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## Artifacts of family

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# ARTIFACTS OF FAMILY

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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

Masters of Fine Arts

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By

Zachary Ostraff

Spring 2016

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## **Waves of Fear**

We all fear something. Although I don't particularly like snakes—I could never have one of those slithering bottom feeders as a pet—I don't fear them. I also don't fear heights or spiders. What I do fear is the ocean, the sea. I'm afraid of its vastness, its unrelenting pounding, and its unpredictability. I fear it mostly because of a vague memory. I was a little boy on a Southern California beach, and a wave caught me, rolled me in its wake, and sucked me off the beach towards the water. I was no older than six and more than likely only four or five. I had been playing a game of cat and mouse: sneaking towards the water line, then sprinting up the beach before the wall of water could reach me. Then the cat caught me. I'll never forget the way I clawed at the sand, trying to grab hold of anything, being relentlessly sucked by the vacuum of water, crying out for help, and then the water was gone, and I ran up the beach past the waterline.

I don't remember anything else from that particular trip to California, even though I've been told that after the beach my family

went to Disneyland, the only time I've been to Disneyland. All I remember was the wave, the way it peaked above me, then crashed down. Oddly enough, years later, when I was in high school and on a x-country trip to "Footlocker," a large regional race held in Walnut, California and I had the opportunity to either go to Disneyland or the beach, I chose the beach.

I'll always choose the beach. For the same reasons that I fear the ocean—memory aside—I also love it. I've always been drawn towards liminal spaces. The beach is the essence of liminal. The spot between land and water is the perfect place to become lost in imagination and adventure. I'll meander the lengths of sand, combing for washed up treasure, imagining I'm an explorer from another time, possibly the first to ever set foot on these strange lands. I'll find a stick—no a staff, and I'll use it to crack shells and rocks and other sticks. I'll even swim, playing in the waves. Saltwater is my favorite to swim in. I love the way the salt sticks to my arms. After it dries, I'll lick it off like a bear. I love the way the ocean smells in my hair. The way my usually fine hair can stand on end, thickened by the sea. But always, when I'm at the sea or near the ocean, when I smell the salt in the air, when I hear the surf cascading towards the earth that terrible memory comes back, and I know that it can happen again. I can mistime everything and be sucked out into the vast depths of water never to be seen again.

This makes what I'm about to tell you all the more terrible. Last spring I took my small family to the coast. Elise was pregnant with Lev, and June had just turned two. I told Elise I just needed to stand in the ocean, to smell the salt, to stand on the edge of the land.

We stopped in the deserted beach town of Seaside, Oregon. It was March. There were stray dogs wandering the streets, some people, but mostly the town felt empty, its high-rise hotels black with vacancies. Though windy, the weather was surprisingly fair. We took hotdogs and marshmallows to roast on the beach.

June was drawn by the water. She said to me, “I want to touch it.” So I pulled out my phone and sent her towards the water. There was no danger. The water was rolling up in sheets of glass for the length of a football field. It was shallow, and the air was warm. I started recording. I wanted to catch her experience on camera.

We all know what happened next. A wave rolled in and knocked her over, rolled her like it had rolled me, and then left her breathless and afraid in the ankle deep water and sand. Inside I think I knew she’d be knocked over, but I’d sent her, anyway. Wouldn’t it be funny? She tumbled into the water, her little body rolling—itsself like a wave. There was no danger. She wasn’t anywhere near being pulled out to sea. I kept filming, and it was Elise who marched into the water to comfort my crying, no, sobbing daughter. And I got it all on film.

It wasn’t until we were back in our hotel room, after a hot shower, that I remembered the feeling of my wave, the way it rolled me and sucked me and dragged me, and the way that the wave has haunted me. I thought of the way June tumbled and rolled, scared and afraid, how I’d knowingly sent her—even encouraged her—to touch the water just so I could get the whole thing on camera.

I’m a monster.



Usually, June loves watching herself in videos, but a week later, when I showed her the video from the beach, she started crying. She said, “No, no, no!”

The water was dangerous. It was a scary thing.

## **At the Park**

Today we are stalking owls. We sneak through the trees, running from trunk to trunk, hoping to see the baby owls roosted above. We have seen grown owls, full sized wingtip to wingtip, but the babies have eluded us. We wouldn't even know they exist except for the rumor that was whispered in our ears.

"There!" I point. "There is a bird, there." I think back to the time I was hunting grouse with my father and brother. I was stalking a bird through dense evergreens, when suddenly, level with me because of the steep hillside, were two great big owl eyes piercing me with their gaze. A flap of wings brings me back to the park, the tree trunk I'm standing by, and June crouched by my side.

"June," I whisper, "Do you see it?" She is looking at a different tree.

"Ya, I do. I do see it," she says.

"No, not there, here." I point again. With a great flurry the wings start flapping, and she does see, but the owl turns into a condor and flies away.

Our adventures at the park often follow suit: We run and hide, we slide, we swing. June is my three-year-old daughter, and she loves the park. We'll be out walking and she'll nonchalantly say, "Let's walk this way. Over to the park, maybe?" Yesterday I was walking next to her, holding Lev (June's little brother), as she rode her balance bike. We'd gone a little ways—naturally towards the park—when she said, "Oh, hey, the park. Let's ride to the park." So matter of fact, as if she hadn't planned it, but the park is almost always in her plans.

I love the park, too. For as long back as I can remember, I've enjoyed playing at the park with my siblings. We'd trek the three long blocks to the park near our house and spend hours wandering and climbing trees. We'd invent games, play tennis or basketball, and scratch our names into playground equipment, a form of graffiti too scary to do while at school, but one that felt safe without any adult supervision. I remember one time I scribbled my name + a girl's name, and the next day at school my friend and I just happened to see it. "Wow!" I said, "Do you think she has a crush on me?"

Even as I got older, I continued to love the park. I stopped scratching my name on playground equipment, but I'd still spend hours wandering around, climbing trees, reading on the grass. For six months I lived kitty-corner to Hyde Park in London. In the mornings I'd run along its paths. In the afternoon, when I needed to get away, I'd find a tree to climb. In the evenings I'd stroll with a friend, talking about our goals and ambitions.

One time, in a back corner of Hyde Park, I found a sycamore tree with branches almost twelve feet off the ground, too high to climb from the trunk. So I walked out a ways to where a branch drooped, and, jumping up, grabbed the branch and used it to monkey my way, hand over hand, up the tree. I spent three hours lounging in the thick branches, thinking about how easy it would be to live like one of Robin Hood's merry men, reading Wordsworth, and watching the people down below like they were ants. When I descended I found myself covered in green from where the tree had rubbed off on me. I wonder if I left my imprint on it, like the boy from *The Giving Tree*.

As a boy I loved the bumps on a slide. They made me feel like I was catching air. Catching air was an important achievement. Now I'm too big to catch air or appreciate the bumps. I'm a self-conscious adult in a child's world, trying not to look silly or immature. I still slide sometimes, usually to convince June to slide, too, but just as often because I can't resist the spring of youth. June is small enough that she does catch air. She also seems to pinball back and forth from slide wall to slide wall. When this happens her eyes light up with the uncontrolled fall, but when she reaches the bottom, she declares her desire to do it again. Once I stood at the bottom and filmed my wife, Elise, sliding with June. Except Elise went first and grabbed for June's hand to pull her too, and June lost her balance, caught her shoe on the side, and tumbled down after Elise. It didn't take long for June to recover, to slide some more, but when she did she didn't ask Elise to slide with her.

While I love parks, I don't always love other people. I don't always like to share the park. What I like most is when I can go anywhere and do anything without worrying about socializing with anyone else. Another thing I liked about Hyde Park was that it was vast enough, and there were enough people, that you didn't stand out, you were just one of the crowd. You could watch people without talking to people. In this way parks have always been a place of solace for me. For the most part you can isolate yourself from others but still not be alone.

If I am alone for too long, I find I start seeking out other people, just to talk. These moments always surprise me. But when I'm at the park with my family, with June, with Elise, with Lev, they are enough. I don't need a stranger or random kid to talk to. Unfortunately, because other people are involved too, going to the park doesn't always turn out the way I've planned. Sometimes, outside forces seem to fight against my isolating tendencies.

"What's her name?" The question came from a pint-sized boy wearing a Spiderman t-shirt. He didn't look much older than June. I looked around for his parent or guardian. There were a few women on the other side of the playground. One looked over and smiled, but didn't come to claim the boy.

"Her name is June," I said.

"What is she doing?"

"She's playing." I took June's hand and led her to a slide on the other side of the playground. The boy followed.

“Sometimes I like to slide, but not when they are wet. When they are wet I sometimes like swinging instead.” I brushed the water off the bottom of the slide so June could go down. I led June back to the other slide. He followed again. I took June to the swings. He followed.

“I can swing on my own. I pump my legs. Look! The little girl and I are crisscrossing.”

Turning to June, I said, "Time to go home." I looked at the kid. He smiled.

“Bye,” I said to him, but he was already attaching himself to someone else.

Sometimes when I play with my kids, other kids, other people feel like they can play, too. I don't want to discourage friendliness or being polite, but I also don't want to spend the time I have to play with my kids with strangers. But you can't just say beat it to a kid. You can't just ignore them. Even when they are little snots and don't leave you alone, you can't just be a snot back.

The other day, as Lev was crawling up the stairs towards a slide, a chunky little girl came up and said, “I'm almost four. I'm bigger than him,” and pushed passed Lev to go down the slide.

As a father the best part of the park is watching my kids grow in confidence. I've seen June lose her timidity only to braveness as she perches at the top of the tallest slide. Lev is still finding his balance, but every time he figures something out, his eyes shine with self-confidence and pleasure. He likes to play a game where he'll

lean towards the edge of a slide, putting his foot onto the slope, and if you reach for him, scared that he'll fall, he'll pull it back and laugh.

I used to think that my kids were just like me, or I like them. I used to think that they, like I, preferred the company of friends to that of strangers. I used to think they needed me at the park. But as June and Lev grow, particularly June, I see the only thing they need me for is getting to the park. June interacts with other children in a way that I never did. This has made me realize, that if anything, my social constructs or preferences have just been holding her back.

Groups of daycare kids swarm like bees, or locusts, or ants. They swarm over the playground, climbing and sliding and playing tag. These groups evoke in me fear and loathing. It isn't their fault, I know. It isn't the leaders or their parents or anyone's fault, not really. This is just the kind of thing that happens when you pack 15 to 20 of the same aged kids onto a playground. *Adapt or leave*, I tell myself. Not wanting to be inundated with children, I usually take my children and leave. Sometimes I don't notice the long line of kids holding hands and crossing the street towards the park in time to leave. In those moments it is usually their wild shrieks cutting the air that get my attention.

They swarm like bees, or locusts, or ants, crawling over everything, climbing, devouring the playground.

"No swings, Quinn! No swings, Quinn!" shouts a lady. It doesn't matter that a little girl, who looks just like any little girl but isn't part of the daycare, gets to swing, tempting the boy with

forbidden fruit.

“Come over here and sit down!” she yells again.

“No jumping, no jumping! We are not jumping today!” shouts another lady.

“Jimmy!” they yell in unison.

