

2013

## Late observations

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LATE OBSERVATIONS

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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By

Jason D. Ludlow

Spring 2013

THESIS OF JASON D. LUDLOW APPROVED BY

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MASTER'S THESIS

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## *Why I Am Not a Mormon*

At the heart of the compulsion that drove me through Mormonism and out the other side was curiosity. As the cheesy banner of a now-defunct atheist website I used to frequent said, "Curiosity Killed the Catholic." I like to ask questions, lots and lots of questions. While there is a general idea that curiosity is a good thing—at least that's what I was taught in school—it does have its drawbacks. I'm that irritating guy during group tours or college lectures or heretofore pleasant conversations who cannot stop asking about everything.

I had a conversation with a friend once where I interrupted a story he was telling five times in as many minutes. "Is that annoying? When I interrupt you to ask questions?" I asked. "Yes, it is!" he responded. I was taken aback. How could I appreciate his story if I didn't know every single detail?

I took a history course as an undergraduate. On the day we were discussing Israel and Palestine and their present tension I couldn't stop raising my hand. "Why don't the Palestinians blame the British for their predicament?" A few minutes later, "What would have happened if the Jewish Underground had succeeded in

blowing up the Dome of the Rock?" A few minutes later, "What is your response to people who say there will 'never' be peace in the Middle East?" The other students in the class weren't pleased.

There are times when you can feel hostility being directed at you from behind—I always sit in the front of the class—and this was one of them. The nape of my neck was about to combust under the heat of their collective glaring. The class was slowed down significantly thanks to my inquiries. That wasn't my concern. There were questions that needed to be answered, and I had to ask them.

I was talking to one of my sister's friends at a party. She told me, as many believing Mormons will tell you, that humans are perfected in the next life.

"What do you mean by perfected?" I asked.

"People don't have physical or mental problems," she responded.

"There's no weakness?"

"I guess not."

"Does that mean all men will look like Arnold Schwarzenegger?"

"I don't know. They'll just be perfect."

"What about people who are born crazy?"

"Their minds will be perfect in heaven."

"What about if someone went crazy in life as opposed to being born crazy?"

"They would be healed in the next life too. Like, if I had a husband and he began to have mental problems God would fix them."

"So you would stay with your husband if he went crazy? Since he's going to be perfect in the next life?"

"Yes, of course."

"Even if he went really crazy?"

"Yes!"

"What if he went crazy and killed all your children?"

At this point she got upset and walked off, leaving me perplexed. What's the big deal? I thought. I'm asking questions, that's all. I'm a little older now, and a little more self-aware. Endlessly curious people—ever have a conversation with a toddler who has recently discovered the word, 'why'? nightmarish does not begin to describe it—are a huge pain in the ass. They can be a threat to public order, good times, and pleasant delusions. While I don't agree with their decision, I sympathize with the Athenians who condemned Socrates to death.



Self-awareness notwithstanding, I still get caught up from time to time in my need to beleaguer people with questions. There are two reasons for this. One, I genuinely am curious about the world and love knowing more about it. Questions are one of the best ways to learn. There are few things I love more when I'm teaching than fielding questions from students. Two, I like looking smart. Looking smart is a large part of my identity. That's me in the movies, I like to think, when my ego has overtaken my better instincts, the guy who has all the answers. I feel that being intelligent makes me different and superior to most people. I'm not proud of this, but I'm rarely strong enough to pass up an opportunity to parade my intellect.

This combination, being willing, more than that, being *enthusiastic* about asking difficult, uncomfortable questions, and, at the same time, needing intellectual validation does not, unfortunately, lead to behavior that fits well within Mormonism. The mindset that Mormonism fosters, with its emphasis on faith and appeals to authority, was cruel at times to my inquisitive nature. Intellectual rigidity was preached at church, and practiced at home. One Sunday, when I was 18, my family was pulling into a parking space at the Sunrise Rancho meeting house in Las Vegas when I

asked my parents about dress. Specifically, I wanted to know why God cared about what people wore to church. It didn't seem reasonable to me that an all-knowing, all-powerful creature who had lived for billions of years would care about whether or not His children were wearing suits and ties and dresses when they gave up three hours every week to worship Him. For that matter, it seemed strange that an all-knowing, all-powerful creature who knew the precise location of every atom in the universe and, somehow, their momentums simultaneously, could get hung up on the legalistic fineries that I felt pressured to conform to, and that He felt the need to be worshipped at all.

Also, I've always hated ties and collared shirts buttoned all the way up to the top. Wearing both in the heat of a Las Vegas summer made life more miserable than it had to be. Didn't God care about my comfort?

"What if you were going to see the president?" my father asked. "Wouldn't you dress up nicely?"

"I guess," I replied, "but God isn't the president."

"You're right, he's much more important."

"But isn't God infinitely wise and just?"

"Of course."

"So wouldn't He be beyond the things that we're concerned with? We dress up for presidents because that's what we've been taught to do and because we rank people. Some people are higher than us, some people are lower. The clothes you wear makes your position in the hierarchy visible. Why would God care about anything like that? Isn't the person you are, not the way you dress more important?"

At eighteen I was already an insufferable little intellectual.

"You do it to show respect!"

There was an unmistakable rise in my father's voice that told me the conversation had ended. My father, by and large, is a shy, conscientious man. I love him. He is an excellent father. He's a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, but you wouldn't guess he was ex-military from his propensity to tell corny jokes— "Pull my finger!" he never gets tired of that one—and do the lion's share of the listening during a conversation. He doesn't give orders. This changes when he is pushed into a corner, especially when religion and politics are on the docket. I'm scared of him when that change occurs, and I can sense that while he would never actually act in a physically violent manner, he knows instinctively that the mere threat of violence taking place is enough to keep me quiet. It's not a

real quiet though, it's a wounded, vengeful violence. It's a quiet that the weak are forced to endure, and it embittered me for a long time. I'm still bitter about it, not as bitter as I used to be, but bitter all the same. Some things, I've had to learn, get better without ever healing completely.

Nearly ten years after we had our discussion about God's sartorial dictates, I was back in Las Vegas. At the dinner table in the kitchen—I can picture the scene with such clarity, the red placemats from Turkey decorated with Arabesques, the mahogany-wood brown ceiling fan turning slowly overhead, Matilda the cat curled up in the windowsill's warmth—my father asked my best friend Dylan, "What happened to you?" Dylan, when he was 19, served as a Mormon missionary in Oklahoma for two full years, as all young Mormon men are expected to do. He left the church when he was twenty-three. At the dinner table he was twenty-six, and had recently finished a short stay in jail that resulted from marijuana possession. Calmly, quietly, logically, my friend responded to my father's inquiry. He called Mormon history and dogma into question. He pointed out that Mormons place their faith in Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, translator of the Book of Mormon, and the church's first prophet, and in the current prophet

of the church due to a feeling that wells up inside of them that they call the holy spirit. He noted that Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses he had spoken to during his mission claimed to feel the same approving spirit over their own particular dogmas which contradicted Mormonism's. He brought up logical and anthropological gaps in the Book of Mormon. I was proud of my friend in those moments, and envious. He was braver than I was. He was not laboring under the agonizing presumption that it was more important to make other people feel comfortable even if it killed me inside a little bit every time I felt forced to suppress my natural curiosity where church was concerned.

"You don't understand," my father responded when Dylan was done, "When I was a missionary I saw things in the Philippines. Miracles. How do you explain that?"

At this point, believing that it might be safe to enter into a wider discussion of how humans know anything—I had been reading Hume, and epistemological difficulties were looming large in my mind—and because I can't help myself, I joined the conversation for the first time with, of course, a question.

"What about Fatima, Portugal, dad? There were thousands of people in the early 19th-century who claimed to see the Virgin Mary and other miracles."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

When my father asked this question he looked me directly in the eye and I saw no love there. His voice was venomous. I remember thinking, in scared, stupid wonder, is my dad about to punch me in the face? I looked away. He had proven his point. He was dominant. He resided at the top of the hierarchy no matter what he was wearing. I excused myself from the table, and walked downstairs, and holed up in my bedroom where I muttered, "Fuck this, fuck this," to myself and read *Siddhartha* until Dylan came looking for me.

My father's visions are part of his story. I can't blame him for feeling the way that he does, as much as I would like to. He is the centerpiece, as I once was, in a war being waged between the cosmic and ageless forces of good and evil. He has had experiences that confirm this to him. He has seen demons as plainly as one person sees another. He has heard angels. A man in the Philippines was attempting to kill my father with a poisoned drink. A voice spoke in my father's mind and told him to drink the poison. God will protect

you, said the voice. He drank. He lived. I have not seen though, and I have not heard, and I cannot believe. *Blessed is he who believes and has not seen*, are words that leave me cold. He believes, but does he wonder? When he's alone, does he ask himself if his experiences happened the way he remembers him? Does he doubt? Doubting is what I do. Even if I had seen or heard, the first thing I would do is try to devise a test to make sure my experience was valid. That was my response to a devout aunt.

"What if you saw an angel?" she asked.

"Here's what I would do," I replied. "I would choose a number between one and a billion. Then I would whisper the number to the angel. The angel would then communicate the number to a friend waiting in a different room. My friend would then enter the room I was in and tell me the number. If the numbers matched up then it would prove...that the angel was probably a real entity. Of course, it wouldn't prove that the angel was actually an angel. It might be part of an experiment being conducted by extraterrestrials. Or a visitor from an alternate dimension. If the numbers matched up it still wouldn't remove the possibility that I was crazy or hallucinating."

My aunt smiled nervously at me in response. I didn't intend to make her uncomfortable. Discomfort is a side effect of questioning. I wish it wasn't.

