similar sensations and come out stronger for it. I mention all this to explain that I did not find adequate justification to assume what I perceived was a great risk, all to join a world that could very well carry on without me, and in fact, had for time immemorial.

Sometimes life runs sideways to the point that down and up no longer seem useful points of comparison; then someone offers a chance to acknowledge where things went astray. Our reaction is often defensive, showing that we haven't spent much time reflecting on it, and we're not ready to acknowledge the veracity of the accusations. If we could admit our own faults, truly, we would be able to sit at ease with ourselves – to think clearly about what tomorrow may bring without exerting effort toward ignoring our past wrongs. Instead, we respectfully go our separate ways, citing irreconcilable differences.

When I told my mother that she never seemed to care where I was or whether I was even alive, she simply said that she had done her best. In her mind, Mexico was the safe place, and the United States held unseen dangers.

She called my sister and told her that I had hurt her feelings by putting to words what I had left in darkness for so long. The narrative became that I had attacked her out of an inability to take ownership of my own trauma. Truthfully, I had long postulated that overcoming can also mean forgetting, which results in premature absolution. This creates resentment over time, which will come out at whichever point it can do the most damage. Honesty is a hand extended – an opportunity to grow with someone, instead of away from them.

When Vonnegut, in his preface to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, says that he got in “some perfectly beautiful trouble” while teaching a creative writing workshop, he is speaking with a

learned style and flair. Style, as many have said, is more about what you leave out than what you put in. This conflicts with some of my earlier claims about writing, when I confidently stated that writers aren't allowed to keep secrets. I should say that style is about keeping irrelevant secrets. Still, there will always be those who pride themselves on sniffing out surreptitious behavior and denouncing it as a sign of ill intent. Possibly, we are so attuned because so many wrongs are committed *without* intent – if so much damage is inflicted blindly, then should we not denounce writers who see their wrongs and yet do not regret them, thus adding to the pile of negative influence that looms over this age of information?

Serious literature doesn't have a clear villain. Wisdom, gained by experience, dictates that mistakes will be made, and this causes mature readers to seek out works that have no clear lines on which to fall.

Through the simple act of making choices, we will inevitably incite genuine hatred in more than a few. To always act for the benefit of others leaves little room for personal growth, which requires conflict between our inner and outer lives. We learn our most lasting lessons from periods of intense emotion, and emotion is relegated to a limited spectrum when performing selfless acts. For this reason, I cannot stomach a hero without a troubled history.

Starting when I was in fifth grade I worked at my mom's used clothes warehouse during the Summers. It occurs to me now that I couldn't have generated much capital. Most likely she wanted me to learn the value of labor. However, this warehouse wasn't built with any sort of safety precautions in mind. One day, as my brother and I were trying to move a bale of clothes, I decided to prop my back against a wall and push off with both feet. When the bale tumbled away, I fell and scraped my back against a pipe that was sticking out of the wall. As I remember my mom was a bit disappointed, as she suspected that I'd done it on purpose to get out of work.

Truly I was eager to leave that dismal prison of brick, dust, and rags, so I didn't blame her for the assumption. That didn't keep me from learning my first lesson about manual labor, which is that the pain of the worker is secondary to the interests of his superiors. I wasn't old enough to understand my value as a person – to take issue at all with the fact that I was ill-suited for the work at hand and that one of the reasons for my being there was to groom me into a workhorse. If I had realized any of those things it would've made little difference. I had no choice in the matter.

I had to go back to work eventually, where I was promptly hurt again, and again. They were all freak accidents, it seemed. Probably I lacked the spatial awareness required for dangerous work environments, and bales of clothes seemed to tumble from every direction wherever I went. My brother had an easier time not getting hurt.

Speaking selflessly, from a selfless self, inside myself, I could talk volumes about what a saint my mother was for keeping a roof over our heads. I could pitch a story where we all tried to make her proud, and in me was the spirit of my ancestors to provide at all costs and break my back for the privilege of making her proud. The story might even sell a few copies and earn me a degree. The truth is that all I wanted to do was to lose myself – to throw any and all obligations into that giant machine used to compress clothes into tight bales, and then ship it to someone with a heart for obedience.

The Summer of my junior year of high school, we slid along the border to California, where my brother and I worked ten-hour shifts to help keep my mom's new clothes business afloat. Then I started at a high school in El Centro, which, while still a border town, was entirely different from where I lived before. For example, El Centro had a terrible marching band, but their jazz band had existed for generations and played gigs at different venues like parks and

military bases; my old high school in Texas had only just started their jazz band, while their marching band won accolades year after year, and demanded the utmost dedication from its participants.

The people were carefree and gregarious, mixing California liberality with traditional Mexican joviality. I had been inconsolably sad since I could remember, and now most of the confidence I'd gained until that point was swept away when I no longer had my friends to lean back on. Slowly I dwindled to a vestige, but the internal observer in me recognized the necessity of this struggle.

We had moved there on the recommendation of my mom's boss, a man who we simply knew as *El Patron*. He and my mom had been dating for some time. It was clear we were not to ask about him. I never saw him, except as maybe a silhouette through translucent blinds. I found out a few years later he had paid for a certain cosmetic surgery my mother had gotten, which I imagine is something she personally must've wanted, but somehow seems a dastardly thing to do when the money might have helped improve our situation.

One of my classes was library maintenance where I was to work at the library for free, greeting people at reception and arranging books. I stopped short one day upon reading an interesting title: *The Only Alien on the Planet*. Over the next week, I would steal away to read this book about a boy unable to speak because he believed if he did his family would die. His verbal paralysis increased with his need for connection to the point where he felt he was a different species. I make mention of this book only to say that it perfectly encapsulates my own experience with otherness in those times, exasperated as it was by the feeling of being uprooted.

I truly don't believe there's a villain in this story – not *El Patron*, not my mom, and not me. Still, all of us are far from blameless. My mother chose to use her sons as cheap labor, then

chose to be with a man who had no desire to interact with us. On top of this, *El Patron* was a married man, which would make him somewhat of a bastard if he had not taken care of my mom to the best of his ability. Lastly, I allowed myself to be a victim of my circumstances. I was unwilling or unable to find happiness in a new place and ruminated constantly on all I had lost, a fact which might have weighed heavily in her decision to eventually give up the business and move back to McAllen.

Many people from cultures of hardened workers are summarily dismissed when they bring up concerns about how they were raised. The word negligence produces anguish in those who only know survival. This has been said many times over. It bears repeating.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SELF-REGULATION

There is an “I” that can sustain a mountain of distracting rhetoric. It is the “I” of Descartes; of Emerson. It is centered on thought and objectivity – the powers of self-regulation which have become mythologized and anthologized, existing in the same way as the Jesus of so many denominations of Christianity. However, I strongly believe that with enough training and self-reflection, we can still see and judge ourselves in the same light as a character in a novel, that is, with a certain allowance for idealistic nonsense, if supported by a strong moral backbone. Taking time to truly understand the cyclical nature of thought and action allows for brief periods of antagonism without the complete disintegration of self, or even identification as a supporting character, a notion at which some would balk at first mention. We even begin to understand the importance of revolt in the face of a bleak and seemingly unalterable future. The only thing that can truly keep a protagonist from surviving and even growing is the almighty hand of the author, and luckily, we seem to be at least partly in control of our narrative.