Sometimes I stand back and watch June in these situations to see how she'll react. More often than not, I'm proud of her. She'll often do things that I would never do, play with kids I would avoid. Other times she gets a look on her face that indicates she isn't sure about the whole thing. She'll cling to my leg, intimidated by the loudness, the chaos, the wild. This is when I feel closest to June. I should probably encourage her to get over it, to interact more. Instead, I embrace her because I get where she is coming from. I prefer choosing my battles. I prefer choosing when and where I socialize. For the time being, June's timidity makes me feel useful as a father, even needed, so I don't discourage her from gravitating towards me instead of the other children.

Park attendance comes with a price. As I was saying, self-awareness and social anxiety are the death of my park enjoyment. Interacting with strangers is intimidating. The park is supposed to be a free, open space. It is supposed to be a place to play and interact with my kids, a place to build memories together, but it's not that, not really. At the park there are people, and with people come social orders. As with dinner etiquette, all I know about this is that I don't know enough. I'm left reading my perceived faux pas in the looks of strangers.



So when my kids and I go to the park, leaving Elise at home, I stand on the edges of the playground watching the moms and dads interact with each other, because I don't know how to interact with them. It is different when I go to the park with Elise. She is included, comfortable interacting.

"What is your name?" she'll ask a little girl standing by her mom.

"My name is Ryder. I am three," says the little girl's mom.

That's strange I think. Why doesn't she let her kid answer the question? Looking at my daughter, the other mom asks, "What is your name?" Elise responds, "My name is June, and I am three, too." It goes on like that, their kids standing or swinging or playing and the moms talking to each other, not as themselves but in octaves higher on behalf of their children. All the while I stand just to the side, tethered to Elise like a balloon, because otherwise I drift from swings to slide, to the jungle gym, occasionally nodding to a stray father or mother who happens to be drifting along like me, because I don't know what else to do or say.

Part of my problem, I've realized, is that I'm just no good at small talk. I don't know what to say. I worry that I'll say the wrong thing. I worry that I'll do the wrong thing. The truth of the matter is that I like to play. I like to climb, and slide, and swing. I like to play hide and seek. I like to play tag. But I don't feel comfortable playing when other people are watching. I don't feel comfortable, because I imagine how I look from their perspective. This is like hearing my voice on an audio recording, which always leaves me thinking, *is that what I really sound like?*

Just when I think I'm the one who is crazy, that is it is my anxieties that create the problem, I hear one lady yell at another lady for leaving her kid on the slide, and all my fears are confirmed. I'm not the only person who watches what other people are doing or how they're interacting. I'm not the only person who judges random strangers. People are always watching and judging one another at the park.

But like I said, maybe this is all part of my imagination. Maybe I just see things that aren't really there. Knowing this doesn't stop me from feeling misplaced in the social structure of the park, but it doesn't matter. Some people use the park as a means to associate with and meet new people, but not I. I go to spend time with my kids. I go to play and build memories in hopes they'll remember me beyond our living room couch.

The trick then, for me, is to embody the moment so fully that nothing else matters. It is then that the park becomes ours—mine and my kids regardless of who else is there.

Sometimes in the summer at the park, in the thick grass, I'll lay myself down on the ground, smelling the rich coolness of the blades mingled with earth, and look at the clouds play across the sky. When June was a baby, I would lay her on my chest and together we'd watch the clouds. Usually, this moment was fleeting; she was a busy child. But once, once she fell asleep on my chest as we watched the heavens float past. She is old enough now that she usually just lies by my side. When she does tire of lying still, she jumps up to chase her shadow. When she does this I sometimes close

my eyes and remember the one time she fell asleep, but just as often I sit up and watch her dance across the grass to the gazebo, where she plays games with sticks and pine cones. It is in those moments, with the smell of dandelion and the sound of a plane overhead, that nothing will ever change or could get any better, or so I can make myself believe.

## **John Wayne's Teeth**

I've heard people say that signs come from above, but I never thought my sign would be so literal. Driving down I-15 in Utah, off to my left a billboard: "Don't much like quitters, son." I hadn't seen it coming, but I'd needed it. I had been going through an existential crisis: trying to decide if I'd chosen the right career path, trying to decide if the pursuit of my dreams was interfering with what was best for my family; even trying to decipher for myself whether or not I still had those same dreams. I'd been looking for answers everywhere but hadn't found any. A week earlier I'd left my house outside of Spokane, Washington, on what was supposed to be a three-day campout and found myself traveling over 1200 miles to the Washington coast, down to Oregon's Cannon Beach and Tillamook, across through Portland, down through Idaho, and into Utah for no other reason than because I was antsy and didn't know how to find any answers. And so, just outside Salt Lake City, when to the left of I-15 John Wayne's eyes stared down at me from a billboard with

those classic words plastered next to him, I turned to my wife, Elise. She turned to me, and we both started to laugh.

“I guess you have your answer,” she said. “Don’t much like quitters, son.”

Standing, hip cocked, in a button up shirt, slacks that covered the tops of his boots, gun belt hanging from his hip, with a full brimmed hat covering his head, John Wayne has become iconic of the cinematic cowboy, and so by default, iconic of America. I used to spend Saturday afternoons with my dad watching John Wayne ride through the desert, through storms, through thick and thin, unwavering, always there, always consistent, always a winner. Clint Eastwood was good, too, but John Wayne was the best.

It was only natural then that John Wayne was the one to urge me on: the iconic cowboy, my hero since boyhood. I'd been looking for a sign, and The Duke had come through when I needed him most.

For centuries people have looked for guidance, looked for signs, from something bigger than themselves. Early Celts and Gauls built their entire society around the solstices. Everything they did was aligned with the movement of the skies. Even today Stonehenge seems to align perfectly with the rising and setting sun during the summer solstice. The Celts and Gauls were not the only cultures to look for signs in the sky: Greeks, Romans, Israelites, and many other people looked to the skies for guidance. The night sky has inspired intricate mathematical equations. Sailors and explorers survived by using the stars for guidance. Almost every culture throughout the

history of time has had a purpose and significance for the stars beyond twinkling.

And so, on November 14, 1833, when the stars fell from the sky in a great flurry, it was no surprise that people thought it a sign. In actuality this was just the first recorded occurrence of the Leonid meteor showers—an annual event that peaks every 33 years in the form of a meteor storm. But that didn't matter. On that night so long ago, so many falling stars crossed the night sky that the Ogallala Sioux took these stars as a warning—an omen. Joseph Smith and the Mormons believed them to be a sign of redemption. The Missouri mobs took the falling stars as a sign that God favored their plan to eradicate the Mormons. Nobody seemed to believe the stars to be a mere coincidence or a natural phenomenon. November 14, 1987 I was born, but I like to think that my story started 154 years earlier when the Missouri mobs pushed the Mormons west, in part, because the stars told them to; because without the Mormons and the West, without the desert, without the stories of sacrifice and courage, without the falling stars, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

Sometimes I look at the night sky, stars twinkling, the moon shining, and wonder how I fit in. I think this must be a common reaction to looking at the sky. It is so large, so vast, both welcoming and foreboding. Usually, these thoughts inspired by the night sky lead me to the question, *How did I get to where I am?* I find this question isn't limited to the sky. Recently, I've been particularly interested in my connection to my ancestors. I look for these connections because my links to the past make me feel connected to

the bigger picture, something beyond the immediate now. I've also started looking for these connections because I've been trying to find ways to share my heritage with my children.

For this reason, among others, the last time I went to Utah's Capitol building, I lay myself down in the middle of the marble floor with my, then, one-year-old daughter on my chest, so we could see the seagulls that were painted on the dome.

"June," I said, "your great-great-grandpa painted those seagulls. All the other painters were afraid to go up that high on the rickety scaffolding, so your grandpa painted all the seagulls by himself. His name was William Slater."

My father's grandpa wasn't an artist by trade. In fact, he was one of those eclectic everymen. You know, the kind of person who could do anything and everything. He worked as a trapper, an electrician, a welder, a miner, a house painter, and a farmer. The dome fine art kind of painting was an anomaly but later in his life a hobby. In 1934, it was also a means to provide for his growing family. As part of President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects, and the Second New Deal, William Slater, and two other men were hired, as artists, to paint the seagulls on the dome of the Capitol Building.

Afraid to mount the scaffolding, the two men who were supposed to help paint the dome sat down below as William Slater painted every single bird. The wingspan of the largest bird is approximately six feet long, and although he didn't need to paint with the detail of the Sistine Chapel, I see him as a Michelangelo figure, laid out on a few boards, high above the ground, paint drops

spattering his face and arms, while he earnestly tried to create a masterpiece.

I never met either of them but for some reason John Wayne reminds me of William Slater. It is possible that John Wayne has become synonymous in my mind with William because of my dad. All those Saturdays spent together, all the stories he told me about his grandpa, all blended together. But it is also possible that one reminds me of the other because they look alike. When I look at pictures of both men, they are broad shouldered, with strong jawlines and prominent foreheads. Their hairlines are fading. John Wayne, of course, covered his hairline with a hat, but there is no doubt in my mind that as he got older, his hair thinned. Both men stand apart, silhouetted against a geography that is both welcoming and harsh. They seem to represent what it means to be patriotic. Until recently their similarities hadn't occurred to me. The link seems obvious now. William Slater, John Wayne, one was real, the other an ideal, an icon. John Wayne died in 1972. William Slater in 1986. Somehow, both these men, separate men, who lived at the same time, have become one in my mind.

Born in 1907 as Marion Robert Morrison, John Wayne took on his famous moniker in hopes of making it in Hollywood. I've heard some people say that John Wayne was a terrible actor, only playing the same part in all his movies, always the same, never acting because it was just himself. I would argue this makes him a better actor. He knew what he was good at and stuck to it. In fact, my least



favorite John Wayne movie is “Hatari!” because his character, his role, isn’t the same as his others. In “Hatari!” John Wayne is supposed to be funny, clever. He is supposed to be like Dean Martin, and John Wayne is no Dean Martin. Even his body language in “Hatari!” seems unsure, awkward. The thing that makes John Wayne John Wayne, more than anything else, is his confidence. Indians, rustlers, rivals never make him waiver. He could be beaten, bruised, left for dead, but you always knew he’d never be broken. John Wayne was a hardnosed, gritty character that represented the truths and values of the Western man, a man who never gave up, no matter what obstacles he faced. I’ve always known I loved John Wayne. I’ve always been inspired by his movies. Every time I get stuck in a rut, every time I need a pep talk, or a pick me up, I turn to John Wayne. Always he makes me feel stronger, braver, more energetic, and less like giving up. John Wayne—hip cocked, steely eyed, broad shouldered, unwavering—never lets me down. I’ve known this for years, but only now am I realizing why.

These two men, William Slater and John Wayne, and what they represent have also formed a large part of my identity, at least in how I’d like to be remembered: as a hard worker, as someone who lived with integrity, someone who was gritty and tough, the ideal Western man. Very much the myth of the West I think. Dime Novel propaganda, maybe, but I just can’t get it out of my system.

The landscape of the American West is inexplicably linked to what it means to be a Westerner. The rolling hills, the mountains, the forests, and the western ocean called to the dreams of people

everywhere. The American West has been a place of independence, freedom, and the realization of these dreams. But the dreams were not easily attained. Although the land was pleasing to the eye, it was not hospitable to the lazy, weak, and careless. For every one man, woman, or family that stayed in the West, four more returned to the East.