If I witnessed a miracle I would interrogate myself in the same manner I wish I could interrogate my parents, my old bishops, the living prophet of the Mormon church, and the prophets long dead, Joseph Smith first and foremost among them. There are questions that need to be asked. Unfortunately, as a notable Mormon apologist once put it, "when the prophet has spoken, the thinking has been done." What about all the fun and disturbing things you've uncovered though? What about Joseph Smith's tendency to marry other men's wives? What about his tendency to marry teenagers, one as young as fourteen? What about the lack of evidence that two great Jewish-infused civilizations in the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites and Nephites, ever existed in South America? What about the "skin of darkness" that God supposedly cursed the Lamanites with for their wickedness, the same cursed skin, so the story goes, that can be found on Native Americans today? What about the magic stone that Joseph Smith used to find buried treasure and translate the Book of Mormon? What about all the work you put into finding facts your church would prefer to stay hidden?



What about the rush of intellectual daring? What about the pat on the back you would like to receive for acting in such a scholarly, industrious fashion? What about the approval of your community for doing such fine work? What about your parents being proud of you? You don't get what you want in the end. You get answers to everything except the questions that matter the most. Pray. Pay your tithing. Believe. Confrontations with the tangled contradictions of history? That's where you get silence, if you're lucky.

Fuck it, that's what you say to yourself when you can't get what you want. Fuck it. That's when it's no fun to be a skeptic.

The loneliness is a real drag. Affirmations of a common cause or goal tend to bring people together. As an inveterate doubter I have found it hard to find my place in any community. After a while, I find myself asking why are we all doing this? Why are we all going to church? I asked when I was religious. Why are we all partying? I asked when I was among partiers. Why are we all making art? I asked when I was among artists. The answers, in time, no longer suffice, and I find myself drifting once again in search of something to embrace, love, question, and leave. Losing my religion was the worst pain. You're losing a sacred, precious part of yourself.

You can sense the inevitability of the loss. Unlike most losses, however, this one won't be sympathized with.

You lose a job and your friends and family rally around you. You lose a person close to you, you lose your laptop, you lose the big game, you lose your mind, your cat, your Rolex, your driver's license, your house, your youth, your innocence, you suffer big losses, small losses, and you can expect to receive some degree of sympathy, understanding and love from the people closest to you. They buoy your spirits when all the awful weight of existence falls on you.

It was different when I began to slip out of Mormonism's shadow. From my father I receive a frightened, angry, uncomprehending silence which to this day colors all the areas outside the basic pleasantries we exchange. We don't discuss politics, religion, philosophy, my love interests, morality, or current events. We talk about the weather, so to speak. From my mother I receive a shake of the head and the words, "Oh well, you kids are adults now, you're going to do what you're going to do. I don't blame myself for this. Your decisions are your decisions," as if I was a junkie or a philanderer, "Oh well, if you're going to ruin your life and break my heart there's nothing I can do about it," as if there had

been a choice at all, and I hadn't been speaking the lines and miming the actions of my unconscious directors, and could run off the rails that had been fixed at birth.

As if they had any choice themselves. I am one of those who was made to not believe. That's what it would say in the *dramatis personae*. *Jason Ludlow, an unbeliever*. Coming to terms with what I have to be has allowed me, in a small way at least, to come to terms with what others have to be. My parents were made to believe. My grandmother was made to believe. My little sister was made to believe. My aunts and uncles and cousins and friends were variously made to believe or not believe. I wish I had been able to accept this earlier. There are lots of things I wish.

I wish I had been better prepared for the gaping void that lost religion leaves in its wake. When believers get angry or scared, or refuse to face the evidence that undermines their faith it does not make them foolish, cruel, or cowardly. The mind, like the body, tries to avoid pain. Consciously or otherwise, believers know how much they stand to lose. Diminished standing in the community, the disapproval of loved ones, the collapse of one's moral foundation—and what of eternal life? No one told me how hard it would be to question the concept of eternal life. Eternal life was the

great umbrella I used to live beneath. Eternal life was the ultimate justification, a dearly loved certainty, an endless source of comfort. Tyrants would be punished in the life to come. The strong would be made weak, and the weak would be made strong. The physical body would be perfected. All the sacrifice and strain that keeping the faith required would be rewarded. I used to dream about the glories living forever entailed. I would have my own universe to govern. I would bathe in God's bliss. The most appealing part about the Mormon story is that it never ends, it only gets better and better for time and all eternity, and if it grated on me that I had to wear a tie to church and give up ten percent of my income for the rest of my life, it was worth it if finality could be defeated.

Best of all, every question I had would be answered. I was going to know whether or not the Loch Ness monster really existed, and where Jimmy Hoffa was buried. I was going to know if the Unified Field Theory of Physics was woven into the fabric of our universe, and the exact paths by which life evolved. I was going to know the beginnings and ends of all things. I was going to know my own heart, and the heart of every man and woman who had lived or ever would live.

Then I realized I was going to die, and that the odds were good I would not be coming back. Life as a one-way trip was a terrifying notion. I could deal with the idea that Joseph Smith wasn't the saintly man that the church made him out to be, and that, contrary to Mormon dogma, Jesus probably had not visited Mesoamerica before making his ascension into heaven. What I could not deal with was nonexistence. There was no comfort to be taken from books. Sartre, I read, held that death was nothing to fear since where existence was, death was not, and where death was, existence was not. Since existence is all we can know through our senses, it follows that nonexistence is a state we cannot possibly know, and therefore should not fear. This answer did nothing for the mental strain I was experiencing. Philip Larkin's poem "Aubade" had it right:

That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anesthetic from which none come round.

Was it true that my grandfather, and my pet dog, and my favorite writers and thinkers from across the centuries were gone forever? I looked for a way out. I was in my mid-twenties. The satisfaction that upending Mormonism's truth claims had given was rapidly yielding to an overpowering dread as the full effects of losing my religion made themselves known.

A pattern recalled from memory. I drive a beat-up Suzuki Esteem with a dented hood from bookstore to bookstore looking for a solution to a question flashing incessantly off and on in my mind like the neon lights on the Las Vegas Strip: is there a reasonable reason to believe life continues after death? Faith does not suffice. Wish thinking is not strong enough to delude me into believing what I want to be true.

At the Barnes and Noble on Maryland Parkway I head straight for the philosophy section. At random, I pick up a book and turn directly to the glossary. The book could be a Kaufmann translation of Nietzsche, or a Bergson treatise on time, or a commentary on Heidegger's concept of being, it does not matter. What matters are the words , "God" and "afterlife." That's me in the movie, the guy who thinks he has all the answers, and then realizes how little he knows, and is shattered as a result.

Book after book in the philosophy section offers nothing to lead me to believe that survival beyond the grave is likelier than not. Disappointed, I head to the books on Eastern religions. The Gita offers an eternal round, Buddhism offers Nirvana, nothing I read indicates that my ego will survive my body's dissolution. I transition to the science section. Stephen Hawking has nothing definitive to say about the matter. Neither does Carl Sagan, or Lawrence Krauss, or Einstein—Einstein's "god", I read, is not a personal god who intervenes in human affairs, and does not offer never-ending life, which, I conclude, makes Einstein's god useless. Oh my god, I think to myself in Barnes and Noble while poring through *Origin of Species'* glossary, there is no hope. I leave the store without bothering to go through the books in the Christian section. I know what they will say. Have faith. I demand proof. There is no proof to be found at Barnes and Noble. Then it's time for the next bookstore, and the next, one disappointment following another for years.

This is not a habit that has been entirely broken. There are still times when I'm in a bookstore and I will find myself scanning the titles in the science section for a reasonable indication that this life is not the end. No luck so far. Then I think of my parents, and

I'm suddenly sorry for every shitty word I've levied against their faith-based dreams. My mother once talked to me about the Millennium. For a thousand years, she said, Satan will be bound by Christ until the time for Armageddon arrives. "What's he going to be bound with?" I asked. "Iron chains? Silk stockings?" She gave me a little smile. "Say what you will," she replied, "But it's going to happen." That's what I envy, that's what I miss, the certainty. Granted, at times it might be a smug certainty, especially where certainty allows moral matters to be reduced to absolutes, but it offers such wide-ranging comforts. My parents know they are going to live forever, and they know what God wants. I've come to the conclusion that asking them to give up that certainty would be irrational. This is an odd thing for apostate to say. I am an apostate though, not a missionary. Having spent some time studying atheism, especially New Atheism, its most recent incarnation, I can say that whatever solace and intellectual refreshment atheism provides, it doesn't have a thing on the afterlife. For that reason alone I am not confident about New Atheism's chances in its quest to rid the world of superstitious, religious thinking. Assuming there is nothing after this life, what good would it do my parents to abandon their tradition and plunge, as I did, into the icy waters of



uncertainty? They aren't intellectually lazy, and they aren't cowards. They're human beings who have found a story that works for them. I can respect that.

At the same time, I can't help being reminded of the cost their story has taken out on me. There is a good chance I will never resolve my dread of the void at the heart of existence, or my tendency to ask and ask until I approach a radical, skeptical nihilism. Humans live and die, and it doesn't matter in any absolute sense. I wish I didn't feel that way. I wish my role had been different. Where my parents are concerned, they no longer strike me as antagonists. If anyone is to blame for the way things have turned out, it's the casting director. Clearly, I have been miscast. My parents should have received a different son, one with a greater predilection for belief. A good Mormon, that is what they should have gotten. I can imagine him. He says his prayers every night. He reads the Book of Mormon regularly without having to be told. He doesn't ask too many questions. He doesn't read non-faith promoting history. He doesn't read philosophy since he doesn't see the point. He has all the answers he needs. He has a decent shot at contentment.