I’ve fallen hardest when propelled by faith alone. Faith is, for the pessimist or realist, a constant war on reason, which tells us that life trends toward absence, not the guiding hand of an invisible force. Absent gods, absent fathers, and often, absent justice. In short, for lack of evidence and an abundance of quixotic ideas on which to grind an axe, any kind of faith is likely maintained out of necessity, including faith in the idea of the soul, or the essence of the individual. As the rationale of those around us compels us to forego this holy ghost wherever it

comes in conflict with social acceptance, it becomes essential to become the rock which we ourselves stand upon to see the world.

I started reading heavily in third grade. During one of our A.R. parties – an awkward pizza rendezvous in honor of our grade’s top readers which took place in our modest library – I was asked how I managed to accumulate enough points to win first place. I told them that I read one book that year, and that was *The Goblet of Fire*. Their eyes dimmed as they lost interest and turned away. Since then, I have learned, on my own terms, that reading books simply for the love of reading isn’t enough. Students are expected to read widely and voraciously to earn their place among the intellectual class.

Inside my school library, which enjoyed a venerated place in the center of the school, there were books about dragons and books about trees with wish-giving powers. There were books that held no value to an adult, but to a child contained magnificent sceneries. I devoured them. The most difficult book I read as an elementary student was *The Grey King*, and though I hardly understood it, I enjoyed it for the fact that it was just beyond my grasp. After that, my reading slowed, as I sought more difficult books.

It is usually out of fear that our grasp begins to exceed our reach, though some would call it courage. We fear that without additional effort our senses will deaden.

Likely, some of us would not survive the life of a factory worker, and yet that is a fate many of us are meant to assume in one of its many forms. I have no choice but to listen when my inner voice continually leads me away. It is wise, in my esteem, to set out – to wander until my purpose comes into view – though such a life carries always the danger of going sour. Such turmoil is required in seeking truth. On one side is madness mundane, caused by a lack of faith, and on the other madness pure, magnified by an all-consuming purpose.

Villains begin by choosing to forego the path of least resistance. They begin also by risking a great fall – into an existence where only in their minds is there a constant flow, and to everyone else, there is a disparity between morality and action, or a sequence of phases to be deciphered and put on display as a warning to other would-be villains. As Emerson once stated, and Williamson made the central premise of his book on Jack London, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. . . .” We are often called to be better than who we’ve been in the past. It is anathema to our ego. However, to continue along a path that is no longer supported by reason is poisonous to sanity.

One of the first classes in my graduate career was a fiction workshop. I had come off a three-year break from university, spending the interim time working at a bookstore and reading only literary magazines such as *Slice* and *The Paris Review*, while spiraling in a circular haze of hemp and video games.

Then I worked at a call center where I met a girl who inspired me to continue my education. After three years of scattered reading, and timid forays into writing – one which landed me in an anthology, but nonetheless became a dead end – my writing had little chance of holding value as anything more than the onanistic ramblings of a wandering youth. Yet, what choice did I have but to show my work and hear where it needed improvement?

On the first day of class, I walked into a sterile white classroom. The professor had neat grey hair and a quiet demeanor. After going over the syllabus, we were asked to write a poem, which I shared. While I knew it wasn’t good, the reaction seemed unwarranted, or disproportionately silent. The professor, who was not the confrontational type and was likely overworked, was part of this reaction.



The poem was about my family dog, a white husky that we had adopted from an elderly woman. He had gotten hit by a car once, and after I had nursed him back to health I had to move away and leave him with my mother. A few years later he escaped from the backyard and never came back. I tried to encapsulate what these events meant to me within a couple of stanzas. The note, as I took it: be better. So, I read the required readings for class in an effort to learn, one of which was a young adult fiction novel, and the other a collection of literary short stories. After each reading, we were asked to discuss, and each time, we all looked at each other with bewildered glances and threw shots in the dark.

Each week, one new story was submitted for feedback from the class. The first week I wrote several pages delving into character and setting – the professor had provided a handout on how to write useful feedback upon another student’s request – and I thought to take the matter seriously considering I now found myself among experienced writers. I soon realized that this would not be reciprocated. Instead, I would get line notes displaying visible frustration at not understanding every concept in my story at first glance, or other times I’d receive a page filled with impressions. Occasionally I’d see a term in someone’s critique that I’d be excited to research, but this happened only once from my recollection.

Around the middle of the semester, I suggested including a supernatural element in another student’s story, describing said element as “the embodiment of fear.” Granted, I stumbled over my words, being unaccustomed to articulating concepts within the scope of surrealism, however, the laugh that erupted when I mentioned the word “primordial” is, to this day, one of the most confusing and vaguely insulting things that happened during my academic career. The final short story I wrote for the class got negative reactions, and yet that was a step up from the silence I’d gotten on the first day. Inside, I was just as lost as I had ever been. My

expectation was that I would be surrounded by professionals, and through enough effort and the support of my classmates, I would quickly rise to the standard of what an MFA program would require. I realized quickly that I didn't speak the same language as them. I had been away from university for too long, and I spoke with the bluntness of a retail worker in the trenches of consumerism. Their language was one of subtlety and insulated intelligence.

Another issue is that students, while being adequately equipped to write a short story, have not the time or care to dedicate any significant amount of attention to the work of another unless that work has the makings of greatness, which few ever do.

The feedback was vague at best, and at worst passive-aggressive. I knew that at least two of my classmates were working full-time jobs, or teaching multiple classes, which, excuse my frankness, goes the furthest in explaining the lack of effort in their responses. To return to my own fault, I had forgotten the importance of reading, after having taken it for granted for so long. Reading, as I'm just beginning to relearn, is not simply a pastime for writers – it is the most foolproof way to improve – and reading takes a significant amount of time.

Yet, what we read also matters, in both content and breadth. The Y.A. novel we read for class was not badly written. The problem inherent in the genre is that Y.A. novels are characterized by the heightened importance of emotion, angst, romantic partners, and the limited perspective of youth. In short, when we actively avoid solipsistic writing, we are thinking of Holden from *The Catcher in the Rye*. To read any book about youth with the intention of gleaning a moral lesson is to understand that the narrator must be, in no small respect, unreliable. Additionally, our modern concept of young adult fiction, garnered from such trilogies as *The Hunger Games*, is skewed towards expository writing. These books are meant to be read by those who don't understand irony and want the characters to say exactly what they're thinking.

I tried to read the adventures of Katniss as an adult. Halfway through the second book, I realized I was exhibiting masochistic behavior.

I hear the ubiquitous voice of reason speaking of the observer's lens – subjectivity. Subjectivity is a concept that determines a person's faculty of judgment as being irrevocably tied to their background, and as such, not one person can claim to have an objective point of view that is not based on a scientific criterion. However, just as we all can agree that the color green is green and that a square is a square based on the faculty of sight – a faculty which not everyone shares – so can those with sufficient faculties, namely those of imagination and understanding, agree on topics of beauty, taste, or aestheticism. So it seems that any subjective point of view can be nothing more than a singular vote toward a relatively objective standard determined by a group, and a vote based on emotions alone is hazardous, as emotions are subject to change.