In the West it gets so dry and hot that you feel like you're baking in a convection oven. Aridity is inescapable. In the West it isn't so much that the sky is bigger than in the east, it's just the contrast between the land and the sky emphasizes the difference. It seems like it is only in the great expanses of the West that the greatness of America could be obtained. Two of the world's biggest dams were built here. Innovations in technology were first dreamed of in the rolling hills and mountain peaks, on the valley floors, and in the deserts.

Even now, the attraction of the West is, in part, predicated on the imagery that Horace Greely and others painted. Manifest Destiny is the idea that the great expanses of the West were blank canvases on which dreams were built. Westerners, European-descended Americans, were the chosen people, the people that would inherit the potential and resources of the uninhabited geography.

In 1833, the year the stars fell, Manifest Destiny was just taking shape. It wouldn't even be for another 20 or so years that Horace Greely would make phrase, "Go west young man, and grow up with the country," popular. And yet, this propaganda campaign would become so successful that even today many people still believe in its message. It didn't matter that the land wasn't empty. It didn't

matter that people were already living and thriving. Westerners, European-descended Americans, were the chosen people. They were led to the promised lands by a desire to find freedom, adventure, and new beginnings, and prophets equal to Moses and Abraham would lead them.

Manifest Destiny conflicts me. It was the greatest land grab enacted by the United States government. If you could get people to move west, then the government could too. Manifest Destiny was all propaganda, but propaganda that was born of dreams: cowboys, enterprise, independence, and the freedom to make a new beginning. The West was a place of dreams, a place of freedom, a place where a hard working person could make something of themselves regardless of their origins; and that seems true, but the West is also a place of harsh reality: Survive, adapt, or leave. Many of the greatest defining monuments of the American people lie in the West, also, many of their worst moments.

I was a believer of the promised lands. Western landscape inspires my spirituality, but the fact remains, Manifest Destiny was not a creator but a destroyer. Like the Promised Land of old, the West was occupied before the “chosen people” arrived. Like the Israelites, Abraham’s kin, America tried to destroy the previous occupants, their culture, and their identity as a people.

Massacres, racism, lying, taking advantage of others seem to be the real heritage of the West. Over and over again, the United States government signed treaties, then broke them. Pioneers, Mormons included, disrespected and abused native populations, justifying their actions by calling them heathens or ungodly and in

need of enlightenment. Maybe because I'm one of them, the actions of the Mormons in particular seem hypocritical to me. They had been pushed west, fleeing from persecution, only to persecute the natives along the way, all in the name of a promised land.

In the 1998 movie "Smoke Signals", Thomas and Victor have a discussion about the iconography of the Western man, John Wayne, the cowboyest cowboy of them all. And Victor starts singing "John Wayne's teeth, John Wayne's teeth, are they fake or are they real? Are they wood or are they steel?" In a way this song is expressing how the icon of the cowboy, the icon of John Wayne, has killed and continues to kill native culture. I watched this movie with my dad, the same way I watched John Wayne movies. I liked "Smoke Signals". I also feel conflicted about liking it. Not because it is a bad movie to like. Rather, I feel conflicted because I also like John Wayne. How can I be whom I am, finding pieces of myself in the iconography that has done its part to destroy a group of people, and still be conscious of what that means?

How do I go about apologizing for my ancestors? After all, it is because of them that I am here. It is also because of them that others are not. I am born of Judah, but I don't know if Israel's plight is also mine. History is littered with bodies being pushed aside. We are taught that to kill is a crime, but killing in the name of God is saintly. This hypocrisy is ripe for the plucking. I don't know if I should be proud or ashamed. It took strength to survive. Does it also take strength to apologize?

People did horrible things to one another, but they also did great things, hard things, just to survive. A pioneer heritage is

nothing to scoff at. I appreciate everything that my progenitors did for me. I appreciate all the work, and the pain, all the suffering endured so I could be here. I'm not blind to atrocities inflicted on pioneers by Indians (or vice versa), but those crimes don't excuse others. None of this eases my burden. It doesn't keep me from feeling conflicted about some of the actions of my ancestors. In fact, I'm so conflicted I'm not even sure if I can or should say Indians or Native Americans. How do I acknowledge the sacrifices from both sides?

After William Slater died in 1986, my great aunt Lynn said she saw his spirit in the House of the Lord, the Salt Lake City LDS temple. He was smiling, she said, and wore green pants. I had forgotten this—I had forgotten him—until a few months ago when Elise bought me some green pants. Now, every time I wear them or see them folded in a drawer or thrown into a laundry basket or glinting by in a mix of drying clothes, I can't help but think about him standing there, smiling at my aunt, wearing green pants.

William Slater was a one-armed, hard-bitten, Western man. His daughters revered him, and until they were old enough to know better, his grandchildren were intimidated by him. For my dad this was when he was 13 and spent the summer painting houses with his grandpa. I've always believed that, at least in part, my dad became a painter because of that summer. Also, because of that summer, my dad seemed to have a special bond with his grandpa.

"Tell me about grandpa Slater," I used to ask. My dad would pause, think for a moment, and then tell me a story. Like how they'd paint houses together and his grandpa would give him a wall to

paint, and after a while my dad would finish up and his grandpa would say, "Is that the best you can do?" and when my dad said, "Yes", he'd send him off to play and repaint the entire wall. Or my dad would tell us about the time that his grandpa had his arm ripped off in a mining accident. He was mining for uranium in Nevada when his shirtsleeve got caught in the drill, and his right arm was torn off. At the sight of the missing appendage, his partner became hysterical and went into shock, so William had to tie his own tourniquet and drive himself the thirty or more miles to the nearest hospital.

This last summer my Grandma Nola, the third of William's five girls, clarified the story a bit. Instead of becoming hysterical, although he did go into shock, her dad's partner helped tie the tourniquet and drove him to the hospital. Along the way her dad was so distraught, having no idea how he would work or play or do anything he loved doing, that he contemplated letting the tourniquet go and letting himself bleed out. The only thing, in the end, that he was able to hold onto was the image of his family, his wife, and five girls, the youngest of whom was only a baby. It was for them he held on.

His autobiography makes it even less dramatic, more violent, and more Western:

My arm got caught in a rope hanging down beside the drill, and my right arm was twisted around the drill with the rope...bones cracked and blood flowed...All that was left, was my hand lying down in the oil box and my skin wrapped

around the steel several times...my two arm bones were sticking about 6 inches out of my shoulder...Dick Denton and I were the only ones who were working out in the Hill's Drilling that fateful day. Dick said, "What shall I do now?" I told him to get the wrench and back the steel drill up...or rather to turn the steel in the opposite direction, which would be counter-clockwise...Dick, who was also in shock, said, "What shall I do now?" and I told him to get a piece of rope and a short stick, wind the rope above the cut and tie it. Then, I put the stick through the rope and twisted it to shut off the flow of blood. If I had not done this I would've bled to death right there on the spot.

Instead of contemplating the end in the car, just letting go, he didn't reach the point of despair until later, after the hospital. It was after his arm was fully amputated that he realized his life, as he knew it was over. It was then he felt like giving in and giving up. It was then that the idea of his girls kept him going, kept the depression at bay.

In a way, the way his story has changed over time is as Western as anything. Time, elapsed, changes our perspective of events as much as fact.

In the same way that I've always been drawn to John Wayne, I've always been attracted to the stories about my great grandpa. His example, the life he lived, has been buoyancy in my life. My dad often told me that my eyes reminded him of his grandpa. I don't know if this is true—if we have the same eyes, or use the same

expressions—but I do know it has made me feel more connected to William Slater. I feel like this man (as big and strong and idealistic as a Western myth) has something to say to me: Encouragement and insight that I myself can't see without his help. I know he is gone, but his stories give me direction.

A while back I took my family to Grand Coulee Dam. It was a damp February day. These were the thoughts I scribbled down, hoping to remember later: *Watching June amble along the grass to the side of the path, learning as she goes. Exploring the museum. Going to Crown Point Lookout. The sun breaking through to engulf the dam. The smallness, the intimacy of the surrounding communities. Driving through the Scablands, the farms and hidden canyons of central Washington. Reading about the communities moved for the dam.*

The story of the Dam is the story of the West. People had lived there before, and then the government decided it needed the land for the “greater good.” In 1933, President Roosevelt legislated the New Deal, and as part of this, the Dam was built. Grand Coulee Dam was one of the largest gravity dams of the modern era. Even today it is known as one of the seven civil engineering wonders of the United States. Like my grandpa, because of this project and the New Deal, thousands of men were able to support themselves and their families during the Depression. Finished in 1942, the energy from the dam helped the United States in its war efforts during the Second World War.



It was an enormous feat, building the dam, but it was also a huge burden to those whose lives were irrevocably changed by its presence. Millions of people may have benefitted from the electricity and irrigation provided, but hundreds of locals lost the heritage of the free-flowing Columbia River. Salmon runs were eviscerated. Homes were drowned. Lives were changed.

Driving through each small town along the way, looking at the small streets we passed, thinking of the farms among the fields, made me realize how much impact something like the dam could have on the small communities. The ties people have to land and place are essential to livelihoods. Driving through the deserted towns, with every other store “closed for the season,” made me realize that along with the land, the livelihood of the West lies in the dreams and the iconic images of the past. People come to experience the breadth, the vastness, and the wildness of the West. And Grand Coulee dam is all of those things in one.

The geography of the mountains, deserts, and rolling fields of wheat entices me into believing in the story of the West. People may have pushed the previous inhabitants out of the west, but the integrity of the common person isn't diminished. All this, the dam, the communities we drive past, the geography, it all gives me hope for the future.

My parents have now settled in the north end of Sanpete County in Utah. This county has the unfortunate heritage of being the place in Utah that has had the most settler-native conflicts in the entire state. This doesn't mean these conflicts were the most

violent or that they were the conflicts with the most casualties, but there were more altercations between the local Ute tribe and the Mormon pioneers there than anywhere else. I don't know what to make of this heritage. I know that all these years later I haven't yet met a single descendent from the Ute tribe that had been there, but the cities and towns are full of people who can trace their lineage to the early settlers. This place, the people and land that make up Sanpete County, have become connected to me in a way that other places haven't. I have benefited from the hard work of the pioneers who settled the valley. I have benefited from the absence of others.

When I delved deeper into that night so long ago—the night the stars fell from the sky—reports were conflicting. Not just in meaning, but also in time and place. Some newspapers reported that the sky fell on November 12, some said the 13th, and others said the 14th. Maybe there was no significance—then or now—in meaning or timing. But I like to think that 154 years before I was born, the decisions, the signs interpreted by hundreds if not thousands of different people, led directly to the person I am today. For good or for bad, I am a product of the West, and I have been made in the image of two men I've grown up with but never actually known.