*Birds*

Eight years ago, when I was twenty-two, I spent the summer at my parents' house in Las Vegas, a sprawling, four-bedroom affair, with a ruddy, clay tile roof, a swimming pool in the back ringed by palm trees, and an interior that bears the kitschy predilections of the previous owner. There is as an etched pane of glass separating the dining room from the living room that features nude Greek figures, and a rug—glued to the carpet—covering most of the basement floor depicting a large, white tiger prowling beneath a voluptuous moon.

My two sisters and I would often migrate back to Las Vegas between June and August while we waited for the next college semester to begin. Tanya, my older sister by thirteen months, was home during the particular summer I am describing. We were close then, but not nearly as close as we are now. She was attending Creighton University in Nebraska, and I envied her the distance she had put between herself and her Mormon heritage. I was attending Brigham Young University in Utah, the epicenter of Mormonism, not fitting in, and hating the experience without realizing that what I actually hated was my own weakness. I was complicit in fashioning

my miserable circumstances, too scared to openly rebel against the religion I had been born into, and too timid to voice my desire independence out loud. It would not be until years later, when I had forged something like an identity, that Tanya and I would become intimates. We won't ever be complete equals. First-born siblings are too used to being in charge. I have no hard feelings about this. We get along well enough. She's fair.

Tanya's birds were with her. From the time we were children, animals in general, but birds especially, have fascinated her. She would hole up in her room after school and memorize entries in the National Audubon Society Field Guide to Birds. To this day, she's a useful person to have around if you need a bird identified. We will be walking together. A bird will alight on a telephone wire ahead. Before I can ask, she'll tell me it's an American crow, or house finch, or white-throated sparrow, and give me facts about their behavior. *Did you know*, she will say, *the redder a male house finch is, the better his chances of finding a mate?* Her knowledge always impresses me. I looked through one of her field guides once, as a boy, in an earnest attempt to access the avian world she communes with. Page after page of painstakingly drawn boobies, and hatches, and warblers, and jays, faced me without arousing my interest. For Christmas,

when I was ten, my parents purchased a children's chemistry set I had been obsessing over for months, ever since I saw it in a toy catalog. The set came with twenty different innocuous chemicals in small, green bottles, and instructions on how to perform simple experiments with them. Christmas arrived, and the chemistry set arrived with it. I didn't open a single bottle. Like ornithology, the idea of chemistry was more appealing to me than the thing itself. If I had known myself better and been more forthcoming, a tall order for most adults, let alone children, I could have spared my parents the fifty dollars they spent, and the disappointment they felt when I allowed their gift to go unregarded.

Tanya had two peach-faced lovebirds. Five-inches tall, their plumage was a rich, tropical green that yielded to a pale pink which covered their faces like ornamental hoods. While the birds in the Audubon guides had not captivated me, they were at least silent and harmless, tamed by technical descriptions. Tanya's birds, whose names I could never bother to remember, if I had even learned them in the first place, were menaces. The feathers were admittedly lovely, but it was the slate-gray beaks and black, opaque eyes that kept my attention. They bit me.

Tanya, who has owned birds for almost her entire life, had charm. She could stroke a peach-faced lovebird on its chest with an index finger held horizontally, and it would calmly hop onto her fleshy perch. When it was my turn to do likewise, I smiled, put on a confident, non-threatening front, held out my finger, and they would strike and tear at my skin with their sharp beaks. They drew blood from the skin around my fingernails. They were mean, and I was afraid of them, and I hated them, and I was ashamed to fear and hate such small, simple creatures. When Tanya asked me to change their water, or cuttlebone, or seeds, I was too prideful to admit that I would as soon not. What excuse could I have offered? Fear? She wouldn't have believed me, and if she had I would have worried that she would be less than sympathetic. You expose a weakness to an older sibling at your own peril. So the birds bit my hands, and I cursed their existence, and my silence.

In addition to a television room, there were three bedrooms in the basement, one for each child in my family. The birds lived in my little sister's bedroom. This made sense since Christa was not returning home that particular summer. The cage was ample. Tanya strived to make sure the lovebirds lacked for nothing. If they needed a wheeled-cage that was five feet high by two feet wide to be

happy, that is what they received. The cage bars were thick, and painted forest green. Sometimes I would poke my fingers between them. The lovebirds would grip the bars and clamber over to my trembling index finger, which I would withdraw as they prepared to strike. I was taunting them and testing my courage at the same time. It was all I could think to do. In spite of my efforts, they didn't lose their resolve to attack and I didn't grow any braver.

In July, Tanya went to Colorado to visit her boyfriend for a week. The birds remained in Las Vegas under my supervision. She instructed me on their care: the newspaper lining the cage needed to be replaced every few days; the birds were to be fed twice a day, new seeds given, empty husks removed; water was to be changed twice a day (the birds often defecated in their own water supply, leaving white, dime-sized blots floating on the water tray's surface. I find it difficult to respect animals that shit where they drink); the cuttlebone clipped near the upper perch of the cage was to be changed when needed. The cuttlebone kept their beaks sharp. *Wonderful, I thought, as if they needed the encouragement.*

I promised I would take care of them. Beyond the requisites of their existence, Tanya encouraged me to play with them from

time to time. I promised I would. As far as lies go, this one was hardly notable.

To keep the birds from being noisy late at night or early in the morning, a black sheet was draped over their cage at night to keep light out. The birds wouldn't make a peep until the sheet was removed. Once Tanya had driven off to the airport, I removed the sheet, fed the birds, gave them water, and they rewarded me by attacking me at every possible instant. So I threw the sheet back over the cage, and congratulated myself on at least shutting them up. I had agreed to take care of them, sure, but I was under no obligation to listen to their inane whistles all day.

The week passed uneventfully, as weeks tended to during the summer. From June to August, the weather in Las Vegas keeps everyone indoors, or scurrying from one air-conditioned casino to the next. At night, the mercury remains in the mid-80s. This always felt to me as though it subverted the natural order of the planet, the city being stuffy and warm at three in the morning, even though I knew it was only the desert acting in its own indifferent fashion. The soft, fabric couch in the basement, and the ample flat screen it faced, were my playground while the sun was out. Life was good in the basement during the summer. There were always movies to be

watched, video games to be played, the occasional book to be read, and friends who came to visit.

Much like high school, summer was a time where I allowed all the knowledge I had accrued during the previous year to dissipate. Out my mind went Kant, cellular respiration, and dimensional analysis. Into my mouth went pork rinds and frozen pizzas. I woke up at noon and went to bed as the sun was rising, exhausted from having done nothing all day. These were not my finest moments, although, if I could do it all over, I would probably do the same thing with those long, aimless hours. Responsibility has always weighed heavily on my heart. I was heading into my final year as an undergraduate. The post-graduation, real world was approaching, with its hateful 40-hour workweeks and bills. I planned to put off its arrival for as long as possible, and succeeded admirably. Vegas was a pleasure cruise. My indolent nature was satisfied.

Tanya was coming back from Colorado, my mother told me. My biggest accomplishment during my sister's absence was eating a marijuana cupcake and reading Siddhartha from start to finish in one sitting. As I closed the book, I tried to convince myself that the pleasant, dissociated feeling radiating through my body was satori



and not THC. I couldn't believe an entire week had gone by so quickly.

That's when I remembered the birds. I was talking to my mother in the kitchen. Her words jarred the lovebirds loose in my brain where they caromed against my skull, and shrieked with outrage. The birds. Oh my god, the birds. The birds were dead. The birds had to be dead. I hadn't fed them in a week, I hadn't blown away the old seed husks and given them new seeds, I hadn't changed their cuttlebone, or replaced their newspaper. I hadn't played with them. What I had done, instead, the morning of Tanya's departure, was put the sheet back on their cage, and forget about them. They hadn't made a sound. I hadn't checked on them. Between all the junk food, Nintendo, action movies, comic books, I hadn't remembered that I had agreed to be responsible for two living creatures. I turned from my mother and ran. I took the stairs to the basement six at a time. I sprinted through the TV room, and down the hallway until I reached the last door on the right. I knew the birds were dead. I would find their emerald green bodies lying on the shit-stained surface of their forest green cage. Tanya would not forgive me, and I would never live down the shame. I entered the bedroom and threw off the sheet.

The birds were alive. The birds were alive. They had water. There were no seeds left in the food trays, but they were alive. It was impossible. It was a miracle. In a daze I filled the trays up with fresh seeds, and watched, stupefied, as the lovebirds attacked them with gusto. I don't know that I've ever felt as glad about anything in my life as I felt about that moment. The birds were alive. They were alive. After ensuring that they had enough food and water, and that I wasn't hallucinating, I holed up in my bedroom where I read manga, tried to get my breathing under control, and waited for Tanya to come home.

An hour or so later I heard her enter the house. A few minutes after that her footsteps sounded on the basement stairs. The door to Christa's room opened, and then closed. She knocked on my door. I invited her in, hoping she wouldn't pick up on my jagged, nervous energy.

We talked for a few minutes about her trip to Colorado, and I filled her in on how little I had accomplished in her absence. She mentioned something that Lola, my Filipino grandmother who was also staying at the house that summer, had told her. Lola had told her that no one was feeding the birds. At that moment I knew I was safe. As I pointed out to Tanya, the birds were in perfect health.

When Tanya asked why Lola would claim that they had been neglected, my answer was simple, and, for her, satisfactory.

I told her that Lola was crazy.