## CHAPTER IX

### PROGRESS

Perception is a fragile thing. Nothing is ever the same after the first time it is perceived, and ever after we are calculating the likelihood that any object in the world can live up to its metaphysical promise. A sword is a symbol of a different age, and even should a perfectly crafted one appear on my path, it would feel misplaced – its foregone importance would appear glaringly bright, or rather, dull, in light of its utter uselessness. Attending university to become a writer feels as if I were carrying a sword. I question the purpose of such anachronistic behavior. We have the internet, and while it is imperfect, it provides a platform for learning far beyond the possibilities of a physical establishment with mounting tuition rates and questionable meritocracy. I joined with complete faith in the guidance provided by hard-working professors and philosophers, only to find that many are unhappy for a myriad of reasons (not unrelated to the politics of such a place), causing the students to suffer. Still, I have met a handful of professors who have changed me for the better.

A philosophy professor walks into class, his demeanor that of a quintessential young intellectual with an eternal hangover, a flannel shirt, and a loose, extemporaneous delivery in his lectures. He asks us about Greece and its debt crisis and receiving nothing but dumb looks in return chides us on our ignorance of important world issues. After he has explained the possible destabilization of the euro, he goes on to explain the etymology of the word philosophy – the insinuation being that if we hope to study philosophy, we will need to adapt the attitude of one

who loves knowledge. He announces that his office hours will take place at the wooden picnic table right outside of class, one of the many that are strewn throughout campus. Inspired, I decide to join him after class, along with a select few students who, like me, welcome a challenge.

We listen to stories about his near-death experiences, views on religion, and other such topics which might seem taboo in a modern classroom. He smokes cigarettes, which today would seem like a war crime on our campus. One other student decides to smoke as well, and while I initially think the student impressionable, I quickly check my reaction against the reality that I am ignorant and also impressionable. This is the start of a long and fruitful semester, where I attend this professor's outdoor office hours whenever I can, and shake his hand at the end, cementing in my mind the mutual respect we've developed.

His class, with its seamless discussions about real issues and philosophical dilemmas, stands as an example of the heights to which a seemingly regular class can ascend. Every professor is free to lead their class how they see fit, but this is the standard which, in spite of myself, I hold them to. My view is, of course, not the only one to consider, but insofar as it keeps professors honest, and encourages administrators to pursue a scenario where universities are still viable for those who are not simply chasing a stable job and want to expand their understanding of truth, it seems a critical part of discussions about the future of ours and other universities. Thoreau had this to say about students: "I mean that they should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end." This is doubly true of those who study the liberal arts. We owe it to our benefactors, whether they be our parents, the community, or even ourselves, to take the pursuit as seriously as life itself. Why else would we pursue this instead of money, or economic security, the less

derisive name of the two? Surely not out of ignorance of our volatile existence? Such truths are central to the art we claim to make – those of us who still remember that we are not so far from oblivion as we might feel while sipping our morning coffee. We are pursuing something more important than a comfortable existence.

I would never make the claim that educational institutions waste our time on purpose. I receive emails constantly about writing competitions and other such opportunities for professional advancement. That is proof enough that they are conscious of a need to justify the amount of time that we spend on such studies that produce little material value. The truth, however, is that choosing to advance my career, while being confident that I have attained an intimate knowledge of nothing during my brief stint as a graduate student is akin to donning a disguise, on top of my pre-existing one, and hoping I won't be discovered. I wish to know where I stand before I run headlong toward distant windmills. I am not one to desensitize my fear of failure before I know what I'm failing for. Is it to gain income simply? I could do just as well with less education. Is it to cast a singular vote to the progression of art as it is defined by movements and ages? Partly, but no, it is to be heard once and for all before my inevitable extinction. But what do I have to say? Where is the beast's heart that I now pursue, and how best to explain that to strike true is not to slay but to purify? I'd rather die in this pursuit without alerting it to my presence than strike it frivolously. Its granite hide can only be pierced by the spear of truth, honed by ancient minds, and crafted anew to travel unabated by Earth's changing winds.

*Don Quixote*, despite its original intention, can now be interpreted as a book about a man who carried his ideals through the muck and confusion of reality to simultaneously bring laughter to the entirety of Spain while becoming a famous knight. Some would say that

regardless of the results, the man was still ridiculed, and objectively became a fool. Of course, they would be right. Don Quixote, the hidalgo, was a fool – unlike us, who understand the absurdity of life and are under no illusions but that of independence, perhaps.

Still, I can't help but admire this character, who after being beaten with the splinters of his own broken lance, carried through in the name of honor, under no one's banner but that of his sweet Dulcinea, who was, we could say, an extension of his absurd notion of love. But no, we are wiser than he, even when, staring into a bleak future, we choose to remain behind the threshold of what is safely possible. Even when our knees are torn from breaking our own lance upon them – even when we tumble face-forward into a life we didn't actively choose.

My approach to writing is to learn the rules as I have learned those of life and then forget those which hinder my ability to pursue a path of honor. Don Quixote is an extreme example, but in a world where we are taught to pursue only material results by material means, he is an inspiration. If I only understand art and the fluttering it provokes in my soul at the late age of the errant knight and choose then to submit my works for publication, it will seem timely still in the larger scheme of things.

## Bridge

They knocked again before he could reach the yellowing, white door. “I’m coming. Jesus.”

Across the threshold stood a bright face and braided yellow hair. Her smile faltered as she gleaned his tired eyes and wrinkled plaid shirt.

“My name is Brianna. I’m with the M.C.A. and I was wondering if you’d like to purchase a magazine subscription.”

“We don’t have money for –

“Please, if I sell enough magazines, I might get a scholarship.”

He stared at her and then walked away, leaving the door wide open. “Come in,” he called from the darkness of the living room.

She stepped slowly across the threshold with her blue rain boots as he silently settled into the couch. He left the room dark except for the few rays of light from half-closed blinds. The room smelled of dust, junk, and the faint scent of old cigarettes. She chose a low chair and plopped down. She tried to sit up straight for a second but decided to settle into the chair’s natural form.

“Why do you want to go to college?” He asked.

“Lots of reasons. Mostly to be a vet.”

“Why?”

“My parents are both doctors, but I like animals more, so I decided to pursue that route.”

A silence hung where he might’ve followed with another question. “Don’t you want to go to college?” She asked.

“For what?” said Julio.



“To figure stuff out. Maybe get a career.”

His eyebrows twitched. “I’ve got my career planned out, and it doesn’t involve begging for scholarships or spending hours in musty libraries.”

“Well, don’t leave me in suspense,” said Brianna.

“Stand-up comedian.”

She smiled, dimples deep like hollows in her round and delicate face. She muttered something in Spanish.

“I’m serious.”

“I can see that,” Her smile widened even further.

He matched her intensity – a dark reflection of her sunny disposition.

“What do you call a dinosaur that can’t get a hard-on?”

“I don’t know.”

He looked at the ashtray on the table between them, then looked at her intently. “Shit, I forgot the punchline.”

“Make one up,” she said.