## Family Treasure

I open my picture book to look at the pictures with my daughter, June. This book was my poor attempt at scrapbooking. Some pictures are glued to pages—cut out into various shapes to make them more interesting—but most of the pictures are just haphazardly shoved in. June points at a picture. “This is me, and my brother,” she says. It isn’t. The resemblance is uncanny, but the picture is actually of my sister Jenny and me. *Picture 1: Black and white. My mom, 24-years-old, on the left, Jenny, 3, on the right, me, newborn baby, laying between them. My mom is looking at Jenny. Jenny is looking at the camera. I’m asleep.*

As we look at the picture together, memories come crashing back to me. I tell June about the time Jenny and I were playing pet and owner in our back yard: I was the pet, tied to Jenny by a piece of rope (a leash). At which point our younger brother Kaleb (also in the backyard) poked a beehive with a stick, infuriating the bees. They swarmed Kaleb, making him cry out for help. Jenny being the good sister she was went to his aid, dragging me behind. She had

forgotten I was tied to her. June listens attentively while I tell her about the bees and the way they'd stung Jenny and Kaleb over and over again, and how I don't remember getting stung even once. When I finish my story, June tells me hers.

"When I was little, I played with my sister, and the bees were mad and they stung us." Her eyes were wide and sincere as she tells this. It doesn't matter that June doesn't have a sister or that this never happened to her. She has come to own the experience through my rendition, and now the story is hers.

This is a common occurrence with June. I tell a story, and then she becomes part of it. She is one of the characters, regardless of impossibility.

*Picture 2: December 27, 2013. This picture is actually five pictures taken sequentially in a photo booth. June is 10 months old. She is crying and squirming. No two pictures are the same. June laughs and says, "Dad, dad, dad. This is me and you, dad." Her face gets serious. "I was sad."*

*Picture 3: On the deck of the Olavaha, an interisland ferry in Tonga. Night. Mom is reading a book on a bench next to dad who is lying down. My older brother Josh, Kaleb, myself, and Jenny are asleep on the ground, sandwiched between our friend Amalea and someone wearing a red windbreaker. I was eight. June doesn't even notice this picture. She doesn't care. She has left to find her picture book. Otherwise I would tell her about living in Tonga while my mom did research for her Masters degree in botany. I would tell her about the time when I was sixteen and my family was back in Tonga, and we, yet again, had taken the Olavaha from one island group to*

another. Our 15-hour boat ride turned into 25 hours. The seas were rough. The ferry swayed back and forth, first leaning one way, then the other, always feeling like it might tip over, but before it did it would sway back the other. I was calm with the false belief that nothing serious could or would happen. Only a few years later a ferry would tip, and hundreds of people would die.

For various different reasons, my family spent a lot of time in Tonga. By the time I was 23, I'd spent a cumulative 3 years, give or take, living there. Not only does a picture of a palm tree bring back memories of climbing bare chested to the top of a tree for green coconuts, and scratching my bare chest on the slide back to the ground, but I can actually tell you precisely where the palm tree was when the picture was taken: the island of Lifuka, just outside the village of Pangai. My family was stranded. Our living arrangements had fallen through. My dad was looking for somewhere for us to stay while the rest of us waited near the dock. My uncle Ben caught a fly with his bare hands and showed me how to leash it with human hair. We'd eventually find accommodation in an LDS church.

June comes back into the room with a pink binder, her picture book. "Want to see when I a baby?" she asks me. For the next few moments we look at her ultrasound picture. We look at pictures of her tiny newborn self. I remember her eyes, moments after she was born, staring at me while I held her in my arms.

We look at pictures of her first, second, and third birthdays, and everything in between. This is a familiar sequence for June and me. I show her pictures of when I was little. She shows me pictures from when she was little. We bond over memories and share our

stories. I did this same thing with Elise before we were married. We spent an entire night going through our old Facebook photos, sharing the context behind the pictures and getting to know one another.

We close June's book and look at more pictures from mine. Elise comes into the room to join us. Lev is asleep in her arms.

*Picture 4: Age 15. I'm running down a lacrosse field. The ball is in my net. Blue and red rugby socks have slid down my calves to rest around my ankles.* I can hardly describe lacrosse to June. I played for about eight years, coached two more, and officiated off and on, as well. My problem isn't that I don't know the game or what goes into it; my problem is that it is too close to my heart. Lacrosse is the one sport I can't stand watching from the sidelines. The feelings, the emotions are just too strong, I have to be involved. I can't explain it to June because I don't know where to start.

So instead I tell June and Elise about how I used to watch "Brave Heart" before every game. Mel Gibson's rendition of this tragic Scottish tale always gets my heart pumping. War paint and patriotism, capped off by a moving cry for "Freedom," always seemed liked an appropriate way to prepare for a game that was originally used to keep a warrior's skills sharp for battle. Plus, I am related to William Wallace—he is my great great great (14 times or so) uncle—and I liked to channel his power and bravery before I played.

Ironically, I might not even be related to William Wallace. Recently, I've been doing research on my family tree, and, as it turns out, he might not be my uncle. My line goes back that far, Wallace after Wallace after Wallace. My line goes all the way to Scotland,

that's for sure. But there are also some discrepancies: like one progenitor born before his father was even twelve, or the name Wallace becomes Wallis, before it reverts to Wallace. So there is a possibility that somewhere along the line a mistake was made. I was telling Kaleb this, and he told me to stop looking so hard. He, like me, has enjoyed telling people that we are related to William Wallace.

The next picture we look at is also from Tonga. *Picture 5: Kaleb and I are sitting in buckets in a damp looking, cement walled room. This is the shower for the house we were living in. I'm 8. Kaleb is six.* One night, just before bed, my mom and dad told me to go shower. I didn't want to. It was dark and cold, and we didn't have any hot water. I've always been very vocal about my preferences, too vocal at times. My family often interpreted the articulation of my objections as whiny and stubborn, I interpreted them as righteous indignation. I have very vivid memories of multiple occasions in which I took a stance against my parents. The cold shower in Tonga was one of these moments.

My mom and dad wouldn't budge. I was filthy and had to bathe before bed. I was too stubborn to comply. The water was too cold. Then, out of the blue, Kaleb stood up, threw a towel over his shoulder and said, "Come on Zac, I'll teach you how to be a man." If that Benedict Arnold had only waited a few more minutes, he would've realized that I was fighting a battle for him, too. To this day everyone in our family remembers this episode as an indication of our differences. Kaleb was "the man," and I was the whiner—too stubborn for my own good.

By this time I am silently telling the stories to myself. June is looking at pictures, but not pictures of my choosing. Elise is just watching us, lost in her own thoughts.

*Picture 6: My dad is in the middle of the photo, sitting just to the right of his dad. He is facing the camera. His hand is resting against his chin, elbow on his knee. The brim on his hat shadows his face. He is wearing flip-flops. My Grandpa Al is facing the edge of the photo. Most of his body is blocked by my dad, but he is leaning forward just enough that his profile is visible.*

Looking at this picture I find myself reading into it what isn't there. Their entire history, as I know it, is in this photo. The good, the bad, even the heartache I witnessed in my dad's eyes after his dad died. All of that and more I see in this one photo.

Looking at it now I can't help but think of the time I sat down in front of my grandpa and made a paper crane. All my life he'd made paper cranes and given them away to people. Everywhere he went he'd have packets of pre-folded birds to give away. People often referred to him as the birdman. So when I sat down to make a crane for him, I thought I was funny, clever even. He watched me intently fold by fold make the bird. Then, when I handed it to him, he said to me, "I know a faster way," and pulled out one of his pre-folded birds to give it to me.

I should've known that would be his response. He always was mischievous. One morning, when my dad was about six, my Grandpa Al said to him, "Joe, go and see what is in the box in the bathtub." And when my dad peeked inside the box, a small alligator jumped out and ran down the hallway.



My dad always shared this story as an example of his dad's eccentricities. But for me, this story wasn't just about my grandpa's eccentricities; it was a depiction of my grandpa's relationship with my dad.

In a round about way, it is my Grandpa Al who taught me how to find myself in pictures and stories. His garage was always filled with boxes and boxes of stuff (his basement, too). Every few years my family would make a big event out of clearing out my grandpa's garage, selling everything we could, and taking the rest to thrift stores and the dump. These garage cleanings were the first place that I learned to appreciate treasure hunts. We'd clean it out, clear out the boxes that reached from floor to ceiling, the boxes stacked so thick that they left only a narrow pathway winding between aisles. We'd make enough room for the car to fit, and then a few months later my grandpa would fill it up again. The benefit of this cycle was that you never knew what treasures you might find. It could be anything: a unicycle, a vintage suit, a pocketknife, or anything really. You never knew what you'd find, but there was always something.

For a long time I found I looked through his things, through the boxes, just to satiate my curiosity, but after a while the purpose behind my perusal, my searches, changed from curiosity to something like necessity. I started looking for myself in the boxes. If artifacts can tell us about someone else, can't they also tell us about ourselves?

Eventually my perusal of the garage also led me to his basement and the storage room that contained his collected

memories. This wasn't so different than June commandeering my stories for herself. I was searching through my Grandpa Al's things, looking for how I connected with the world. After a while I knew what each box contained, and that in each box I'd find something that related to me, even if it was just junk.

Inevitably, even though I already knew what was there, whenever I'd visit my grandparents, I'd wander past the living room, through the kitchen, down the stairs to the storage room, where I'd entomb myself for hours on end in the comfort of dust and boxes. Because in those boxes everything had once, or still, belonged to a progenitor of my being, and sifting through the collected memories of my grandparent's possessions was like I was seeing part of my DNA. And so, little by little, my curiosity for what was there became a curiosity of who was there and how I related to them.

Flipping through these pictures, my pictures, makes it so easy to lose myself in memory, lost in the story of the past. But the memories aren't constant. They aren't fixed in time. The older I get the more my perspective is changing. I hold up a picture for Elise to look at. *Picture 7: I'm in shorts and a t-shirt, lounging in a chair, legs crossed. I'm looking at the camera with a half smile. I'm in Tonga. Age 22.* "This was from my last trip to Tonga," I tell Elise. "This was when I was collecting folklore." She smiles knowingly. She of course, has heard all this before. I tell the story, anyway.

"A long time ago in the Kingdom of Tonga, the Tui Tonga, or the King of Tonga, had a very handsome brother. The king and his brother travelled all the way to Samoa, where the king was to meet his future wife, Hina.

“Instead of falling in love with the king, Hina fell in love with the king’s brother. When the king found out, his heart was broken twice: once by Hina and once by his brother. In the throes of rage the King took his brother far out to sea and left him to die. But Hina could not bear to watch the man she loved drown. So she called to some ‘atu, or skip jack tuna, that were passing by. She begged these fish to save her true love. The ‘atu swam to the man, told him to grab on, and then took him to an island in Tonga called Kau Vai. It is said that the brother’s descendants still live on Kau Vai, and they can call to the ancestors of the ‘atu.

“Many years ago in the Kingdom of Tonga there was a great and terrible hurricane. This hurricane swept across the islands of Ha’apai, destroying all manner of vegetation. When the hurricane had passed, there was no food. Not on land or on sea. All that remained was a small amount of flour. The people of Ha’apai rationed the flour, hoping that a boat with supplies would arrive before they starved to death. Every day they would take their allotment of flour, add a little water, and boil it. This was not very good, but it was all they had.

“Just when many people thought they would starve, a man came forward. His name was Hiko and he said he had had a dream. In this dream Hiko’s ancestor, the king’s brother, taught him the words that Hina used to call the ‘atu. Also, in this dream he was instructed that the fish would come only as long as the people didn’t use hooks or spears, that they didn’t sell the fish for personal gain, and when the fish came they could only net as many as they needed to survive. After teaching the people these rules, Hiko went to a

remote bay on Kau Vai called Ha'ano. It was there he called to the fish. Thousands of 'atu came.