To be fair, my Lola, or Filipino grandmother, is a little crazy. She lives in a world parallel to the one most people live in. It's hard to get through to her sometimes, and almost impossible to guess what she's thinking. I don't know what impulse moved her to look beneath the sheet covering the lovebirds' cage, to properly assess what was happening to them due to my neglect, and to take care of them without telling anyone else in the house what she was doing.

I didn't tell Tanya the truth about what had happened while she was in Denver. I didn't tell her the day after she returned, or the week after, or when she left Las Vegas, or the year after that, or the year after that. For eight years I haven't told her the truth, and—like many a failure before and after it—the whole experience slipped out of my short-term memory, and took up residence deep within the pack of forgotten memories rattling around the dark spaces of my skull. I hadn't thought about the birds in years. Then, inexplicably, it all began to come back a few weeks ago, my indolence, my hatred for them, my broken promises, the despair and the relief.

All of it was present once again, present and directionless. It takes a certain degree of self-confidence to admit that you were once a person you wish you hadn't been, and that there is a strong likelihood that you will always be, to some extent, the person you wish that you weren't. I would like to say that I'm no longer lazy, but the best I can do is say I'm not as lazy as I used to be. If two lovebirds were left in my charge today I wouldn't let them starve or dehydrate. Their cuttlebone would be replaced when needed. I wouldn't play with them, but I wouldn't promise to play with them either.

I was wrong to call Lola crazy, and I wish I hadn't. I'm not the man I used to be, but I'm not entirely different. While I was racing to the basement, on the verge of having a panic attack, in the moments where I thought the birds were dead, and that I had killed them, while I had some concern for their well-being, I was far more worried about Tanya. I was worried about how devastated she would be. I was worried about what she would do to me, and what I would do to myself in the hours, weeks, and years following the discovery of her dead pets. I was unable to think of them as ends in themselves. The birds were a catalyst for a potential disaster, and little beyond that as far as I'm concerned. If, hypothetically, the

birds hadn't belonged to anyone, and, somehow, had been my responsibility, and I had let them die, I would have been fine. I would have looked at the cuts healing on my fingers, and felt the anxiety subsiding in my mind, and I would have been a little bit glad that they were dead, and could no longer agonize me. There is no reason I can think of to let Tanya know this.

If lovebirds weren't important to me, I should have understood that they were important to her. I should have put on a pair of leather gloves and fed them and watered them, not for their own sakes, something I was incapable of doing, but for hers. I should have set aside my own fear of sharp beaks and my desire to luxuriate in front of the television and helped my sister, who I loved, and who loved me in return, but I didn't. And I'm sorry. That is what I was not strong enough to say the day she returned home. I'm sorry.

*My Lola*

If anyone gets on my nerves, it's Lola. When I think about my Filipino grandmother, it's with a mixture of irritation and indulgence, the kind of indulgence you might direct towards a difficult child where a broken toy leads to a fit of screaming, an unrequited demand for a favorite treat leads to sulking, an inability to understand the busy, adult world leads to frustration and fright. When Lola fusses or scolds or demands, it sets my teeth on edge. *That's Lola being Lola*, I have to remind myself. She won't change, and I have the capacity to act like an adult. Our roles are understood and consistent.

Lola irritates me. She irritates virtually everyone who falls within the range of her heavily accented voice. She speaks your name. You strain to hear what she is saying, both because English with a prominent Tagalog inflection is difficult to understand, and because her voice is soft. A soft voice, but with a firmness, an insistence at its foundation. A slow wave that knocks you over. She stands at some distance while calling your name. You may be on the couch, watching a movie in the basement, and she will stand at the foot of the basement stairs and call your name from ten feet away. You will wait for a few moments before responding, as if in that unspeaking space she will give up. Lola never gives up.

You will respond, generally, with a, "Yes, Lola?" She asks for a ride to the doctor. You attempt to come up with a reasonable excuse and fail. The words, "I have to...." taper off in your throat as you meet her expectant eyes. What kind of grandson are you anyway? You tell yourself you're a good person, and that you try to do the right things, so you end up driving her to the doctor. You might find yourself waiting at her doctor's office for three hours. Or spending an hour driving her across town and then twice as long on the way home after Lola "remembers" a few other stops she has to

make. An entire day wasted, again. You return home and swear you won't do her any more favors in the future. Except you will.

It isn't the requests, but the sheer volume of them, their collected weight, which breeds resentment. I am not alone in finding Lola burdensome. There are several women who attend the same church as Lola who will no longer answer her calls. She never wants to chat, she never wants to do anything church related, she never wants to invite anyone over for dinner. What she wants is a ride somewhere, and she won't tell you that it's going to take your entire day, and she will have no qualms about calling you as often as she needs to in order to get her needs met. When we lived together in my parents' house, there was no telephone to act as a screening mechanism. I couldn't say no to her. No one can say no to her once she starts speaking. I would find myself, one four-hour trip later, amazed, carrying her groceries—pandasal bread, a jar of fresh bagoong, and dried squid—back into the house.

If I were to ask someone to devote a substantial portion of her day to my personal needs, I would feel hesitant, reluctant.

Culturally, I was raised in a WASPy environment. Getting one's needs met is to be done only after everyone else's needs have been met, and even then you're probably inconveniencing people terribly



by—how dare you!—asking for things from them. One slice of pizza left? Let somebody else have it. A friend's whistling is annoying you? Grow up, stop complaining and let him have his fun. You're feeling an emotion? Keep it to yourself, buddy. I tell myself that this is the attitude that puts up cathedrals—all that sublimated fury has to go somewhere—and makes its antithesis, as exemplified by Lola, a woman who has asked and shall receive, frustrating to behold. Lola appears to be taking without giving back. She violates the social contract that was inculcated in me during youth: give, especially when you don't want to give. This is what Christ and society demand. You'll receive admiration on earth and heaven ever after.

There are times where I find myself envious of Lola. When neighbors play music loudly late at night, I never asked them to turn it down. I'm too shy, hesitant, scared. Aren't they entitled to have a good time without it being spoiled by some selfish, pushy guy? Lola wouldn't hesitate. She would knock on the door. She would stand in the doorway for 30 minutes, gently complaining about the noise, and her life, and her ungrateful children and grandchildren, and all the awful things she has had to endure in life and continues to endure, and they would yield.

Lola is unburdened by self-awareness.

She can also be cruel.

Lola criticizes her children. Nothing they ever do is good enough. Not the favors they offer, not the money they send her, not the house they built her on Guimaras Island in the Philippines, not the wall they built around the house which is topped with broken bottle glass to thwart intruders, not the maids they help pay for to clean the house, who Lola also criticizes, not the trips to America they fund, not the time and toil employed to win her forever withheld approval. I don't think she could approve at this point. I don't think she's capable of it. I don't know that it would make any difference if she did.

She called my thirteen year old cousin Jerry a "stupid freak" knowing full well that the insult carried special, devastating connotations for him. They were the same words an abusive stepmother had used against him years before. He hid in his room and cried. A few weeks later Lola got locked in the garage. She knocked on the door that led into the kitchen, and cried for help for two hours. Jerry finally freed her, and she immediately blamed him for locking her out in the first place. When I asked Jerry about it, he told me it was an accident. I believe him, but it wouldn't have

surprised me if he had done it on purpose. She deserved it, that's what I would have told Jerry, all the while knowing that one cruelty can't right another.

My dad observed that she could have simply used the garage door opener to make her escape. She couldn't though, that's what I realize. Lola grew up in the Philippines. The average yearly per capita income in America is \$48,328. The average, yearly per capita income in the Philippines is \$4,100. My mother told me that her high school teachers used to sell snacks during recess and lunch to supplement their salaries. She told me that every Christmas, for a treat, she and her siblings would have spaghetti. She told me that her mother, my Lola, abandoned the family when my mother was a teenager, the eldest of six siblings. Since Lola abandoned her family forty years ago, my mother has had a hard time allowing anyone to get close. I've accepted that there is nothing I can do about this.

My mother and my Lola aren't on the best of terms, but when I ask her why Lola is so eccentric, and I've asked many times, my mother grows sympathetic. She told me that after leaving the family, Lola took up with an abusive man and was never the same afterwards. She told me he wasn't the first man to abuse Lola. There are hints of rape in my Lola's past. There is more. I haven't

been able to get the full story. I haven't asked. Maybe I don't want to know. Maybe I do know the full story, but have convinced myself that I don't. Maybe I would like to believe she's simply an inconvenient, self-centered old lady in order to spare myself the trouble of having to sympathize with her continued plight.

Lola lived in one of the poorest countries on earth where the abuse she endured and inflicted eventually robbed her of whatever common sense she possessed to the point where understanding the simple operation of a garage door opener is now beyond her. I wonder if that makes her crazy. Certainly Lola has exhibited signs of paranoia in the past, and a noticeable detachment from reality, and a troubling lack of self-awareness, but it's hard to tell how much of that is due to what she has survived, and how much of it is due to being a stranger in a strange land, with a language, culture, and grandchildren that are hard to relate to. She's still going though, that much is undeniable.

There is a scene in Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* that has stayed with me for years. Art and his girlfriend, Françoise, are driving Art's father, Vladek, to the grocery store. Vladek, a Holocaust survivor, wants to return opened boxes of food. Art, understandably, is embarrassed. His father comes out a few

minutes later with new groceries he received for a specially discounted price. Art can't believe it. His father tells him that everything went smoothly after he explained to the store manager his ongoing health problems and experiences in Dachau and Auschwitz. On the drive home, Françoise notices a black man hitchhiking, and pulls over to pick him up. Vladek is alarmed. "A *schwarze!*" he cries, using racist, Yiddish slang. Over his father's protestations, Françoise gives the black man a ride. Vladek is outraged. To have survived all that he has, and now, to be forced to endure this indignity, sharing his space with a dirty, thieving black man, is intolerable to him. After dropping the black man off, Françoise rounds on Vladek for his racism. You don't understand, Vladek replies, and tells her when he first arrived in New York after the war, he was robbed on several occasions by black people.