“Your dad.”

She took a second and then laughed. “So, about the magazines,” she said, settling down.

“Shutterbug, I guess,” he said after looking at the list. “My mom likes to look at black-and-white pictures of old men.”

“Great, so the initial fee is thirty dollars. You should get your first issue in three weeks or more.”

## CHAPTER X

### TREES

I have no qualms with laughing at myself, and calling myself a common squirrel because, at our university, we are plenty. During the course of a semester, we are given several texts and encouraged to conduct our own research aside. Most students develop some sort of social cause, or a tree, on which to dwell and come to whenever too much space is given. The tree I finally found is an old one, and I believe it will still exist when all others have been felled. But I found it late and have been dashing back and forth long enough that I am scatterbrained.

During my stint as an academic coach, I have spoken to squirrels in similar predicaments, unsure of what their purpose is in this place, and floundering amidst pressures of air and compression that seem fleeting to minds tainted by the taste of the earth and cosmic derailment. Truthfully, it is admirable to find a tree worth staying in, but then we have chosen a cause to which we are interminably bound. We drop our kernels and speculate whether they are worth the effort of recollection.

One student was called a genius by one of their professors. We discussed the effects of such overvaluations, and how temporary they are in their morale-boosting effects, while in the long-term, they cause students to question whether superiority is something to be accepted or relegated as a product of temporary misplacement. I told the student that being intelligent has little value in other contexts, and to find yourself in a place and society where you easily excel is to be in a position to help others, while inwardly you can choose to accept that you will one day

outgrow your environment. We agreed it was best that they prepare themselves beyond what was currently demanded of them, and by all means, avoid any inclination to fall into complacency before they might reach a place of like-minded people.

Another student settled for the relatively economical choice of attending UTRGV because they had been denied an athletic scholarship. I asked this student if they considered themselves a scholar or an athlete. The student said that undoubtedly, they were an athlete, and confessed that even if they took scholarship seriously, they did not think this was the right place for it.

I could not argue in favor of the university, seeing how they preferred hiring part-time professors, and generally gave little care to the quality of courses that were considered to be of minor importance. I was also aware that my hours as an academic coach were carefully limited to avoid providing benefits, and little care was given toward training or maintaining a healthy workflow.

Even while that job paid well compared to others on campus, I could not help but feel bitter towards such practices. I could only imagine how professors were treated, seeing how the philosophy professor I so admired had quickly moved on, and so many others seemed overworked.

When the pandemic hit, I continued my stint as a coach, though I suspected I was under-equipped to handle many of the issues I was presented with. Most of the students I spoke with struggled with procrastination, an effect of being unsure about the future and deprived of the routines many of us so dearly depended on. As the abrupt transition to an online format continued, I received an email from a faculty member that effectively chided the student population for making excuses, while their professors were experiencing the same circumstances

and continuing with their work regardless. Never mind that they were being paid, and by many accounts were shirking their duties in more ways than one, while students were all struggling to make ends meet (though we received a few gifts from school and government that amounted to a month's expenses), all the while being unsure whether we were getting our money's worth due to the varying degrees of computer literacy.

In the middle of this, we were hit with a winter storm that knocked out our power for more than a few days. One of my students apologized for going dark during that time and asked if they should attempt to make up the work they had missed. I advised that they should have a lengthy discussion with their professor, and I added that I personally did not find the present circumstances conducive to the type of cumulative and continuous toil that results in genuine learning.

During this time, I indulged heavily in alcohol and weed. Others would find my behavior irrational and self-destructive, though I couldn't imagine dealing with it otherwise. I find self-medication a dangerous game nonetheless. Even if I am alive, which feels like an accomplishment, I will never advise anyone to follow a similar path, which leads me to an important point: advisement only works on those who have accepted that the adviser is of a similar mind and has sufficient experience to speak on such matters. If I ever truly excelled as a coach, it was because I had stumbled and come out wiser for it, not because I suggested using note cards or time management strategies. Those who did not listen were either too young to accept they might also make mistakes or saw my questions and occasional soliloquies as evidence of long-term damage, which I confess I cannot disavow with any meaningful amount of certainty. Although I am trying my best to be aware of my flaws on a daily basis, anyone can attest to how difficult it is during regular circumstances, let alone during a global pandemic.

Being a student is difficult enough without adding unnecessary levels of uncertainty into the mix. If we are squirrels, then direct us toward a sturdy tree and throw a few kernels here and there but remember that we are not simply soldiers marching toward the advancement of a social cause. We are engaged in a losing battle to find meaning in a tempest of emotion and misdirection. Hinder us not with non-committal phrases. If writers attend university for any reason, it is to receive personalized direction from those with the benefit of time and experience.

In a poetry workshop, I wrote that I felt as if I were in a “foreign” film. After I read the poem aloud, another student politely asked what I meant by “foreign.” I explained that foreign films, as I had observed during my film classes, usually had a foreboding, ominous tone, though not exclusively. Another student offered an alternate word to use, though now it escapes me, and as I continued to explain what the term meant, he virtually threw his hands up. I had the realization that the word foreign was possibly problematic, though this only occurred to me after the fact. The word was used freely in the film classes I’d taken only a few years previously in this same university, yet I was handled as if I had used a common offensive slur. What the term meant was a type of film which is made in a different country. It is a type of film that teaches us about a creative process or plot structure outside of the one we’re familiar with.

Another time I commented on a classmate’s work of short fiction, wherein one of his characters was an overweight preacher. After reading his work aloud, one of our fellow classmates commented on the fact that the character was overweight and questioned the logic behind such a decision, stating that it was problematic to use weight as a negative characteristic. I defended the decision, as the writer was not allowed to speak during this portion of the workshop. I stated that the preacher, from a religious perspective, had fallen victim to gluttony, which would justify the decision by adding to the character’s background within the milieu of

the scene in question. In retrospect, I might've added that hypocrisy is most certainly a negative characteristic.

The writer of the piece later told us that he had overcome obesity, and several others joined in with similar stories. I have as much sympathy as one can have without ever having experienced it myself. I realize that such matters must be handled delicately. However, the way I have seen classmates throw around accusations of insensitivity, without first considering the validity and context of the issue at hand, has made me lose faith in the effectiveness of workshops as a place for discussion. If so many subjects are handled with rubber gloves, how many more are being completely ignored for the sake of civility? How are we to discuss the building blocks of writing or the myriad backgrounds and customs of the world, when we must stop whenever an alarm is tripped?

These are not the only occasions when I have found myself alone on the opposing side of a political discussion, and though I cannot say with utmost certainty that my position was always the right one, it is clear that I am in the minority in believing we should continually challenge cultural norms, as they constitute the bulk of what I would call "the obvious." I have always balked at injustice. Simply put, it is a reflex caused by personal trauma. I understand that this type of reaction has a legitimate place in discussions about subject matter and the necessary policing that must take place in educational institutions, where professors must take seriously their role in cultivating young minds who might one day lead the world. However, literature, and art as a whole, are meant to challenge our preconceptions about the standard mode of operations which deadens our senses. Our faculty of truth-seeking and creativity are what make us successful in our pursuit of sublimity. Those who must truly be policed are outside of our small influence. They are too rich, or actively avoid such places where they might be exposed for their

hateful practices. In such a case as one of these persons is “caught,” it would still seem unwise to corner them and toss hateful glances. It is, after all, those who are cast out of society who have the least regard for consequences, as our broken prison system has proven time and time again.