“For many years Hiko was able to call to the 'atu and have them come. And for many years the people followed the rules. That is, they followed the rules until 21 years ago. When Hiko called the fish, people took more than they needed and sold them.

“And when I was in Tonga last, when I was researching this story, amongst others, I realized I had been living in Tonga the last time Hiko called in the fish. I was eight years old and living in an LDS church because our other accommodations had fallen through. And I had eaten the very fish from the story.”

June is asleep. Above her, on the wall, is a painting my dad painted for her when she was born. It's titled, *Hiko's Dream, Zac's Story, Juniper's Painting*. Pictures are strewn across the floor. Elise goes to put Lev in bed, then comes back for June. I pick up my scattered memories, place them back in my book, and put it away.

## Father, Son

At first I thought you were just getting rid of stuff, cleaning out your office. The kind of cleanse that was typical of my childhood—I think of all the toys that got thrown out, all the clothes, all the stuff from my youth. It made sense to me, this cleanse, because you were giving your old sketchbooks away, and I couldn't see any other reason for you to hold onto them for so long only to discard them when you did. I took a few only to be polite, and maybe to flip through once or twice before I threw them away. Later, when I asked you about it, you said you weren't throwing them out. You were sharing them. I was grateful then that I'd chosen not to trash the few I had. It also made me wonder if you could see the similarities between us but couldn't find the words to express your understanding, so instead of saying anything you let your sketchbooks do the talking.

In your old sketchbooks, the ones you gave me, I found references to my own memories. A haiku you wrote—at the same time you were making me write haikus every morning—next to a

picture of some fish I drew. And on another page, a drawing of a glass coke bottle you brought back from New York with a note underneath, “Possibly consumed by Hillary Clinton.” You wrote that you claimed this bottle for yourself as she and her detail of secret service men left a café you happened to be walking past. I remember in our living room you held up the bottle, raised it like a trophy, and I thought, *That bottle may have touched the lips of the president’s wife, and my dad found it.* We lived so close to glory back then. Much later my friend’s gay father would say that Hillary would never beat Barack Obama for the presidential nomination because she wore a brown pantsuit on national television. Glass coke bottles now remind me not to wear brown pantsuits (or women’s clothing) if ever I’m on TV.

The more formal the occasion, the more frequently I saw your sketchbooks. I always assumed you used them as a device to keep you awake or more engaged—if not in contemplation at least in looks. This was a habit I picked up over the years. The difference is that I’d rarely draw. Usually, I’d just write. I almost never filled a book. I always stopped, putting it away, never using it again, even though nearly half of the pages were blank. Its funny the things I learned from you without ever realizing it: Half of the pages in these sketchbooks are left blank. Your sketchbooks were ever present, but never something I paid attention to. I didn’t even realize you kept your used sketchbooks until you were giving them away.

I found the drawings and stories in your sketchbooks to be a time machine to the past: ideas I once heard you discussing, places we’d been together, times best spent. At the same time that you were

writing about those specific memories, I was living those experiences from a different perspective. These sketchbooks, our shared story, allow me to look back, but the lines between you and me seem to be blurring, your experiences and mine overlapping. Now it seems I'm living those experiences from your perspective, that of a father.

I watch my children play together and alone. I look at their eyes and I wonder how much of me is theirs, how much of them is mine. I wonder at the softness of their dimples, the complexity of their expressions and tonal shifts, and I wonder if I am capable of guiding them through life when I can't guide myself. Once, sitting in the parking lot of the Tillamook cheese factory—where we'd just stopped moments before, done a quick tour, bought some ice cream and cheese and gone back in the car—Elise asked me, "Why are you in such a hurry? You don't even know where we are going." That's the truth. This all feels like a game to me. A game I'm not very good at playing. At what point does "fake it till you make it" just drive you into the ground?

You express all of these fears in your sketchbook and more, and I wonder how you held it together, because I feel like I'm disintegrating at the seams. I'm losing control. At one point you wrote, "I have failed—to look honestly at oneself is a painful thing if one has hidden flaws with fancy philosophy and rationalization." I find this ironic because you claim this failure even as you look at yourself—a conundrum, a confliction of action and truth, and, yet, not unlikely, I too feel most like a failure when I examine the difference between my words and my actions. How is it that I never

saw the acid, the self-loathing and crippling doubt? How did you cope?

Do you remember how you used to let us draw in your sketchbooks during church? I'm sure this was just to keep us quiet or awake, depending on our age, but I always assumed there was an unwritten rule never to read what you'd written. I'd flip through the pictures, and draw my own, but I never read, that was too personal. Now that you've given me a few, I couldn't help but read your writing, almost as if you'd given me permission to see your private thoughts and feelings.

On one page there is a map of the kingdom—"Zac's Kingdom." Bottle shaped (a common theme it seems) with a key explaining each symbol: ▲ houses, ≈ moat, ééé orchards, □□□▣ secret tunnel, and so on, right up to the central figure of the sphinx or "sphynix." I don't remember drawing the kingdom or the fish. I don't remember drawing anything specific in your sketchbooks, but I'm not surprised to find these things. Your sketchbooks are inherently different from a journal. A journal is private and secure, and you have never been those things. Even as I write this, I find myself laughing because saying it like this makes you seem frantic and frazzled, emotionally unstable, and you weren't. The paradox of all of this is that I never once doubted you, your presence in my life, or your capacity. And I laugh because I can imagine the sullen/annoyed look on your face as you read this thinking I'm calling you insecure. Maybe that's why I was so surprised to see insecurity in the pages of your sketchbooks. But it shouldn't have surprised me. If our time together has taught me one thing it is that you are not perfect—nor is anyone else for



that matter, but especially not you. This is one of the things I've always admired about you: your willingness to admit fault. With that being said, I never put those two things together, imperfection and insecurity. It is only now that I'm reading the pages of your sketchbook and reexamining the past, that I can see that you were insecure in an uncertain kind of way, An uncertainty that comes from within, a nagging, questioning feeling, that leaves you asking how you got there and how you're going to carry on. Only now do I recognize this as insecure because your writing is like looking in a mirror, and I can imagine, even though you didn't panic on the outside, you felt it on the inside. So when I say a journal is private and secure, and you and your sketchbooks are not, nor have you ever been those things, I mean it, because I get a sense of who you really were through these pages.

And now, even though I've read through the books over and over again, I find I can't stop flipping through these pages hoping to find definition, resolution, and answers, answers to questions you've already faced. Your sketchbooks may be a time machine to the past, but the feelings you expressed—through word and art—were a glimpse into the future, my present. I can't help but wonder if these writings are also a glimpse at my future. One day, down the road, will I see the cycle of my life repeated in my children, the same way yours is repeated in me?

## Scratching an Itch

I scratch the way others play scales on the piano: Start with your smallest finger, slightly curved, and press. Each finger follows in order. Curve and press. Curve and press. The only difference with scratching is that instead of using the pad of your finger to push down the key you are changing the angle and letting your nail dig into the flesh.

There is nothing more satisfying than scratching an itch. Any itch. Think about the Baloo back scratch from the *Jungle Book* or the dog's kicking leg as you scratch her behind the ear. Think of the eye rolling, time stopping, never-before-felt-so-good, got to get that spot scratch. Everyone does it but scratching is a talent that I've been honing all of my life. Ever since I was little, my skin has been exceptionally dry. Abnormally dry. Atopic Dermatitis dry. Also known as eczema. Not to be confused with emphysema, eczema is a skin condition that causes skin irritation and incessant itching. Eczema is most prevalent in children under ten. I was quite young when I started itching all the time—younger than memory serves—

most strongly in my legs and arms. All through elementary school I wore long pants. My family always seemed to think I wore pants instead of shorts because they made me more cowboy. Really, though, I wore pants because I didn't want the other kids to see my sores.

My name is Zac and I'm addicted to scratching.

It is night. I just want to sleep. I can't. My daughter June is awake, whimpering in her bed, restless as a nightingale—if nightingales are restless. Maybe she is a black bird or an owl. It doesn't matter. She is awake. I sit on the edge of her bed, imagining that my eyes are red and worn, as exhausted as my body feels. She kicks at the covers. Tosses over. Rolls.

"Just close your eyes and sleep," I plead. Instead she pierces me with her gaze, kicks the covers, tosses, rolls. I trace her face with my finger: around her eyes, down her nose, across her mouth. Her agitation eases but does not cease. I get out some lotion and rub it on her legs. Her tiny hands jerk towards her knees. I move them away. "I'll do it," I say, and I begin scratching.

I was in first-grade computer lab when the student teacher noticed me scratching my legs through my jeans. "Oh, my brother has eczema, too," she said. Just like that the asteroid spelling game that I was losing because I was trying to play with one hand while I used the other hand to scratch became meaningless. I didn't know what eczema was, but I was sure I didn't have it. I looked around to make sure none of the other kids were paying attention and replied,

"No, its just dry skin." I didn't have a disease or a condition. I just had dry skin. Dry skin and that was all. Not a disease, just a fact of life.

I sit in the shower and crank the hot water. I stick one leg in, then the other. The water is scalding. It burns. It burns like an itch, but it is real and tangible and more unbearable than an itch. It burns, but it feels good. It burns so bad that I get a queasy feeling in my stomach, and my body starts shaking. I can't leave my legs in for long, but every second counts. Every second makes the relief that much better. This sounds sick, I know, and it is, but when I've tried not to scratch all day long, this is one of the few things that brings relief. Burn it off, I think. Burn it off.

Scratching isn't the problem; scratching is the solution. It feels so good to sink my nails into my calf and scratch. Pressure is relieved. Hunger satisfied. Thirst quenched. My dad's solution to minor aches and pains was to cause pain somewhere else. Oh, you have a headache? Well does it still hurt if I pinch your earlobe? Scratching is the same. A distraction. When a person scratches, his or her brain releases serotonin. Serotonin is a chemical that has mild pain blockers. So when a person scratches, the relief comes from the pain blockers going to work. The only problem is that a side affect of serotonin is itchiness. So by combating skin irritation with scratching, we are only playing a cyclical game. The problem, then, is not scratching but itching, and serotonin, because without serotonin scratching wouldn't feel good. I assume it's the serotonin that makes the hot water feel so good on my legs. I assume because

I'm not a scientist, I have no conclusive evidence, but the water works.

Lotion, oil, Vaseline, moisture, these are the recommended treatments for Atopic Dermatitis inflammation, and, or, itchiness. If the skin doesn't dry, crack, and feel like a desert, then you won't feel like scratching. When I was a boy my mom would rub Vaseline all over my legs. The Vaseline would leave a sticky coating that would grab the sheets, hairballs, and lint, unless I wore pajama pants to bed. When I did wear pajama pants to bed, my legs would stick to the fabric. The Vaseline also didn't work. It didn't relieve the itchiness. There was no relief. I still found myself scratching, with the Vaseline leaving a coat of gelatinous goop under my fingernails.