I read *Maus* for the first time when I was 16. I didn't want to believe that Vladek's survival had not made him a hero. Vladek was not kinder, more compassionate, or inured to hardship. He was selfish, stingy, and bigoted. I was too young to realize that life isn't like the movies. Revisiting that scene 15 years later I am in awe of Spiegleman's willingness to not spare himself or the reader the truth about his father. When I see Vladek now, I see Lola reflected in him.

The same complaints, the same prejudices, the same artless self-centeredness, and, underlying them, the same black, implacable ocean of will. Lola would return opened groceries in a heartbeat. I would drive her to the store.

I can't remember ever having a tender moment with Lola. Her edges are too sharp, too inhospitable to offer the haven of simple kindness. I don't know if I love her. But I have come to respect her. She is stronger than me, frail, old thing though she might seem to be. She's back in the Philippines now, carrying the weight of her 80 years with simple, inalterable determination. She is surviving.

My father once told her, right to her uncomprehending face, that if there were a prize for worst mother in the world she would win. He might be right. But she's still my Lola.

*Why I Box*

I push open the front door and enter the gym. The bare light bulbs hang from a high ceiling and diffuse a pale, orange numinous glow throughout the large room. The floors are wooden, dark-stained, warped in places. I walk past the punching bags, half of which have been duct taped to prevent their foam guts from spilling out, and the boxing ring, its decades-old blue canvas stained with blood and sweat and the residual will of hundreds of forgotten fighters and students. One day I'll be forgotten too, and join them, but not today. Today is for work.

The rope comes first. I find an unoccupied space on the gym floor and jump for three minutes. A timer is constantly in action in most boxing gyms, set for three minutes, the same time as a single round in a boxing match. Then a one minute rest period. Three minutes on. One minute off. I jump for three minutes without stopping. When I started, I could barely manage to keep my legs moving for sixty seconds. If you haven't tried it, you would probably be surprised at how difficult and unforgiving a jump rope can be. The timer at Spokane Boxing has three lights attached to it. Green means go, yellow means 30 seconds left, red means rest.

There is no longer time period in the world than the one between green and yellow, and none shorter than that between red and green. During some exercises, I will still be catching my breath when the light turns green again. "Fuck," I will say to myself. I say "fuck" to myself a lot while I'm training. I'm not alone in this.

After working the rope for three or four rounds, it's time for cardio. Doug, the gym's cardio coach, has us work the ladder. Imagine one of those flexible ladders you see hanging from helicopters. Now imagine that ladder laid flat on the ground. "Keep your hands up while you're in the ladder!" shouts Doug. The ladder is fifteen yards long. Its neatly segmented squares are used for agility drills. We turn our bodies sideways and side-step across the rungs. We do jumping jacks down the ladder's length. Left foot in the ladder, right foot in the ladder, left foot out, right foot out, repeat in every square. Knuckle pushups down the ladder. Move side to side through the ladder. Each exercise is practiced for a round. We work the ladder for six rounds. It never gets easier. If it's getting easy, you start to work harder until it isn't easy anymore.

After the ladder we put our gloves on and do speed drills. Two people to a punching bag. The first person punches for ten seconds while the second holds the bag steady. Then switch. Then



fifteen seconds, or five, or thirty, depending on Doug's count. Partners switch back and forth, arms pumping and pumping until they go numb. If you've never boxed, time yourself for a minute while you punch the air. It's exhausting, even without 16-ounce gloves and a punching bag adding resistance. We do speed drills for three rounds. After the second round it is always unbelievable that a third round remains. "Fuck," I say to myself.

After speed drills we usually do ab work, a minor mercy after what has come before. Minute long front planks, followed immediately by half-minute side planks. Feet raised six inches for a minute. I lock legs with a partner and lower my upper-body halfway down, until my viscera begins to burn, and hold that position while Doug counts to sixty, or thirty, or fifteen, or ten, or five. If Doug feels the work has been sufficient we stop here. If Doug does not feel the work has been sufficient, and he usually does not feel the work has been sufficient, we do jumping jacks, squats, mountain climbers, cherry pickers, close-grip pushups, wide-grip pushups. Doug is forty-eight, and has the facial features of an imperial senator from the HBO series *Rome*. Somebody at the gym told me he was the mayor of a small town just outside Spokane. I haven't confirmed this with Doug. He isn't much for socializing.

"Good work people," says Doug, "you're on your own." "Thanks, Doug," I manage to croak before stepping outside to cool down for a minute.

You can work the heavy bag if you like, smash it with straights, jabs, hooks, or shadow box in front of a mirror to make sure your form is correct, or work with the kettlebells, or do pull-ups. You're on your own. The best thing to do when you're on your own is work mitts with one of the coaches. Mitts are hand pads that can be punched. For one or two rounds you can work with a pro boxer in the ring while he holds the mitts in various configurations for you to strike at. I call this the best thing to do because it's where you actually learn to box. Some people come to the gym exclusively for the workout. I come because I want to know how to fight.

The two main punches are the jab and the straight. Assuming your stance is orthodox, with your right foot back, the jab is performed with the left arm, the straight with the right. Learning to punch properly is a long process. I had no idea it would take me longer than a year to throw an adequate one-two combination. The one is a jab, the two is a straight. Jab, weaken the opponent's guard, create an opening, follow with the straight, use its power to cause damage, to hurt, to make the other guy quit. The jab is the initiator,

the scout testing the enemy's defenses. Compared to the straight, the jab is usually quick, stealthy, sneaky. A feinted jab can easily turn into a straight, or a left hook, or a right uppercut. You have to lie well to box well. You have to be tricky.

Of course, depending on how it's used, the jab can also cause serious damage. "Homie," Jessie, my favorite coach, once told me, "you can do anything with a jab. You can score points if you're trying to score points, all you need to do is get all your knuckles on your opponents body. Or you can hurt." He brought his left hand up to his jaw, his elbow tucked against his ribs, his fist was perpendicular to the floor. "You extend the jab," his elbow slowly opened up, "and twist that fucker at the last second! Whop!" At the last moment, before his arm was fully extended, he turned his fist over until it was parallel with the ring floor. "You put your glove against someone's face and twist like that and it'll tear their shit up. It'll make them bleed. Remember, it's a fight, I don't care who it is, I'll fuck them up."

Jessie is fifty-three years old, a Mexican-American, with deep bags under his eyes that I imagine are filled with the blood of dozens of pro fights, and a nose bulbous across the bridge from being broken multiple times. On his chest is a tattoo of an Aztec

warrior's face and, behind him, a large ziggurat. He told me he got the tattoo in prison. He has a teardrop tattooed under his right eye. He has alluded to time in spent in prison when he was a gang member in his twenties in Southern California. I'm reasonably certain he killed people when he was younger. Like Doug, he is incredible shape for his age, and always comes out on top during sparring sessions with younger boxers. During the rest period between rounds, while we're working mitts together, he'll bounce around the ring shadow-boxing and describing his latest feat. "Some young guy tried to take it to me, homie,"—the stories always involve young guys—"I don't give a fuck. I'll take down whoever you put in front of me. Who is going to break first? It's not going to be me, fuck that! You know what I'm saying?"

Then he will grow philosophic. I'll throw a one-two combination in the ring and he will correct me. "No, no, no, you have to do it with feeling. With feeling. You must commit your body and your mind to the move, you have to trust in the move, and then you must put feeling, and passion behind it. The body work, homie, it's like dancing." When I watch him shadow boxing in front of a mirror I understand what he means. He is light years beyond the level I train at. The movements, practiced over and over and

over again until they are inseparable from the self, until they are as natural as breathing, remain aspirations for me. I watch him move onto the ball of his right foot, throw a short uppercut, step sideways with the smoothness of water washing up on the shore, and throw a lightning-fast one-two combination, weave, throw a straight, then a left hook, then bob under an imaginary punch, step back, feint with his jab—and he's right. It is dancing.

Only, this is a dance that ends in bloodshed, whose unity of souls leads to a separation from consciousness for the weaker partner. There is a beautiful moment in the second meeting between legendary lightweight Roberto Duran and Esteban deJesus. Duran is against the ropes. He extends his left arm, places it on deJesus' waist, and turns deJesus like an expert waltzer until their positions are reversed. Energy is transferred between the two opponents, both are attempting to lead, and the one with the finer skills, and deeper reservoir of will gets to hurt his partner. After the turn, Duran lands several lightning-fast body blows on his opponent. The meeting of balletic grace and ballistic force in this instance captures the sport's ambivalent nature, and partially explains its hold over me. I can't resolve or be completely comfortable with boxing's

combination of beauty and blood, I only know there is a part of me that wants to be a part of it.

Jessie once described being knocked out to me. Suddenly you're waking up and you don't know where you are. You don't remember the punch that floored you. A haze of memories, then darkness, then light. I immediately asked him why he fought, and he didn't have an easy answer. The most he could say was that boxing was what he was, it was all he could remember doing.

The day I walked into Spokane Boxing, a year and a half ago, I spoke to Rick Welliver, the gym's owner and a former heavyweight prizefighter. When he asked why I wanted to box, my response was simple and straightforward.

"I want to get strong," I said.