Joseph D. Haske, in his book titled *North Dixie Highway*, writes about issues such as domestic abuse, homelessness, and other such approximations of death that are tied to poverty. At no point does he pause to distance himself from his actions and thoughts – the cycle of revenge central to its plot is displayed in visceral clarity, which, if not an admonition, displays an intimate knowledge of the subject at hand. It is in the showing, the bringing to light, where the author justifies his inclusion of such ugly things. Most are aware of these truths, and yet the way we deal with each other is proof enough that we might need reminding. Those that read such works and are inspired rather than dissuaded are proof that something is fundamentally wrong with society, not that we should cease talking about issues that will maintain permanence even should we avert our gaze completely.

I maintain that ignorance gained by honest means is akin to wisdom. We don't, after all, chide the construction worker brained by a stray nut dislodged from up high, at least not if he was wearing his hard hat, which is analogous to maintaining a general awareness, as that is the only logical protection against becoming altogether deceased, the ultimate form of ignorance. Do we still subscribe to the long-held belief that the ultimate form of wisdom is: “Who's to say?” And is that idiom in any way tied to the idiom of the rapture: “Who's to stay?” I can feel myself shrugging from the other side of a temporal brook.

## Bridge

His dinner table, made of heavy wood, had a thick grain and charcoal hue. Ignacio and his wife ate as they had for years – close enough that they could reach out and be sure of each other, but far enough that their elbows wouldn't knock.

“Our friend invited us to Hawaii,” she said.

The unpacked bowels of society's haste; the inescapable truth of surrender.

“Ah. Warm faces and clear water. Sounds great.”

“You can't go?”

“I can't. Too much work to do.”

“Honey, I'm –”

“Tired of my excuses? Sorry that I can't go, but you'll miss me and try to have fun?”

“I'm sad. Terribly.”

“And I'm sorry. This isn't forever.”

“Maybe not, but in a moment alone a fraction of eternity is felt.”

“Yes. You're becoming quite the poet.”

Night came on suddenly. The moon bounced a million different ways to reach his eyes, but just barely. His wife lay in bed snoring peacefully as he sat at his desk. Obsessed, or at least, preoccupied with thoughts about improvisation, he paced across the room. One side of his jacket hung lower than the other, the weight of his phone adding its shallow note to the composition. The fan spun with vigor, allowing the slow moment of awakening to stretch at its own pace against, but not opposed, to its motion. The door was ajar as far as the composition was lopsided – reversible only in the perfect world of numbers and figures.



*Yet to say that the metaphor of the closed room had not inspired my thought and the ones that will come after would be downright American, and that is something to be resisted always, futile though the endeavor may seem at times.*

I am who I say I am. I am what I do. I am whom I surround myself with. I am what I think. I think I am me. I am scared of losing my job. I am quick to anger. I am known for being unstable. I resist being labeled. I am averse to rhymes unintentional. I am not sure you understand. I am sure most people don't. I am not sure I can communicate. I am what I eat. I eat what I am. I am not being cute. I am sure I eat myself. I am losing my rhythm (as all things do). I am not sure what I want to say. I am not even sure it's important to say anything at all. I am afraid of losing more time. I am always losing time. I am a second son. I am a third child. I am not talking to my mom. I am not talking to my dad. I am not even sure if he's alive. I am sure I don't care. I am aware that I should. I am a believer in redemption. I am scared of doing the wrong thing. I am a believer in falling apart. I am sure there is a thread here. I am also sure I might never find it. I am a mediocre person. I am ok with that. I am not a bad person. I am reaffirming what matters. What matters is my wife, God, and the things that make me.

*Daemon, O' Daemon. Or is it Demian? You have led us astray again. Ah, Job made God realize he didn't understand his subjects. Truly, he paved the way for Jesus' coming. Am I Job? No, I'd have to be a stout believer first. I'm an angry peon.*

*The Book of Job as it exists today, speaks of the uneven dispersal of God's wrath. God was faced with a chastising son, and in his wisdom, he must have realized the truth in his son's righteous indignation. He did not have "eyes of flesh" to see man's suffering. God is not all-knowing.*

*In those days, I believe, men really did prosper as a result of worship and devotion to their God. Our God? But pain and suffering were dealt with in broad strokes. Humankind had proven itself untrustworthy. (Why were we tested?). We were guilty until proven innocent, and Job had earned the right to call himself innocent. Still, when God gave Satan power over Job and Job was subsequently broken upon the knee of this agent of judgment, his friends taunted him. They told him to stop whining and search for his wrongdoing among the smoldering wreckage, they themselves never having fallen prey to the direct wrath of God.*

*Theirs was the privilege of the unseen.*

*To be a friend and not Job in the story is tantamount to being corrupted by a lack of spirit – believing that everyone falls somewhere in the middle of the bell curve and failing to see the irony of their assumption.*

*The clear message of the book is that we are nearly inconsequential players in a cosmic game. Who makes the rules? It's clear that our innate sense of justice does not apply to the law of nature, therefore natural law is independent. Evidence implies a certain implacable nature in our creator. One who prefers trends over individual experiences.*

*I have seen the face of evil. Night terrors play on repeat. No, we're changing all the time.*

*“Honey?”*

*She was snoring softly. He closed his dark eyes.*

## Bridge

He took me around to see the statues of biblical scenes encased in bronze at the San Juan Basilica, and I read all the plaques. Overlooking our small journey, the tower of the catholic temple imposed itself on the perfectly kept grass of the park. The path my dad and I walked on was cobbled with stones of various sizes and colors. Earthy colors stimulate the eye without attracting it. I never wondered about the cost of paned glass windows. The statues lay on each other, incapacitated by hunger or exhaustion. He put his hand on my shoulder as we walked. The clouds imposed no shadow, they meandered upon a bright canvas, smatters of white.

The winding path led to the parking lot where our blue-grey sedan sat. The narrow road leading back to the expressway was lined with houses, most of them small in the sweltering heat with chain-link fences strangled by weeds.

We made our way to the flea market, a place where everyone's breath and vapors created their own ozone, where used clothes and knick-knacks found their homes. The tent stalls offered decent shade to the tanned and sweaty workers who peddled their wares. We bought watermelon slices from a fruit stand. My father talked to some of his friends while I spit seeds onto patches of grass between car bumpers in a parking lot full of gravel. He made sure to tell me not to swallow the seeds or they'd grow in my stomach.

"He read every plaque," my dad told his friends in Spanish. "My son's going to be a priest," he added.

'Wow,' I thought. 'Is that what I'm going to be?' I'd been wondering for a while. Most people choose their parents' professions, though "factory worker" didn't seem a particularly appealing career path.

“Hard-working” was the easiest compliment to give. On birthdays and Thanksgiving, I’d say my thanks to God for a hard-working mom, because aside from that I couldn’t name another admirable quality. “Generous” sounded too much like she was a bank to me, and “thoughtful” felt dishonest. The only thing that could never be disputed was her work ethic, the likes of which I may never see again.