In most cases the symptoms of eczema fade as the child moves into adolescence. This isn't true in my case. I was fifteen when my cousin declared to our entire family that he always knew where I slept whenever I slept over because he could hear my scratching in the night. Even now, at the age of 28, my skin is as dry as ever—"Dry as a desert," my wife says—and my skin is easily irritated. The only difference between then and now is that my legs are no longer covered in sores. Rather than my symptoms fading, I attribute this to my own practice of scratching. Over the years I've perfected my technique and timing to best amplify the scratch. I've also learned restraint. As far as I know there is no cure for eczema. There is only one answer I know that eases the itchiness. Don't scratch. Don't feed the beast.

But scratching feels so good. Nothing, not even scalding water, feels as good as a deep, precise scratch. Oftentimes, at night, my wife says to June, “Why don’t you let your dad scratch your back? He is the best scratcher,” and this worries me. It worries me that my daughter, barely even three, is already realizing that nothing beats a good scratch.

My name is Zac and I’m addicted to scratching.

## **Binge Watching**

It is March 16th right now. The conference tournaments are over, the field is set, and I can see it coming. The binge is coming. I don't care about college basketball, not until March, and then I, like millions of others, fill out a bracket and zealously follow the score lines. The genius of March Madness, I think, is that they figured out binge watching before binge watching was a thing. Dating back to its conception, the NCAA has done a wonderful job at making its basketball tournament relevant and making it into an event in March. People who don't care about sports care about March Madness. With 68 teams playing single-elimination games and the eventual winner being crowned national champion, the stakes are as high as they get in college basketball. Drama, skill, poise, effort, poetry, all at its finest and on display for the basketball minded public. You can't risk missing any of the action, or you risk missing out on the magic of the moment. Part of the magic is the bracket, the competition that reaches offices, classrooms, families, and individuals. Partly the thrill of gambling—trying to win the office

pool—partly the pleasure of earning bragging rights, to pick the winners, to pick the champion is the ultimate test of basketball savvy, and to have your bracket bust, implode with upsets and miscalculations, leaves you feeling gutted and resentful. You can't help but root against the teams your friends pick to win, if only to spite them. And part of the magic is the format. As culture changed, the culture of watching and experiencing TV, it played right into the hands of the tournament: Two weeks, 67 games, all televised, and I watch as many as I can. That's a lot of basketball and doesn't even account for any NIT games thrown into the mix. My basketball binge is about to begin. In fact, it started yesterday with the four play-in games.

Vanderbilt 50, Wichita State 70

Florida Gulf Coast 96, Fairleigh Dickinson 65

Holy Cross 59, Southern Jaguars 55

Michigan 67, Tulsa 62

Binge watching has quickly surpassed baseball as America's pastime. With movie hubs like Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon Prime, not to mention thousands of others, you can watch full seasons and entire trilogies in the blink of a thousand eyes. Netflix alone has 40 million subscribers, with an estimated 61 percent of those subscribers binge watching during the week. I've heard all kinds of definitions for binge watching, but according to the report about Netflix users, binge watching is watching two or more episodes of a show in a single sitting.



These are the last fifteen shows or movies that I binge watched: *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Psych*, *Chuno*, *Leverage*, *House*, *Lord of the Rings*, World Cup Soccer, Western movies, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Blue Bloods*, baseball movies, *Harry Potter*, *The Office*, and *Seinfeld*. Binge watching is not like watching your favorite show once a week for a season. It's not like watching your favorite movie every once in a while. Binge watching is a commitment. It is the marriage between yourself and a show for that show's entirety. Binge watching is sitting through episode after episode after episode because no matter how much you realize you have other (practical) things to do, you just can't leave Jim and Pam. You have to know if they work things out.

The NCAA tournament is a beast unto itself. It may have been a precursor to the binge watch, but it still survives and thrives because it is a binge watch with a time limit. You can't risk missing the excitement, so you tune in wherever you're at, whatever you're doing. School, work, home, you have to follow along, watch your bracket, hope your teams pull through. There is no way to watch every game, not unless you have four TVs and nothing else to do, but you can watch enough to binge.

Last year, 2015, March Madness had on average 11.3 million viewers. The final game, at its peak, had over 34 million people tune in to watch Duke and Wisconsin play. That was just one game. Last year, including the final, I watched only a few games, and none sequentially. I probably wouldn't have counted last year's tournament as a binge. This year is different.

It is day 2, and I've been watching so much basketball my three-year-old daughter, June, has started reprimanding me. If I leave the room for a moment, she'll run to the TV and turn it off. "That's enough," she seems to be saying. This is coming from the girl who binges her own shows: *Sofia the First*, *Doc McStuffins*, *Daniel Tiger*. There are times I have to bribe her to play with me outside. She is the girl who knows three Georges: the maintenance man from our building, George Washington from the street signs, and George from *Seinfeld*. George from *Seinfeld* is her friend, she says. Late at night when she doesn't want to sleep, she'll come up to me and say, "Dad, let's watch a June show and a dad show, let's watch George and Jerry." Still she turns off the TV. You'd think she'd be more understanding.

I start feeling guilty when June turns off the TV. Not because I'm watching basketball, but because my watching of basketball has started to isolate me from my family. The thing that makes a binge, the most important thing, I think, beyond excesses of time, is the relationships you build. I know writers and editors, producers and directors, fabricate the characters in the shows I watch, but it doesn't stop me from building a relationship with them. I know I've been binging when I find myself thinking of, and relating to, a fictional character more than to my neighbors or friends. I'm generally OK with this isolation. However, I'm not okay with being isolated from my family. Most of the time this isn't a problem for me. Most of the shows I watch, most of my binges, are with my family. But when I watch sports I most often find myself alone on the couch.

Hour after hour I get lost in the movement and anticipation of the game. This habit peaked a few years ago when I bought a subscription to *MLS Live* so I could watch soccer matches. Every Saturday I'd watch not one, not two, but three or four or even five games in a row. The movement and patterns of the game mesmerized me. I'd spend all day watching soccer, and when I went to bed, I'd realize I had never even left the house. Not even to check the mail, and usually checking the mail is a passion of mine. Everything started revolving around soccer. My family was put on the back burner so that I could satisfy my soccer watching. I was becoming an addict to soccer. My daughter would only know me as the dad who watched soccer all the time. Somehow I realized this before it was too late. I still watch the occasional game, but now I limit myself. I try to spend time building memories with my family, instead of instilling the memory of me plastered to a couch watching other people run around chasing a ball.

This isn't to say I stopped watching sports on TV. In fact, sports are one of the few reasons to watch live TV. So much of the time, you can find a show online, and with fewer, if any, commercials. To watch it as it airs seems silly. But sports are happening in the moment. They are live. Afterward, when the game is over, the anticipation, the thrill, is gone, the outcome sure. On occasion, I, or a friend of mine, have recorded a game to watch later, but these recordings are more pain than pleasure. You have to go to great lengths not to find out the score, turning off your phone, avoiding contact with any other fans, interrupting conversations to say you haven't yet seen the outcome, and you'd appreciate it if

someone would change the conversation to a new subject. Sports are best live and in the moment.

I skip watching the #1 seeded teams, mostly because at this stage in the tournament they are annihilating the competition. Kansas, Virginia, and North Carolina each won by an average of 26 points. Oregon hasn't played yet, but I'll watch only if it's a close game.

One thing June and I have in common is our interest in princess stories. For her, Disney princesses are the best. For me, the best part of March Madness are the Cinderella stories: the teams that come out of nowhere, the unheard of small schools that show up and beat teams nationally recognized. I love the underdog. Basketball is unique in that it allows for the possibility of an upset more than any other sport. All you need is five players to show up and play their guts out, play harder than the other five players on the court. That's all it takes. When you have a team do that in consecutive games, things get real, things get exciting. Already things are exciting, with four upsets on the first full day of the tournament: Yale (12<sup>th</sup> seed) beat Baylor (5<sup>th</sup> seed), AR-Little Rock (12<sup>th</sup> seed) beat Purdue (5<sup>th</sup> seed), Wichita State (11<sup>th</sup> seed) beat Arizona (6<sup>th</sup> seed), and Gonzaga (11<sup>th</sup> seed) beat Seton Hall (6<sup>th</sup> seed).

I know people who think watching any television is a waste of time. These same people usually say they'd rather spend time with people who are alive and real. What they don't understand is that watching television can be a shared experience. Elise and her sisters can quote entire movies in chronological order to each other. At the

most random moments, in my opinion, they'll share a quote and all start laughing. This only feels random to me because the quote is contingent on their shared understanding. Binge watching doesn't have to be a singular isolating experience; it can also be a unifier.

March Madness might be temporarily isolating me from my wife and kids, but it is also uniting me with everyone else who is watching it. When I was studying anthropology during my eclectic undergraduate years, I came to the conclusion that sports are replacing religion as community glue. Our teams, our fellow fans, become our clans. Our teams become our rising and setting suns. We worship the players like Greek demi-gods. We, as fans, unite in our support.

Three states away in Utah, my brother Kaleb has been following the tournament, too. Five years ago in 2011, Kaleb and I watched every game we could in our dad's office on the BYU campus. I had watched the tournament before that year and since, but that year stands out above the others because BYU (the school I was attending) made it past the first two rounds of the tournament to the Sweet 16, and I watched every game I could with Kaleb. He had just returned from his LDS mission, and at first he seemed different, not the brother I remembered. I didn't know how to talk to him. Then we started watching basketball and everything went back to normal. This year we're three states away, but occasionally we'll call or text each other to see if the other saw a specific game or play. I'm watching by myself, but I'm not watching alone.

Day 3. I feel like I should admit I forgot to fill out a bracket. It is early in the first half, but Middle Tennessee (15th seed) is beating Michigan State (2<sup>nd</sup> seed) by ten. Can they hold on? Can they pull the upset? This year the tournament feels particularly relaxing, partly because I didn't fill out a bracket, so I have no confliction with all these upsets, and partly because BYU didn't even make the field of 68. This means I get to enjoy the close games without feeling my gut rumble. Upsets aren't so upsetting; they're just fun when you can just enjoy the close game. Even though I don't have a particular team, I find myself gravitating towards specific stories. It isn't so much about basketball. Its individual stories of achievement that I like, stories about trials of faith and persecution met with hard work and eventual success, as far as success is found on the basketball court. It is these kinds of stories, from teams and players that make me care, that keep me invested. Who can run the gauntlet? Who can face the challenges and challengers and win a national championship?

Point and case: Syracuse, one of the very last teams to get into the tournament, a team that wasn't supposed to be good or worthy, just beat Dayton by 19 points. And Villanova, a team expected to do big things, is doing them already by destroying UNC Asheville by thirty points.

It is only natural that March Madness turns into a binge, because you just get sucked in. You just have to keep watching. Kaleb was telling me just the other day that he has been watching the games while he works out in the gym. Overtime, he said, means

something completely new and daunting when you have to run an extra mile just to see it. I keep watching March Madness because I'm afraid to miss anything, any drama, any upset, any of the magic.

In general, it can be hard to step away from a binge. The lives of the characters become so real. You could stop, you tell yourself. You could stop any time, but for the time being you just have to know if Leslie Knope is elected to the city council.