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I said this. It's a line from a movie, filling for a word balloon in a comic book. While I was being sincere, I was also being evasive, even to myself. If I had been more honest, I would have said, "I don't want to be weak anymore."

For the great majority of my life, I'm thirty now, I was what you would call a bookworm. I liked being alone. I preferred books and ideas to people. If I was miserable and lonely I was also willing to deceive myself about the root causes. One more book, I used to

tell myself, one more philosophy, and I'll be ready to face the world. I won't be afraid to meet new people, or travel alone. One more line from Nietzsche about no longer being ashamed of oneself, and I will no longer be ashamed. One more book by Bertrand Russell about mastering happiness in the modern world, and I'll master it. One more sutra from the Buddha about conquering fear, and I will conquer fear.

When you're an ectomorph the world can be a frightening place. Most guys are larger than me, it's a simple fact. What if one of those guys decides to attack me? I used to wonder. I would be beaten, humiliated. I am aware that this is a paranoid thought. In my entire life, I can count the times I've been threatened with physical violence on two fingers, but my fear didn't care about reason and logic. My fear was real, and it presented scenarios that kept me nervous. When I moved to Spokane, I decided to do something about it. I wanted to become a threat. I wanted to inspire fear in others. I wanted to be violent, and willful, and mean.

This project was doomed to failure from the start. Whether I like it or not, I'm a skinny, five-foot seven-inch Asian. No one is likely to look at me and feel anything other than general indifference. There's only so much I can do with what I've been

given. I can run ladders, and do speed drills, and work the mitts for the next ten years and I still won't be Jessie.

But I'm physically fitter than I've ever been in my life. I stand up straighter. I'm less afraid of people. I'm sociable and active. When I'm in the ring working with Jessie reality funnels down until nothing exists beyond us. We are here, now. The training continues. I'll continue to punch at the fear, and it will continue to come round.

One day, a large, drunk man walked into the gym. He began yelling at people. He walked between the heavy bags, reeking of alcohol and malice. Jessie was in the ring at the time. He called down to the drunk man.

"Let's go outside, homie," said Jessie.

"You got it," the man slurred in response.

The front of the gym is made of large, glass windowpanes. You can catch people looking in at the workouts as they walk up and down East Sprague. The people in this neighborhood have character, a lot of them. You can tell that they've been through it, like the guy Jessie was taking outside to teach a lesson, fate had obviously been unkind to him. The most frightening thing about the man, far beyond his size and anger, was the fear he inspired about my existence, the fear that I would end up like him, beaten.



It was winter, and the glass was foggy with condensation. Dozens of bodies kept the gym warm. Dozens of pairs of eyes looked through the glass to the blurred figures on the sidewalk. It looked as though Jessie and the man were exchanging words. They stepped closer together. Jessie's arms reached out. He embraced the man. The man put his head on Jessie's shoulders and began crying.

### *The Other*

### *Scholarships*

When people ask me what my ethnicity is, I answer, "Depends. What scholarship am I applying for?" This gets a few laughs. The question comes again. Honestly though, what are you? The assumption is that my previous answer had been a joke.

Three years ago, while applying online to a graduate program, I came across a page that asked about race. "Pick as many as apply" the words at the top read. The choices included, "White," "African-American," "Asian," "Pacific Islander," "Native-American," and, near the bottom, "Hispanic (Latin America, Philippines)." This last box attracted my attention since I'm half-Filipino.

I had never seen Hispanic and Filipino grouped together before. Temptation tugged at me. Defining myself as Hispanic might have helped my chances at gaining admission to the university.

The feeling that I was about to transgress an unspoken trust was present. You are not Hispanic, I told myself. Your father is white, your mother is Filipino; you're Asian, if anything. Why can't I be Hispanic right now? I countered. How can you justify calling yourself Hispanic? The Spanish colonized the Philippines, most Filipinos are Catholics, the country has more in common with Latin America than Southeast Asia. Filipinos are Asian. They live in Asia, but are culturally Hispanic. This entitles you to whatever scholarship and quota considerations "Hispanic" includes at the University of Utah? Yes.

I put an X in the box marked "Hispanic (Latin America, Philippines)," moved on to the next page, and tried to convince myself that I wasn't taking advantage of a system that had been designed to level the playing field for the children of first-generation immigrants from countries like Mexico, or Guatemala, or Peru. Self-interest won out in the end. The last page of the application form

asked if I had answered all questions truthfully to the best of my knowledge. I clicked "Yes."

This was not my finest hour, and if I had to make the choice again today, to be completely honest I am not sure that I would be disinterested enough to choose "Asian," the most truthful answer. As a mixed-race man I find myself struggling with shifting allegiances. I can have the best of both worlds if I want. On one side are the privileges I enjoyed growing up in a middle-class American household. I always had enough to eat, I was able to live in comfort in England and Hawaii, and when the newest video game system came out it inevitably found its way under the Christmas tree with my name attached to it. My parents loved me, and did their best to see I wanted for nothing. On the other are the scholarships I can apply for as an Asian, or an Asian-American, or Hispanic; the pleasure I can take in calling myself a brown person specially set apart from the same white society whose blessings I enjoy.

My racial self-identity is mixed up in my mind, but I do know one thing. On the application form, at the very bottom, was one last option: "Other." A catch-all for the vaguely defined. I don't want to be an "Other." There are no Other associations, or famous self-

described Others. It's a lonely designation. I'd prefer to be this or that.

### *Not White*

Part of pinning down my identity involves negative definitions, as if there were a list somewhere filled with finite possibilities and by crossing off enough of them I could come to a definite conclusion.

I learned at a young age that I wasn't white.

When I was seven my family moved to England. Since my father was in the Air Force, I attended schools filled with fellow military brats. Racial affiliation wasn't an issue for me then, partially because I was too young as an elementary and middle school student to take it seriously, and partially because the Department of Defense-run schools I attended were diverse. Black kids, white kids, Hispanics, and Asians were all present, and we were all foreigners in England together. No one cared about ethnicity. We were simply Americans.

For the first time in my life I had friends of various races. My friends had all been white when I had lived in America previously. It never occurred to me to think about how my new friend Charles,

an African-American, and Jared, who was part Thai, were different from me, and it never occurred to them to ask me what I was. The categories firmly dividing different races of humanity from one another had not been imprinted on me. This would change.

We spent seven years in England, and then my family moved to Utah. I was 13. While my father was stationed in Las Vegas, I lived with my mother and two sisters in a townhouse my grandparents owned in Spanish Fork, a small city of about 8,000.

My two sisters and I were the only non-whites attending Spanish Fork Middle School, a fact that my peers would not let me forget. They hung a moniker on me, "The Mexican." I didn't try to correct them. I was scared. The other kids would call me the Mexican, push me around when I passed them in the hallways, and abuse me verbally in class. Once, as I was kneeling to tie a shoelace, a large boy kicked my head into a locker. The locker's metal door clanged like a fire alarm silenced after a single, solid ring. My head was suddenly stuffed with a cotton ache that distorted his laughter as it floated toward me in his wake.

Middle school is a time when a lot of kids learn what sets them apart from their classmates. Bullying, when it has an honest edge, can be instructive. You might learn that you're not as smart as

everyone else, or as tall, or as handsome, or as popular. Life sucks for everyone in middle school, sure, and it sucks in particular ways. I learned, to a degree deeper than skin color, that I wasn't white. I learned that the social privileges I enjoyed had a boundary that coincided in certain contexts with the tan tones of my skin. As terrible as this knowledge was, I discovered entertaining compensations for it.

### *Jokes*

I am convinced it was Dave Chappelle more than anyone else who made it acceptable to laugh about race and racism. He wasn't the first to write bits about those topics, but he brought more ferocity and intelligence to them than had previously been seen, and he made them mainstream. Prominent comics like David Cross, Louis C.K., and Sarah Silverman followed in his footsteps. Racial commentary is what Generation Y has come to expect in its comedy, a fact that I have often exploited.

"What a racist!"

This is a phrase I liked to throw at my friend Keith whenever the opportunity presented itself.

We would be at work, or at a bar, and I would call Keith out on a charge of imaginary prejudice. "Can I borrow your stapler Keith, or do you only let your white friends borrow your things?" Stuff like that. Keith, and anyone else present, would laugh when I joked about being an aggrieved minority who was being endlessly oppressed by the white people who surround him.

"Isn't your dad white, though?" Keith once asked me.

"He is, and as a victim of miscegenation I can tell you I am firmly against race-mixing. All it does is lead to confusion. The eugenicists were right." More laughs.

The first time I called Keith a racist, he was taken aback. Once it was clear that I was kidding he relaxed and played along. I should have been sympathetic after observing his initial reaction and left him alone. He was sweet, civil, and had spent his entire adult life trying to show understanding towards the marginalized. Then I showed up and began ripping on him about white privilege, as if I hadn't enjoyed white privilege myself on more than one occasion.

What I did to Keith with humor wasn't acceptable according to my own code governing its use. Humor is to be used to be liked, to entertain, to charm, and to say outrageous things. My friend

Alice once told me about her romantic woes. The man she was dating was apprehensive about becoming intimate with her. He wanted to wait until they got to know each other better which caused her no end of suffering.

"Well, Alice," I said, grabbing my girlfriend who was close by, "just say the word and my girlfriend and I will join you for a threesome."

Alice laughed until I thought she would collapse unconscious to the floor. To this day she brings it up. "I couldn't believe what I was hearing," she says. When you're as comfortable with humor as I am you can say literally anything, and as long as you've chosen the right moment—I wouldn't have tried that line on Alice at her grandmother's funeral—and your delivery is sound you will get away with it. More than that, you can take people to dark places with you, to sources of fear and discontent, even primal sources, and make them feel safe with laughter.