Every day she would get up early and head off to work where she’d have to sit in an old office lined with cheap wood paneling. Her desk was cramped with the remembrances of other people, as she shared this office space with both the manager of the warehouse and other people who owned businesses in the same space. Below her desk was a mini fridge, which was always stocked with enough water to keep the workers from dehydrating or passing out from heat exhaustion as they folded clothes, compressed the lower-quality garments into small bales that weighed fifty to a hundred pounds, and load these wares into trucks. My job, when I would go to work with her, was to load clothes into the compressor, and as I would get older I would handle the machine on my own. And I did so with the utmost venom.

I would see her work, and I would see the conditions she’d put herself in day after day, and the friends she made were people who didn’t speak English but wanted nothing more than to survive in America’s most calloused appendage. I had the vague sense, in the brief interactions I had with them, that they wanted to be in her good graces, which is something we shared in common. Part of me still wants to work the same hours, and with the same people that my mom did; to understand them in a way that hardly anyone from this side of the border ever will.

Inspiration is complex. I don’t understand it. One day I am overcome with the possibilities unfolding every second, and the next I feel I have absolutely no stake in whatever happens between now and my pitiful end. There are days when I know that I could only benefit

from an override of my daily routine, and there are others when I am exhausted from plugging away at tasks, feeling some part of me curdling into sour milk. We lose something when we only focus on what's useful, and that can only be attributed to the ingenious mix of chemicals and synapses that is the human brain. But if I had to put my finger on it now, in the wee hours of the night, pressured only by the idea of a future self, reading this back – I would have to say that it's acceptance. When we are constantly in control, we forget what it feels like to feel appeased in our souls.

Short of hyperbole, short of the inexcusable, there is little I could tell you about the process of writing. First is the gnawing hunger for expression, second the full exploration of a topic, third the loss of self and inability to express oneself simply, fourth the dread of the ouroboros, and fifth and finally, the honest remuneration of power, with the addendum that a person's beliefs may strongly impact the results of such remunerations. Should a writer be held to their beliefs? Never.

A star shines upon a dismal scene of pollution, filth, and waste – wasted time, wasted space, and wasted effort. The fresh asphalt on the road does nothing to hide the cracks of a single road which lies open and wide like a highway, through a town that few would deign to visit if not for its museum. Though its citizens are chronically hungry, restaurants lay empty, while fast food joints fill their drive-throughs with near-defunct cars.

The main road, which bisects the town, leads from North to South.

*We tell the truth because steeped in the waters of imperfect living, it is the hardest thing to do. Without truth-tellers, we wouldn't feel connected to the world at large. We would be isolated. And so, we take the obligation upon ourselves to bear that connection.*

Traveling southward, past fields of dull grass and machines irrigating large plots of land, there is a wilderness that I've visited repeatedly, but only in sleep.

*Even if it should cost us a great deal of pride. Even if we must surrender our right to keep secrets that could damage us. Do not misunderstand. We do not martyr ourselves; to be more precise, we do not seek glory.*

The entrance is a thick wall of reeds. The terrain is inundated with shallow water and the croaking of frogs, and always there is a feeling of deep foreboding.

*In the end, we have only ourselves to give – and that is not a lot – and yet, it is not nothing. When we give ourselves to truth, we give what we have accumulated through lifelong effort – things both misbegotten and tirelessly worked-after.*

I went there last night. I hadn't been there in a long time. I found it had been cleared and paved over.

We share our very souls, which we've gained piecemeal. We write with security that what we give does not fall short if it aids the progress of our profession and that even if no one reads it we can always start again.

## CHAPTER XI

### INTIMATIONS

The winds of changing pressure, the inheritance of dispossessed society; large vistas of pale brick, dirt, and brush where the overall area is improved by the onslaught of city life, wherever it may manifest in such a state of free and open space. The seasons are marked only by shifts in temperature and short spats of rain that are nothing if not transient. The overall effect is a confusion of natural forces, including those manifested in groups of people who have, at one end, sheltered their kin from the onslaught of dangers presented by the devil, and at the other, taken to their surroundings with the zeal of self-made gods.

The warehouse walls were made of red brick and mortar. The parking lot, large and perpetually empty, with scattered gravel strewn about as if another building had been reduced to tiny rubble and then cast about, was fenced opposite the warehouse by a steel link fence. On this pale August morning with its air of suffocating humidity the bay doors had been opened, though there weren't any trucks expected for the rest of the day.

He walked up the steps to the doorway. Inside, there was another chain link fence around a few cleaning supplies and broken machine parts. Adjacent to the fence was the office – a narrow space with a mini fridge and a long counter to serve as a desk. He walked in to find the boss typing an e-mail, brow furrowed and sun-spotted arms bright with sweat. The walls were made of faux wood paneling. A small fan spun quietly next to her face on a shelf above the counter.

“What do you need?” He asked.

She jumped in her seat, turned, and smiled. “You gave me a fright,” she said in Spanish. He was a short Mexican boy with a slight waist, the most imposing thing about him being his broad back. She collected herself, trying to remember what she had called him for. “Start loading the machines with clothes. I’ll see if I can get someone to help you tie off the bales.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

He looked at the mountain of used clothes beside a steel machine with a hydraulic arm, two swinging metal doors, and a lever.

He spent the day stooping to pick up armfuls of tired rags and throwing them between the compressing mechanism and the large swinging door of the machine. Disengaging the safety with the press of a button, he threw the lever to start the hydraulics. Once the clothes were pressed down, he opened the two doors while the hydraulic press kept the clothes in place and used three metal cables to tie off the bale, using the indents in the machine to fit the cables around the clothes. After looping every cable he used a large, industrial stapler to clip it closed and tested it shortly before moving on to the next. He repeated this process several times until he felt empty and distraught. Then he did it a few more times.

He left after a few hours, uneasy about the unfinished, insurmountable task, his brow thick with dried sweat – the sun skewed southwest, and gravel crunched under his worn tires as he departed.

The next day, his first day of college, he woke to find the memory of his dreams already fading. The sun shone with dull, white pallor across his television; the air smelled of skin and pollen. He put on brown pants and a work shirt, the uniform of his job at the local grocery store, knowing he would have more time to eat if he didn’t have to come back home to change.



The street and its loose stones made for a rough ride. His longboard consisted of parts selected for what is known within the vernacular of such activities as “sidewalk surfing.” Balancing on a single, off-kilter leg, he would push with all the strength of thousands of squats spread over years of desperate routine, shaking with the force of traversing an unwilling and uneven ground.

He reached the sidewalk and pushed harder still, across a surface that allowed speeds approaching those with far-reaching consequences should a single rock throw him from his board. The lukewarm wind became fresh as the mountain air he had once felt atop the Sierra Madre.

He arrived at the university baseball stadium where the gates were left open. He trespassed and rode still faster through empty pathways and dodged the myriad concrete obstacles and handrails in his path with practiced alacrity. There he saw another rider. They exchanged a nod and separated.