Binge watching changes a person. Any time you've committed yourself to a relationship, of any kind, you come away altered. With shows that aren't sports, I find I most often binge because I care. My personal binge watching has evolved in the four years I've been married. Early on I watched *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Psych*, and then *Chuno* because these shows were metaphors for different aspects of my life: *Malcolm in the Middle* because it highlighted the way my family thinks (if there is a family out there that is as crazy as Malcolm's, then me and mine aren't so bad); *Psych* because the unique bond of friendship between Shawn and Gus was indicative of my relationship with my friend Miles; and *Chuno* because Chuno is a Korean drama about unrequited love and sacrifice, and until I met Elise I felt destined for such a fate. So I made Elise watch each of these shows to help her understand me and where I was coming from.

Now I watch shows with Elise, and unlike the movies she quotes with her sisters, the shows we've watched together keep me in on the joke. I can walk into the room and say, "Helloooooo," and she knows I am quoting Jerry from *Seinfeld*. I can talk about the complex taste of beets and she'll call me Dwight, and I'll know what

she means. The shows we watch allow us to reference phrases or episodes that belong to a character and do it in a way that we feel more connected to each other.

When I did finally pull myself away from the TV and the games, to take my family to the park, there were two boys playing basketball. They were reenacting a game they'd seen, running back and forth between hoops, calling out names of players, calling the shots, losing themselves in their imaginations and memories. It took me back to when I was a boy and would play basketball with my brothers. Once Kaleb and I challenged two other boys in the neighborhood to a best of seven basketball series. The other boys wore their official Utah Jazz basketball jerseys emblazoned with Stockton and Malone. I don't remember if Kaleb and I even had jerseys but we called ourselves Jordan and Pippen. We won the series in four games straight.

Watching the boys play at the park took me to the heart of why I still watch sports of any kind. Growing up I loved to play any sport. I loved being outside. I loved playing and competing. As a small boy I loved watching sports because it allowed me to visualize myself in the game. My potential was all in front of me. I could be anything I wanted to be. Elise teases me because I admitted to her that I thought I could've been a professional athlete in any sport if I'd just taken the time and dedicated myself.

I know people who say, "I'd rather play than watch someone else play." To these people I say, "I'd rather live vicariously through a player who can do things that I can't." There is no feeling in the



world that beats the moment that you have an opponent facing you, fear in his eyes, knowing that you know you can beat him. You weave left, lean right, dip your head, watch their weight shift, and then you're passed them and scoring a goal. Before my career ending injury, before I stopped playing lacrosse, I had that feeling a lot. But now I don't. So I have to live vicariously through people who can still do those things. Ironically lacrosse is the one sport I can't stand watching. Not because I hate it, but because my loss becomes too real and raw. Don't get me wrong, I still like to play sports, but I also love to lose myself in the poetry and rhythms expressed through others, too, so I watch sports on TV.

Oregon State is losing by seven with just under five minutes to go. I've typically been rooting against Pac12 schools, but I find myself wanting Oregon State to win, mostly because their starting point guard is Gary Payton II. I remember watching his dad play in the NBA. I have no other reason to root for them. In fact, I find myself suddenly rooting for VCU instead because they have two players with dreadlocks. I'm a wishy-washy fan.

There are all kinds of reasons that someone might find himself or herself bingeing. Sometimes I binge because I'm interested in a show, and once the show has ended, and the entire series is online, it's easy to fall into binge watching. Other times binge watching is a form of nostalgic distraction. We have good associations with a show so we go back to it, either together or alone, to experience those moments again. *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Office*, these are some of the shows I binge for nostalgic purposes. I'll never forget

the first time I watched *Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring* in theaters. I was fourteen and decided that I no longer needed to be embarrassed by kissing scenes. So when Aragorn and Arwen kissed in the Rivendale gardens, I forced my hands to stay in my lap, and I watched wide eyed while Kaleb and our cousin peaked through their fingers.

Westerns have always been my go-to movies when I'm feeling depressed. There is something comforting about the way Westerns always solve the problem, not necessarily with guns, but with grit and determination, with courage and spirit. Westerns have a way of motivating me that is like clockwork. Last year Elise visited her sister for two weeks, and I found myself camped out on our couch with old pizza strewn across the floor while I watched Western after Western after Western, only interrupted with *How I Met Your Mother*—a terrible show, I might add, terrible because of its hedonistic morality code, but when you get sucked in you get sucked in.

The closest I come to a March Madness binge when it isn't March is the World Cup or the Olympics. The coverage of these events is immense, and so that's what you do, you binge. And you share the binge with the world. Other times I started binging because a specific subject interested me. Elise still makes fun of me for my baseball movie binge. I don't even like baseball, but I'd been reading a lot about baseball and suddenly I was watching lots of Kevin Costner movies, mixed in with *The Bad News Bears*, *The Sandlot*, and *Moneyball*. My baseball binge actually ended, not in

front of the TV like you might expect, but during the ninth inning of an actual baseball game when I realized I was watching baseball.

With an entire weekend of basketball ahead I'll try not to completely ignore my family for the next few days. Ideally, they'd watch with me. These games are starting to get exciting. I figure, though, that one extended week of basketball during the year, and no other time, makes this binge acceptable. Another key to March Madness's success, I think, is how easy it is to rationalize watching 68 games. The scores keep rolling in, and I keep flipping from game to game hoping to catch all of the most exciting moments. This isn't the end, no victor crowned, not yet, but I can't focus on two things anymore. When you binge you go all in.

I should probably be concerned that so much of my cultural knowledge is informed by the television I watch. I should be concerned but I'm not. Binge watching is quickly becoming one of the most popular pastimes in America. Over 10 billion hours of shows were streamed from Netflix in the first quarter of 2015. That number is only increasing. Not only is binge watching becoming America's pastime, it is also becoming my family's pastime. We still do things other than watch television, but many nights, or weekends, or whenever we just need to relax and decompress, watching makes for easy family time.

After a successful binge I'll think about the characters for weeks. I'll miss them. I'll become nostalgic. I might hate basketball by the end of this tournament, but I'll also miss the excitement. For

now, Oregon State lost, Michigan State is still losing, and I'll be watching basketball all day long and into next week.

## Bedtime

Flashlight bright, lighting the ceilings and walls,  
“Lie down. Lie down. Don’t worry about your twisted  
Nightgown.” It never took me so long to fall asleep.

All right, then, here we go: “Long enough ago that I was just six years old my family had a dog named Rhombus. Rhombus was a mischievous beagle, always getting into trouble. We found him at the pound. It’s strange now for me to think that he had a name before he came, but afterwards and forever it was Rhombus. Maybe that explains his multiple personalities or his senile, psychotic ways. He never once kept a bone we’d given him. Instead he’d bury it in the backyard to never again retrieve it. Once, when my mom went to bed, she found a cold, old hotdog under her pillow.  
“EWWW,’ she said.

“My uncle lived with us then. His dog, a pup, named Ossie—the best dog ever—and Rhombus, as my uncle told my brothers and I, fried or

scrambled eggs every night after we went to bed. Ossie we did not blame, after all he was just a puppy, innocent and unaware, but every morning I'd look Rhombus in the eye and ask why he didn't share.

'Then when we were travelling and Rhombus stayed behind with Grandma, her neighbor girl took him to the creek in spring. The water was high and fast. That dumb darn blasted dog jumped in and couldn't get out. He drowned. I cried that night, the night my parents told me he was dead.' I've decided now that he may not have drowned. His body was never found. He just wanted a new name with a new family that didn't think him so deranged.

## **The Tasting Game**

I learned to fear the blindfold. Actually the blindfold part wasn't so bad. It was even exhilarating. I liked the anticipation of what would come next. It was only after the creak of the refrigerator door, the hushed whispers, sudden uncontrolled laughter, and then the directions, "Open your mouth," that my anticipation would turn to fear.

This was all part of the Tasting Game: blind fold, anticipation, and fear. Arguably the best part of the game is the actual tasting part. This is the part that everyone is waiting for. How will the person, the victim, react to a spoonful of whatever substance was just placed inside their mouth? My brother once had a spoonful of mayonnaise given to him. He hates mayonnaise. Obviously whether or not this is the best part of the game depends on your seat: If you are the taster it is the worst part; if you are the audience or the spooner it is the best.

The game part in all this comes after the tasting. If the taster can guess what they have tasted, they get to reverse roles and make

the spooner the blindfolded participant while they plunge into the depths of the fridge for an unforgettable substance. This game was played most often at family gatherings on my mother's side.

Children were the most likely participants, too innocent or naïve to know better. The older you became the less likely you were to participate, most likely because the adults had been there before, played the game, and could use their authority to persuade the younger generations to play without having to play themselves.

The Tasting Game was my first foray in the possibilities of different flavors. In a way it was my first attempt at cooking. Cooking, to me, is an inquisitive process: What is the history of an ingredient, and how can I use it to get a specific texture or flavor? How do combinations of different ingredients change the flavors of the food? What will this taste like?

Usually, my inquisition begins with an idea or a craving. I'd see something on TV, I'd read about something in a book, I'd hear someone talk about the best dish they've ever eaten, and I'd start wondering what it would be like to eat it and if I had the capabilities to make whatever it was. My most recent endeavor was that of gravy.

There are two ways that I see cravings work. First, our body adapts its needs to our cravings: Taste buds recognize certain chemicals that our body needs, and our memories connect those needs with food that matches. Second, certain memories are so strong that we subconsciously remember the goodness of a specific taste or experience, and we just need to recreate that experience.



After my daughter, June, was born, and I had been sitting in the hospital without eating for seventeen or eighteen hours, the cafeteria roast beef, mashed potatoes, and gravy (of course) were the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted. Ever since I've especially loved gravy. This line of thought is similar to that of Bee Wilson in her book *First Bite*. In it she explains that eating is a learned behavior. Our sensory pleasures reinforce our eating behaviors. When we eat something that gives us pleasure, our brain is releasing dopamine into our blood stream. We are literally being addicted to good tasting things, or tastes we associate with positive experience.

I had never before made gravy, but I had a craving to eat it. I knew I could've asked someone else to make me some. My wife, Elise, is a great cook and has made gravy for me on many occasions. But part of the process, the quest, is finding out whether or not I am capable of making something delicious. So instead of asking Elise to make me gravy, I decided to learn what goes into it.

I started with *The Nordic Cookbook* by Magnus Nilsson. When I opened the book, all I really knew about making gravy was that you used the drippings from some sort of meat. I knew this because for as far back as I can remember, for Thanksgiving dinner my grandma Joanie would make the gravy by using the turkey drippings. She would actually make two gravies: one for the vast majority of people, and one for my grandpa that included all the turkey giblets. Grandpa Jim had grown up on a farm in southern Georgia, and his taste in food expressed that: pig's feet, raw oysters, giblets, and other various "strange" things. When our family got together, grandpa Jim loved to share his "treats" with the grandkids.

It didn't take us long to realize we didn't want to partake. He never seemed to mind, all the more for him. This habit of my grandpa's seems to be the precursor to the Tasting Game.

As I read through the gravy recipes in *Nordic Cooking*, I realized each recipe used something called a roux. I had never even heard of a roux before then—a testament to my lack of experience. Luckily, in the back of the book it explained a roux is just browned butter mixed with flour in a pan. It is used in gravy as a binder and a thickener. There was nothing to it. Easy peasy. Like a gravy train.