This is humor at its finest, and the opposite of what I did with Keith. I roughed Keith up, and if it wasn't appropriate I convinced myself I was entitled to a little redress for past wrongs. It wasn't a severe beating, but it was inexcusable all the same. Like I said, you can get away with saying anything if your delivery is right. Without



compassion and intelligence though, you can easily become a bully. I have to remind myself often that just because I can get away with something it doesn't mean I should.

### *Not Mexican*

Sometimes I wish that I was Mexican, if only to save myself the embarrassment of being mistaken for Mexican, and to save Mexicans the embarrassment of mistaking me for one of their own. When I was 19, I worked in the sporting goods section of K-Mart.

One afternoon, a Mexican man approached me while I was amusing myself by reading the various Powerbait flavors—who knew trout liked garlic?—and asked me a question in Spanish. He was short, solid, and, I observed, perhaps incorrectly, working class. I reached this conclusion after seeing the paint stains on his jeans and the caulk stains on his shoes.

"[speaking Spanish]," he said.

"Excuse me?" I replied.

"[speaking Spanish with greater insistence]," he said.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish."

"[disgusted, speaking Spanish]," he said, before walking away.

What I remember clearly, as he left in search of someone useful, was how I felt like the conversation's failure had been my fault. Like how dare I look like someone who had betrayed his heritage by not learning the mother tongue. This is absurd. If I am betraying my cultural heritage by not learning a language, that language is Tagalog.

All the same, whenever I'm in Mariana's, a supermercado with the best grocery prices in Vegas, and the man at the deli asks me in Spanish what I would like, or the cashier smiles, gestures to my cart, and makes what I assume to be a humorous aside in Spanish, or a Mexican hipster in tight jeans and an Iron Maiden t-shirt looks at my fedora and says something I hope is complimentary, and all this after wandering the aisles filled with sale notifications I can't understand, and walking past racks filled with magazines and paperback novels I can't read, I feel ashamed. I make a grunting sound, half-chuckle, half-cough, to communicate, hey, I know, right, it's weird that I look Mexican, and that you think I should be able to speak Spanish, but I can't, so let's laugh about this together.

Underlying this self-denigration is the sense that I ought to be something, and that if I'm not going to be something I ought to at

least spare innocent people the difficulty of looking like something else. This is what bothers me, that simply by looking the way I am and having the cultural background that I do as a result of being a white-Asian mix, I am both inconveniencing other people and being reminded that my place is nowhere in particular, and my people no one I know.

### *What I Am*

Next year, I plan to move to South America and learn Spanish. If I knew Spanish I would probably feel more entitled than I already do to the poorly-defined blessings being a minority provides. Now, I would think to myself, I can more easily justify being Hispanic on applications forms, more easily excuse ripping on the white man for keeping me down, more easily assume an enlightened position from which I can converse with working class Mexicans. This is self-defeating nonsense of course, but I cannot deny that these self-centered impulses exist within me and must be resisted. The temptation of race, in my own life, is to use race's nebulous nature to my advantage whenever I can. It comes from an unwarranted sense of entitlement. The answer may be "no," but the question comes

round again regardless, *Aren't I entitled to a little compensation for my troubles?*

I'm not sure what to call myself, and I'm beginning to think I will never be sure. White. Brown. Asian. Asian-American. Filipino-American. Other. I might belong in the Other category after all since I can't seem to convince myself that I am definitely this or definitely that. The impulse to self-categorize demands, nags at me, and I have little to offer it. All the white privilege I've enjoyed could not make me white, and all the wishful thinking and inappropriate jokes I've told could not make up for my ignorance about the brown culture half of me ostensibly arises from. Having the best of both worlds, in my case, means belonging to none.

I was walking with a friend to work last week. We were discussing our parents.

"Since I'm Asian—" I began to tell him before he interrupted.

"You're not Asian," he said. "You're half-Asian."

It bothered me, both that he contradicted me, which isn't a nice thing to do when you're trying to enjoy a nice walk to work, and that I could not tell if he was right, or if I was right, or if we were both wrong.

*On Insomnia*

There's a Joni Mitchell song, "Big Yellow Taxi," that I've been listening to a lot, late at night. It's the one where she sings, "Don't it always seem to go / That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone." I like to imagine she's singing about sleep.

Sleep was easy once upon a time. Even after suffering from chronic insomnia for six years, since I was twenty-four, and knowing that tomorrow will bring lethargy, brain fog, irritation, and various depression-aping symptoms that accompany the condition, I can still distinctly recall a time when I could look forward to bedtime. Now I feel like a tired cliché, a guy in a movie who's lost a hand, or a foot, or an eye, and laments his lack of appreciation for what he once had. "My hand!" he cries, "I never thanked you for all those things you used to grab."

Here's the routine: three to five times a week, every week, I lay my head down on my pillow, eight hours before my alarm is set to go off, and think *here we go again*.

Go to sleep, I silently command myself. Four hours later, like clockwork, I remain in bed, hope presently exhausted, but certain to return in the near future to torment me. I make pathetic, outraged, mewling sounds that are honestly offered, but comical at the same time (who mewls, anyway?). The words *this isn't fair* refrain in my

skull. Soon dawn, that rough beast, its hour come round at last, will begin to show against the blinds, dressed in pale blue, bringing with it another day for me to muddle through. *Oh well, what the hell*, I think, echoing McWatt from *Catch-22*. *At least it's better than X*, where "X" equals a health or life condition more intolerable than my own.

I've tried everything, including having a sense of humor about everything I've tried. In no particular order: I used to meditate in the evening until I learned that meditation in the evening can make the mind more active, not less, at a time when it should be preparing to rest, so I meditated in the morning instead, and it didn't make a difference. I've tried sleeping with my head at a forty-five degree angle, sleeping flat on the floor, sleeping while sitting upright, more dead ends. I've tried the paleo diet, which attempts to mimic the nutritional intake of our hominid predecessors: raw food wherever possible (including raw meat, but I could never make myself eat steak tartare even though, according to the diet experts, it's something Fred Flintstone would have eaten, like, for sure), lots of fruits, lots of vegetables, and no cultivated grains. I went gluten-free, sugar-free, fat-free, dairy-free. Sleep stubbornly refused to be teased from whatever bodily recess it was hiding in.

"You can't eat bread?" a friend said to me during my gluten free phase, "what's the point of living if you can't eat bread? Bread doesn't cause insomnia. You should try something else." We were at a restaurant, and he was buttering a fresh, thick, crusty piece of bread.

You should try this or that is the sort of thing that friends and family members say when I feel like burdening them with my continuing woes. What am I looking for when I relate that, once again, I spent an evening shivering with despair, wondering if all the sleepless hours would in time add up to madness? A little sympathy. A little understanding. A kind nod of the head. Meaningless, comforting words. *I'm sorry to hear that. You'll get through this. How awful.* I do receive kind words—and with the kind words, what a bummer this is, a sense that I do not deserve them since I was fishing for sympathy from listeners who undoubtedly have their own problems.

I also receive unsolicited advice.

Lots of it. *You should try exercising in the morning. Don't eat close to bedtime. Only use your bed for sleeping. Take fish oil supplements. Take melatonin. Take a glass of warm milk, the tryptophan in it promotes drowsiness. See a therapist. Count sheep, I'm serious. Read*



*a boring book. Listen to Bach's "Air." Go for a long walk in the evening. Stretch. Masturbate. Pray.*

In general, I don't bother saying "I've already tried that," and simply respond to the advice with a false smile and affirming nod. My loved ones are trying their best with every soporific herbal tea and yoga exercise they offer. I can't blame them. I've given the same sort of encouragements to others, hoping it would do some good. I confess as well that my ears prick up a little when I know advice is on its way. Hope appears again, leading me to wonder if the words about to fall from my friend's mouth will be the right ones, the magic words that will finally break my sleepless spell. *You should try exercising, my friends says, but not too close to bedtime.* I've already tried that, I think and don't say. I've tried everything.

I've even tried being proud of my illness. I can't wait for someone to tell me how poorly they slept the night before. "I can barely function," someone says at the office, "I only got five hours of sleep last night." My eyes start to roll. What a whiner. Buddy, I get five hours of sleep twice a week if I'm lucky. I take pride in my toughness, my solitary endurance. I am also pleased to know that my affliction has been noted among the brilliant. Amy Lowell, Vladimir Nabokov, Mark Twain, to give you a taste, all suffered

from insomnia (so did Napoleon, Mao, Hitler, but the less said about them the better). All the same, I would gladly exchange having celebrity companions in woe to be among the many who can sleep when their bodies require it.

At one point, I grew desperate enough to undergo a sleep study to see if I had sleep apnea. Sometimes I noticed that my breathing became labored to the point of panic while I was lying down on my bed. Then there were the dreams about suffocating under the sea that I would wake from with agonized, gasping breaths. This was insomnia year five. An inability to sleep had become the defining feature of my physical existence.

The nurse at Deaconess Hospital was a matronly lady with an exuberant attitude. Every preparation step along the way, as she hooked up electrodes to my upper back and chest after cleaning their surfaces with a gritty scrub, fastened a snore microphone to the collar of my hospital gown, strapped a respiratory belt around my torso to monitor my oxygen levels, and clipped a finger diode to my right index finger to read my hemoglobin level, we chatted about her work. The level of interest I took in the proceedings took her by surprise. Most patients didn't ask any questions, she said.

My terror wasn't evident thanks to my nonstop queries. The machines, wires, and lights were causing me significant anxiety. I smiled anyway. Chronic suffering has made me a fantastic faker when I have to be.