He left shortly after and looked back and looked back, and then looked back until he was thrown into a puddle of mud – and he had to laugh because now he would have to walk into class marked by the earth, raising all sorts of questions about the origins of his appearance, a topic simple and familiar, yet impossible to address.

A top-heavy man was explaining several uses for lens filters in cinematography when he eyed a friend of his sister’s two rows down in the auditorium seating. Her left arm was propped tensely against her notebook as she stared intently forward.

After class, she approached him in one of the causeways lining the campus. “Hey, haven’t seen you in a while. What do you think of college? Overwhelmed by the freedom of it?” She looked down. “What happened to you?”

“I fell. I have to go.”

At work, the checkout aisles were laden with all walks of life, some browsing through tabloids while they waited for their cabbage and pastries to be checked out. In spite of this variety, the air had a thickness.

Another bagger, a girl named Maria, waved at him from another aisle. She had a scar across her mouth. He waved back. He returned to the stream of groceries moving toward him at glacial speed. The cashier had several warts on his face, but he wore his uniform with pride. His name was Daniel. He called the kid over, explaining the customer’s request to have their bags loaded as lightly as possible. His breath was pungent. Ignacio stifled a gag and divided the dozens of canned goods into groups of three.

The next day he sat in a screenwriting class. The professor had an air of dignity and puckishness, though the way he ridiculed his students left a bitter taste in one’s mouth. The professor asked for volunteers to act out a scene they had written as part of their first assignment – to write something. The boy volunteered.

He stood and walked over to his acting mate, feeling the cold linoleum floor through the soles of his shoes. The room fell silent as he wrapped his arm around his acting mate and spoke the lines with his best imitation of slurred inebriation:

“To need irregularity and be hampered by it. What calls attention to unseen vistas and subterranea but the need for infinite variety? What causes the plummet into catatonic self-effacement but the need to envelop even the darkest corners of life in our purview?”

Air circulates around and under us, freezing our extremities and chilling our bones. Those with inner warmth laugh at those who voice their discomfort. (hic) We are divided between those

who feel malaise indefinitely and those who experience only that which is brought on by external circumstances and wish not to be bothered by the casualties of an invisible war.

Pursuit is to escape as knowledge is to freedom. Who can blame anyone for choosing the latter?"

They asked him what it all meant. He said he didn't rightly know and didn't mean to find out. His writing voice, he explained to the class, was how he imagined God would think, and he insisted on the word "think" rather than "speak" because he knew any communication real or imagined was ever only implied, and thus, impossible.

*The Giver*, a children's book about a keeper of memories in a world that is without pain or recollection, continues to yield new insights to one slow enough to appreciate digestion and its relation to the passing of time. He who finds himself in a book, and not necessarily in the leading role, finds himself everywhere.

His eyes darted underneath his closed eyelids.

"Who were you back in Texas?" Asked a girl named Melissa. He wore a plastered smile while wading in her backyard pool.

"Same person I am here. Just a normal person." His new friends were listening, wading around them.

"You think you're normal?" She asked.

The smile he'd been struggling to maintain – the smile he had learned to adopt just to assure everyone he wasn't miserable – faltered.

"Melissa!" said her friend.

For the rest of the night, he gave up the ghost. They played ping-pong while he pondered his failure. The ball fell in his direction, and he picked it up, feeling its smooth, light form with

impossible clarity. The garage they played in was lit by a single bulb. He realized he was there to shed light on a foreign state. They were young Californians, and he was a young Texan.

They turned to see him standing there, holding the ball, with heavy brow held in sharp relief by the singular bulb.

“Are you all right? You look lost.”

“I’m confused. Confused as to why any of you are so sure of yourselves. Nothing works the way it should. Money is baseless, love is dissoluble. I gave my food to a homeless person yesterday with the knowledge that his life will not change. I’m practicing self-affirmation while my body moves toward self-effacement, and so time moves backward and forward to a theoretical standstill. We say there is no God, and yet I can mark the year in which I lost favor with Him, because since then I’ve had people die who shouldn’t have, and I have felt the mold thicken around the edges of my brain for refusing to obey an invisible force. He is circling me like a shark, and I don’t know whether to swim away or stare at His magnificent form as He takes chunks out of me. All the while you people stare at me as if I’ve gone insane. I can assure you that I haven’t. Maybe if I did, I could finally relax. Maybe then I could finally care less about what you people think. I’ve gone out to the edge of existence and asked myself the questions that are better left unspoken. Since then, I’ve been staring at something that – God help me – I can’t turn away from. Worst of all, you hear me speak and think I must be a serial killer, and for good reason. Death is in the air. The last thing we should all be, is sure of ourselves.”

They looked at him with renewed pity and continued their game until finally, they all scattered to their respective homes, and he felt shame that he had said anything at all.

*A basketball hoop sat in the middle of the yard in sharp relief against a forest of pine trees. "Everything is changing again. Ponderous living and thoughts inconsequential, mixing."*  
*Said Elijah.*

On campus, he climbed the steps of a turret attached by a catwalk to the astronomy tower. He scuffed the concrete stairs with shambling steps, head bowed. Up above, a voice soft and higher than air spoke in long whispers. He cleared his throat to let her know he was there. There was a shuffling of papers, followed by the opening of a door. It slammed shut as he approached.

His first foray into short fiction flopped. He showed it to Maria, who took her time reading it and finally returned it with disheartening notes about diction and originality. He agreed wholeheartedly but turned it in for the grade, regardless.

They met when he asked if he could sit next to her in class. He set his board down by his desk in an awkward manner. She had freckles splayed across her slender brow, above a pair of shadowed eyes. Immediately there was the intimation of a dance.

They read their daily journals aloud for the class. He talked of his struggles with self-actualization and vocalized anything that came to mind – seemed unfazed by the lack of response from his classmates until their eyes were off him and he would begin to burrow a deep hole in the ground with his gaze.

Her own man was across the state to the east, she told him after class. They shared his last cigarette as she explained further: She remembered him as the roots of a tree, belonging entirely to a world in which she had no place. Money he had plenty of, and went further and further in pursuit of it while she stayed and pursued a degree.

On the days when she would miss his company, she would travel to the beach, where she could seek comfort in the company of people and gentle calls of seagulls and waves. Sometimes, she said, she could even sense the history of ancestral rock dissolved over time.

Then the sky would darken and she would drive home, alone. “We slight in the sun but by the moon, we fix our mistakes,” he said.

They stood on his balcony smoking cigarettes, her face flushed, and the clouds grey and rolling. In front of them was a nice apartment complex, fresh with egg-white paint. The wooden floorboards sighed with the wind, as it traveled through their gaps. Below one of his roommates passed by, laughing at their serious countenance.

The next day he found himself at the warehouse once again. The day was hotter than any he had felt before. “Move that bale over there.” His mom pointed to a place several meters from where he had left it. He looked at her and her implacable expression and then rolled the bale straight out of the doorway and down the stairs into the gravel.

Two of his classmates sat with him and their creative writing professor to discuss the year’s progress and the short stories which served as their final projects. One young woman with freckles on her brow wrote about a boy with a board in a story otherwise meandering and somewhat confusing. There was mention of a sea and of tumultuous waves of seasons and time’s irreversible flow. The kid couldn’t help her make it into anything and criticized the story as being too ambitious for a piece of short fiction.