The cherubic woman began to tell me about the bizarre sleep disorders she was familiar with. She told me about Klein-Levitz syndrome. People will sleep for weeks at a time. When they wake up they regress to juvenile behavior. I imagined what that would entail if the condition afflicted my parents, and immediately wished I hadn't. She told me about exploding head syndrome. Right as a person is falling asleep, they hear a loud "BANG!" She clapped her hands together when she said this, which caused me to jump. Then she told me about people that die from insomnia. They're able to get bouts of microsleep, but that's it. Eventually, after a few months of not sleeping, their bodies shut down.

I asked her if there was a cure.

"There's no cure. All done." She straightened up and inspected her work. With wires running to and from my body, I must have looked like a worn down android undergoing maintenance. "Good luck tonight!" she said with a big smile.

Thankfully, I had come equipped with an Ambien pill to send me into a state of unconsciousness much like sleep, although not as refreshing. I castigated my nurse as I slipped into blackness. For weeks after my study—which showed no apnea—I thought about death by insomnia and blamed her for making it a possibility to worry over. What kind of thoughtless fool, I asked myself, would bring up such a condition as a preface to a sleep study?

I am more forgiving now. She and I were approaching insomnia from two different angles, mine as participant, hers as observer. Without realizing it, I was learning a lesson about the private nature of a chronic health condition. What it has led to for me, the sense of personal accountability for a situation beyond my control, the pride I tried to take in it, the well-intentioned, but ineffective advice and stories I have heard, is aloneness. This is not the same as loneliness. You can, of course, be alone without being lonely, and lonely without being alone. The difference, to my mind, is that when I am lonely I feel as though I want something for myself, whereas when I am alone I feel as though I am learning something about myself.

Insomnia grants me particular aloneness that offers a particular instruction. I recall Mick Jagger's words, "You can't

always get what you want / but if you try hard enough you might get what you need." The hardest thing to try as an insomniac is getting out of bed. A number of books I've read on the subject offer the same counsel: don't lie there moping, get up and do something. To do this I have to break my hope, an act that I am rarely capable of, and get out of bed at two, three, four in the morning. The entire world seems possessed by silence in those hours; I feel like the last man left alive; I feel like I am in on a secret. I admit defeat. Then I occupy my time.

I teach myself a new juggling skill. I memorize French vocabulary cards. I do my homework. I clean the kitchen. I watch another entry in the American Film Institute's Top 100 American movies. The agony is transmuted.

Sometimes, however, doing something is not possible.

There are times, out of bed, sitting at the kitchen table, when all my mental defenses are completely broken down, my body so bereft of energy, and my mind so bereft of thought that I am a blank, driven by exhaustion to a point with no logic, language or, blessedly, irony. I can't remember my own name. A feeling of peace overtakes me. All the years I've wasted and worried don't matter. That place of non-being is beautiful. I'm no Buddhist, which makes

it difficult to tell, but perhaps it is satori, another state that I believe blooms out of an immense solitude.

Slowly, after some time, I come back to my senses and see blue breaking through the blinds. I listen. I hear birdsong, and cars passing on the street. The world is waking up, and I, content for the moment, am waking up with it.

### *On Loyalty*

At a bar a few months ago, I got into an argument with my friend Kristy. For two years, we had both been taking classes at Spokane Boxing. Recently, our mutual favorite coach, Jesse, had left Spokane Boxing to run a new gym. Jesse and I had grown close during our time together. He taught me everything I knew.

Kristy refused to follow him. She berated me for entertaining the thought of leaving Spokane Boxing.

"Spokane Boxing made Jesse. The coaches there bailed him out of jail. Then he turned his back on them and left without any

warning." She considered me for a moment. "You know what the difference between you and me is? I'm loyal."

I felt the sting of her reproach, instead of indifference, which meant there was truth to what she was saying as much as I did not want to admit it. Was she right? Was I disloyal?

Loyalty, I believe, involves complicated choices. There are those who do not feel the same. As my father likes to point out, and as numerous Sunday school teachers echo him in my memory, no man can serve two masters. Choose you this day whom ye will serve. As for me and my house we will serve the Lord. I have the verses by heart. God or mammon. Good or evil. Black or white. Jesse or Spokane Boxing.

I wish I could believe that the choice of who or what to be loyal to was simple, but twenty years ago my parents unintentionally taught me an important lesson about loyalty, one different from the bible's.

My father, a captain in the Air Force was gone a lot. He left on TDY, or temporary duty every other month. Different nations performed joint military exercises with America that required my father to travel from England, where we were stationed, to Spain, or Germany, or Italy for anywhere from a week to a few months.

My father would call when he was on TDY, and we would chat about school, and how things were going at home, and after a few minutes we would say "I love you" to one another before I passed the phone to whoever was next in line.

I remember one call in particular. I was nine years old.

He called from Germany. The phone was in the hallway adjoining the kitchen. It rested on an antique sideboard too large for the space it had been squeezed into (my parents had argued over it, my father insisting it would not fit in the house, my mother disagreeing with disproportionate anger). I pressed the receiver close to my ear and parsed the static for his voice. After locating it, we soon settled into our comfortable routine. I told him that I hated learning about fractions, had won the class spelling bee, and would, for the third straight year, be a ninja for Halloween. He told me to keep working hard, and that he was proud of me. Before I passed the phone to my little sister he asked me, "Is your mother taking good care of you?"

"Yes, daddy," I replied.

"Good. OK, let me talk to your sister. Love you."

"Love you too."



A minute later, in the living room, my mother asked me about the call. She was sitting on a couch, leafing through a Dorling-Kindersley book about the Vikings.

"Dad and I talked about the spelling bee," I told her.

"That's nice. What else did you talk about?"

"He asked if you were taking good care of me."

"He asked you what?" The tone in her voice changed. "What were the exact words he used?"

I felt like I was committing a wrong for no reason I could name. In that moment, when so much appeared to hang on a question my father had asked, and the exact words he used to ask it, I doubted myself. I could not remember what he had said. Maybe he hadn't asked the question at all. The sudden fog of amnesia that descended on the child has only grown thicker with the passage of time. To this day I don't know what my father said, I honestly don't. I knew what my mother wanted me to say though.

"Dad said, 'Is your mother taking good care of you?'"

She closed her book, placed it on the coffee table, and walked to the hallway where my little sister was talking on the phone. My mother took the phone from her and began. "How dare you ask Jason if I'm taking care of the kids. Of course I'm taking care of the

kids. What do you think I'm doing while you're hundreds of miles away?" I can't remember the words that followed, or I don't want to. She spoke for some time. Then she hung up the phone and returned to where I was sitting.

"You're a good boy," she said. "Would you like a video game?"

I brightened immediately. Video games were expensive. Outside of birthdays or Christmas, my parents were unlikely to justify spending forty dollars on Mega Man IV, or Final Fantasy, or Master Blaster. At the time I felt, or convinced myself, that I had earned a reward by reporting to my mother something that my father should not have said. I had been faithful to her.

At the Base Exchange, I chose a game whose name I can no longer recall. The game had a super-spy premise that is also impossible to remember. Whatever the scenario might have been, it was up to me to save the day.

Easier said than done. What strikes me now as I dredge up the hours upon hours I spent plugging away at the game, was how unmercifully difficult it was. The game didn't care that I was a little kid who lacked the common sense and intelligence required to figure out the rules of the fight. So I died, and continued, and died,

and continued, without coming closer to understanding what I was supposed to do.

One week later, I spoke to my father on the phone again. We talked about the usual through the static until our time was almost up. One topic remained.

"Jason, look, I know what you told your mother, but I didn't ask you that question. You must have misheard me."

I had no response. My mother's claim on my obedience rested on the one side. On the other was the wrong I had committed against my father by telling her what I thought I had heard. I had betrayed the trust vested in the love we had for each other. With a child's understanding I could not completely comprehend this, but I knew enough to feel guilty.

"I love you," he said.

"Love you too." The call ended.

That was when I learned for the first time that loyalty is often accompanied by betrayal, and that love is powerless to prevent this. The pattern has repeated itself throughout my life. When I was younger, and loyal to my Mormon heritage and principles, I betrayed my inner-self and its desire to be independent from religion. When I later became loyal to my inner-self and left the

church, I betrayed a Mormon tradition which dates back five generations. When I stayed loyal to an artistic impulse that drove me over two thousand miles from New York to a writing program in Spokane, I betrayed a girl who had her hopes pinned on me, hopes I had encouraged, and did not wish to see me go. When, out of loyalty, I followed Jesse to his new gym, I betrayed Spokane Boxing.

At least, that's how Kristy saw it. We don't talk as much as we used to. The decision I made upset her. It's unfortunate. I have found that the reward I receive for loyalty is nothing as unalloyed as the ones found in stories of martyrs murdered by tyrants in which fidelity to goodness, even unto death, is ultimately justified by a final triumph over evil. Instead, I have had to endure the everyday heartbreak and confusion of those who justifiably feel betrayed. A loving grandmother asking me to go back to church, a girlfriend I left in tears at the airport, a friend who no longer feels that she can trust me. It would be nice to believe that the rules and consequences are clearer to me now than when I was a child, but this is not always the case. Too many people in my life want too many different things from me, and it's impossible to keep what I am owed and owe straight in my mind, and keep one allegiance from doing harm to another.

And what of the loyalties tied up in this essay? The more I read, and the more I write, the more I have come to believe that there is no person, relationship, or experience intimate or privileged enough that a writer, like me, won't sell it out if it serves the demands of art, pays tribute to the truth, or helps him make a point. Choose.

## VITA

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