What was the lesson in causing Orpheus to lose everything because of one slight error? Such tales are eternal fountains, raising questions central to our existence and coexistence even these centuries later.

At night he expanded his lungs and belted a song under an illusory shade of privacy. Not a single nymph approached as he eased his sore throat.

Is it enough to dispel such comments and the thoughts they provoke through their utterance? Should she craft her retort in long form, and address it to an audience instead of him? Reactions, if they wish to garner any attention, should serve innumerable purposes.

Experiences form deep ruts and boundaries. On a flimsy pale couch in January, he clutched the simple belief that great writing could transcend such boundaries.

## CHAPTER XII

### VIOLENCE

“They challenged me to a sprint. It was muddy. I slipped.” – Leopold Bloom

The medical safety net expired while he was living with three friends and attending university. Sitting on a rough couch with armrests of polished wood, he called his mom.

“My tooth’s been hurting pretty bad,” he told her.

“You know, I have a friend in Reynosa who’s a dentist.”

He weighed his options while he stared at his meager bookcase. One of its columns of painted black wood had several slashes. Paranoia had caused him to practice knife fighting – the bookcase, the unfortunate target of his ire. A majority of the books it contained were leftovers from philosophy classes.

Behind it, a glass door led to the balcony, where he often sat to meditate or watch the sunset, though the neighbor’s balcony formed a wall that boxed the view into a small space.

“Yeah, why not. How will I find it?”

They drove the short distance from his mom’s house to the border along streets of faded pavement. The road, lined with gas stations, plazas, and restaurants, widened as they got closer to the U.S. entry point, while the number of buildings thinned until there was only the occasional doctor’s office, mechanic’s joint, or swinger’s club. Then, for a stretch, they saw the characteristic brush, dirt, and mesquite that dominate the uninhabited spaces of South Texas. In the distance sat a warehouse with playful medieval architecture



Close to the border, a plaza lined the street, populated by discount stores and tertiary services. There sat tired families waiting for their rides into the unknown, diverging always at this juncture of worry, haste, and prayer.

They passed them and the border patrol without incident. Mexico was exactly as he remembered it: swarming with taxis, narrow roads, and aging infrastructure. A small park lay encased by the bustling roads, with a large gazebo at its center. The wind carried scattered dust toward the roofs of so many businesses: small cross-sections in grey blockades lining the sidewalks. The dentist's office sat a couple of blocks into the city, in an office space with a façade of polished stone filmed with dirt. The operation room consisted of a dentist's chair, a curtain, and two other chairs. He thought it fit the purpose fine, except for a large watermark on the roof that reminded him of a solitary lake.

His mom and her friend discussed the price of removing all his wisdom teeth at once. He admitted it would be best, steeling himself for a dull and painful afternoon. The dentist enjoyed talking, which is common though not less bothersome for it. Anna was her name. Applying the anesthesia with a syringe, she waited for Ignacio's mouth to numb and spoke to his mother enthusiastically. Regardless of how he felt, he had to commend her for her energy, diving into metropolitan topics with the vigor of someone half her age. Responsibility does little to dampen the gregarious.

The dentist's assistant, who sat to his left, told him to raise his hand if he felt pain. His mouth propped open; the dentist slowly fixed the drill to his mouth. Wincing as soon as the drill made contact, he fixed his eyes on the watermark and pretended he only felt discomfort, and that his sweating was not a reaction to imminent violence in his nervous system.

A few minutes into the operation, the assistant noticed him sweating and called it off. She smiled at the absurdity of enduring pain to get through an uncomfortable space of time, though to the boy it seemed a personal choice, and anyway, what was taking the anesthesia so long?

“You need to relax, or it’ll never work,” said the dentist. They left to convene in her office, and he sat with a rig attached to his mouth trying to relax so the numbness would set in.

In the following two years, he returned for several more visits, as the dentist identified issues with shocking regularity. His mother accompanied him every time, as they rarely took trips together and it seemed as good an excuse as any to get to know one another.

One day she grew tired of his unwillingness to go on his own. His reluctance came from a fragility impossible to relate. It was equal parts exhaustion from completing meaningless assignments for classes, being ostracized by his closest friends for self-obsession, and the result of self-medication which he found essential to his daily routine but sent a perpetually sweeping haze to corrupt his sight. A trip to Mexico alone seemed impossible. Add to that the objective of paying a fee to experience prolonged pain and discomfort, and he chose, amidst a draining storm, to push his dental problems toward an unknown date. If God existed, he might protect him long enough to avoid further issues, and if he did not receive such protection, then either he wasn’t worthy, or he didn’t exist, and that in itself was worth finding out. In short, he chose to remove himself and risked losing this small scuffle in favor of gaining ground in a war where both sides remained cloaked by the dust of their advancement. If on the side of the righteous he wished to remain, he would have to accept personal losses of varying degrees. Books, films, and intimate knowledge of self taught him to choose mind over body wherever the two came into conflict.

As he was eating cereal with oat, doused by the light from his balcony window, he heard a crack, and gone was his right incisor. It was then he realized he had an important follow-up

with Anna. He went to the bathroom and stared into the mirror, opening his mouth, then closing it again. The light bulb sputtered from above.

Everything. That's the tiny, insignificant factor that tilts reality sideways on the rails of existence.

## REFERENCES

- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*. Translated by Samuel Putnam, Modern Library, 1998.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. Translated by Constance Garnett, Project Gutenberg, 16 Dec. 2021, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/600/600-h/600-h.htm>.
- Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Avenel Press, 2017.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Selected Writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. Modern Library, 1992.
- Gass, William H. *Tests of Time*. Dalkey Archive Press, 2014.
- Ginsborg, Hannah. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 15 July 2005. Article. 20 March 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-aesthetics/>.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. Vintage Books, 2007. Novel.
- Ichikawa, Jonathan, and Benjamin Jarvis. "Thought-Experiment Intuitions and Truth in Fiction." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 142, no. 2, 2009, pp. 221–246. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/27734365](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27734365).
- Leitch, B. Vincent. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Longinus, and Grube G M A. *On Great Writing (on the Sublime)*. Hackett Pub. Co, 1991.
- Martin, George R.R. *A Game of Thrones*. Bantam Books, 2017.
- Shapiro, Karl Jay. *Creative Glut: Selected Essays*. Ed. Robert S. Phillips. I.R. Dee, 2004.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five: or, The Children's Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death*. Delacorte Press, 1969.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Saul Alejandro Rodriguez received his B.A. in 2015, and M.F.A. in 2023 under the College of Creative Writing from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

He received a scholarship to study abroad in London during the Summer of 2014. After receiving his B.A., he became one of the founding members of the McAllen Public Library's writing circle and published a short story in their first annual anthology titled "Flight." While attaining his M.F.A., he worked as a teacher's assistant and was one of two academic coaches pioneering a program to help guide students who had fallen into academic probation. He also interviewed and helped establish a training program for prospective coaches and has worked intermittently as a substitute teacher for the Edinburg I.S.D. and I.D.E.A. public school systems.

He currently lives at 2016 East 23rd Street in Mission, TX, and is happily married.