Gravy train. Gravy train. Where does that term even come from? The best part of approaching the task of cooking inquisitively is that you never know where you will end up, or what you might learn. The term gravy train, I found out, is often used to refer to the good life, easy income with little work. Gravy has become synonymous with rich man's food. The train part of the phrase comes from railroad workers who would call an easy shift a "gravy run," meaning the shift had little work. Nowadays it is most often used as a way of referencing "falling into money," or having it easy. My kind of dish, I think.

The first thing to do, even before making a roux, was to make a stock. A basic gravy really is just thickened stock. I started out by chopping an onion and throwing it into a pressure cooker with some butter. Then I chopped up some beef and threw that in the pan as well. I added a few herbs: basil, a little cumin, and that's it. I poured in a cup of water and put the lid on to let it pressurize and cook for 45 minutes.

I had read that the worst thing you can do to a stock is over cook the vegetables. So while the meat was cooking down, I started chopping some celery and carrots. I added these to the stock after the elapsed time of 45 minutes. I also added salt and pepper and some orange peel shavings. Before I put the lid back on, I had a sudden feeling to add a cinnamon stick. I put the pan back on the heat and let it pressure cook for another twenty minutes.

As I waited for the stock to form, I started thinking about the cinnamon stick. Why had I done that? Why had I thrown cinnamon into the pot? I turned to the Internet to find answers. Cinnamon, as it turns out, is a natural compliment to beef. One of the earliest uses for cinnamon was as a preservative for meat, in much the same way as salt. However, because cinnamon was such a pricey spice, only the wealthy could afford it. Originally, only grown on the tropical island nation of Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon), the exporting of cinnamon was a highly sought after enterprise. I found it interesting to note that by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, cinnamon was the Dutch India Trade Company's most profitable spice. When I threw the cinnamon stick into the pot, I didn't know any of this. I just thought it would be a nice balance to the orange peel, and it was.

Generally speaking I don't like cooking with other people in the kitchen. I feel like my unorthodox methods are scrutinized. I do my due diligence in reading about whatever it is I'm making, but rarely ever do I follow a recipe. Instead, I just go for it. I smell different spices. I try new methods. I bounce around the kitchen chaotically deciphering the whims and smells of whatever it is I'm trying to

cook. Measurements and precision don't matter to me as much as gut feeling. Needless to say I never make the same dish twice. It always ends up different the second time around.

My family—my parents, my brothers, and my sisters—they harass me because of my methods, my slap dashery. “You never know what Zac will cook up next,” they say. Followed by, “at least its not beans.” Then everyone laughs.

When I was only nine years old, my parents made it a chore for my siblings and me to cook dinner once a week. To the delight of my parents, my older brother and sister started to experiment and explore the culinary world. I, on the other hand, wanted nothing more than to become a cowboy, and so when I cooked, I cooked what cowboys ate (or at least what I thought they ate): beans and hotdogs. My family started calling me Bean Boy.

Over the next five or six years, nothing much would change. Nothing was easier to make than a can of baked beans. If nothing else, I was all about efficiency in my chores so I could get back to doing what I wanted to do. My family didn't see things the same way. They considered my cooking as lazy and last minute. Eventually, I would move away from cooking only hotdogs and beans, but I still didn't care enough to try, to put any effort into the process; the reward wasn't worth the effort. So I'd just throw whatever I could into a pan, hoping for edibility, and if I came up short, who cared?

Eventually, I would. Or at least my taste buds cared. I may not have fallen in love with cooking at a young age, but it was

undeniable that I liked good tasting food. I also got tired of everyone referring to me as Bean Boy.

If this were a cooking show on TV, this would be the part where I give my sob story to the judges: “I am capable of cooking something great, and I want to prove that to my family. I just want validation of my capacity to be more than Bean Boy. If I win today it would be confirmation that I’m not the same person I was twenty years ago. I have changed. I am capable and hard working, not slap dash last minute, but creative and strong and interesting.” Or something like that. As soppy as this is, as cliché as it sounds, that is probably the truth. I started cooking, actually spending time thinking about flavors and food and possible combinations, because I wanted my family to acknowledge that I’m not always lazy or last minute. I wanted them to be impressed. Cooking was a challenge, and doing it successfully was a metaphor for my ability to make and create successfully.

Ironically, the perception of my cooking didn’t change until I married Elise. It was then that I escaped the definition my family had given me. Bean Boy was no more. I could cook.

Food has always played an important role in my relationship with Elise. I’ve heard that most marital arguments are about sex or money. I’d add a third category for Elise and me, we argue most when either one or both of us is hungry. Also, three of our first four dates were significantly linked with food: eating a strawberry Rhubarb pie Elise had made, going in search of the famous Big Buddha burger from Sammie’s Restaurant in Provo, Utah, and when

I made Elise a Bit of Heaven. It was the Bit of Heaven that sealed the deal. This is a wonderful dessert that uses croissants as base for French toast, which is then topped with vanilla custard, and then finished with a berry sauce. This is the only dish I've consistently made using a recipe. After her first helping, Elise asked if she could have some more. I said, "You can but it will cost you your first born." Everything else is history.

After marrying Elise the purpose behind my cooking changed, but the challenge of cooking new things remained. Cooking was still a way to satisfy my need for validation, but the validation itself was different. I wasn't looking for my family's acknowledgement that I had grown out of hot dogs and beans; instead, cooking was a way to test my abilities and learn new things, and hopefully make something tasty.

There are days the chore of cooking feels the same, exhausting and not worth my time. Cooking can be so mundane, just a way to feed my family or myself. There is no life in this, only necessity. Elise teases me that I only ever cook when we have someone over to eat. This isn't entirely true. I cook other times, too. But when we have guests, I cook with passion and effort. Cooking is exhausting, and it is only when I have other people to share it with that the reward outweighs the effort.

So after I drained the juices from the beef and vegetables, made a roux, added a few cups of water—voila, gravy—I made Elise invite some neighbors over for dinner. I figured once I put in the effort, I might as well share the experience.

Most everyone will tell you the food is good whether or not it actually tastes delicious. So instead of listening to what they say, I watch their facial expressions while they eat. I'll sit and watch, studying faces, watching for surprise, and delight, or disgust. I interpret the slightest change of expression for feedback. I get satisfaction from watching someone's eyes light up with surprise. Very much like the Tasting Game, the reaction is what counts. Luckily nobody received a spoonful of mayonnaise, only gravy.

The combination of orange and cinnamon in my gravy gave it a warm, holiday sort of feel. "What is that flavor?" our neighbors asked. "We just can't place it. It is very festive." Not even Elise could guess which ingredients I'd used to give the gravy that holiday feel. Eventually, I told them about the cinnamon stick and orange peel. And at the end of the night, each of us was satisfied with the result.

My gravy recipe: Norseman's Gravy (serves 4)

1 onion (chopped)  
 ½ cube of butter  
 1 cup of water  
 1 lb. of chopped beef

A sprinkling of various herbs: basil, cumin, and anything else that comes to mind.

Put all these together in a pressure cooker and put on heat for 45 min. After 45 minutes add:

2 chopped carrots  
 A few chopped celery stalks  
 Salt and pepper to taste

Orange peel  
1 cinnamon stick

Return to heat for 20 minutes.

Drain the juices, and add a roux and two cups of water. Have your wife, or someone (anyone, really) make the biscuits.



## **Pig Chaser**

The best feeling in the world is when you've caught the greased pig. You hug that Squealer to you with the pride and pleasure of a man who beat all other men. You literally are bringing home the bacon. Women everywhere swoon. At least that's how I imagine it. I didn't catch the pig. With a lunge I had reached it and started wrapping my arm around it—the pig was mine—and then the mass of humanity arrived on top of me, and the pig popped free. If catching the pig is the best feeling, the penultimate moment of pride, being crushed into the dirt of the rodeo grounds, thinking about years of animal and man sediment being pressed into your eyes, mouth, and ears is not that. Not fun, or good, maybe the opposite of the best.

When you end up on the bottom of a pile of humanity, you start wondering how you got there. For me, the answer was an easy one. It was a mistake. Not anyone else's, my own. When I was a little boy I'd won a greased pig chase. I was too little to remember much, but

the story has become part of family lore. Everyone in the family knows I'm the one who caught a greased pig. Watching the kids chase it, chase the pig around and around, was exciting and fun. Then they announced they were going to do another pig chase, this time for the adults. So why not? I'll tell you why not. Unless you are a WWE wrestler, you probably don't like having your body slammed by another human being. You probably don't like being compressed into the dirt of the rodeo grounds. I don't.

Generally speaking, I've never liked wrestling, or wrestlers very much. In high school, the wrestlers had a reputation for being gross, cauliflower eared, and ringworm bearers. At least that's how the x-country team felt about them. We had to share a locker room. I could never understand the draw of tight spandex and flopping around a mat with a sweaty, smelly, person. I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to be contorted like a pretzel. Believe me, if I wrestled I would've been. Then, a few months ago I went and watched my ten-year-old cousin's wrestling match. The gym was full of kids, ages four to twelve, waiting to wrestle each other. There were four pads and one hundred kids. Sometimes they'd have to wait an hour before they got a turn. I've never seen so many children crying at a sporting event. Not just tears, but full complete sobbing meltdowns. This meet was confirming all my feelings about wrestling. I couldn't understand why parents would submit their kids to such a cruel sport. Any sporting event that made more than half its participants cry shouldn't be considered sporting.

When I pointed out all the crying kids to my aunt, she said, "They cry because it's hard to be pinned, twisted to the point that

you lose all control. They get to the point that nothing they can do physically will help. They mentally break. So they cry. Especially at first, when they are new to wrestling.” So, I thought, it’s about the power. Being able to pin someone, getting them in a position that they can’t get out of. People like the power. But my aunt continued, “I think it is a good thing for a kid to learn that they can’t always get what they want. A lot of kids quit. Some learn that you have to work and work and work. It takes time and practice, and even then it doesn’t always help, but when a kid is faced with something they can’t control, they learn something important. They learn that you can quit and never achieve anything, or you can work for it and maybe make it. Wrestling teaches kids how to face up to the inevitable. You don’t always get what you want in life.”

The Achilles' tendon is like a rubber band; it holds the most latent energy when it is stretched and ready to snap back. Meaning, the smaller the heel of a shoe the faster you will be because the more your tendon is stretched. There is a reason that sprinters wear next to nothing on their feet. With this in mind, I was wearing cowboy boots and jeans, so it is no wonder that the few guys wearing tennis shoes started quicker off the line than I did. It didn't matter. I reached the pig first. Or maybe it was second, or third, but before most. And so I was near the bottom of the pile. I vividly remember a large man wearing overalls and an orange shirt landing on my back. I remember this like it was an out of body experience—watching myself lunge, watching him jump on my back, watching as fifty other people jumped on us, too.

All afternoon I'd taken pictures of kids riding sheep and steers, being thrown off, getting a face-full of earth. I'd laughed. I'd clicked away, picture after picture. I tried to capture the moments—either just before, or just after—in which the tears would come. Three out of ten kids would cry. Three more would get up from the ground, not crying, but not laughing either. The other four would jump up, smile spreading so wide that all you noticed was the dirt caked to their gums. These were the kids who wanted to go again. I'd laughed, at both the criers and the thrill seekers I'd laughed. Then I had the ground smashed into my face. The dirt had been shoved up my nose and into my ears; it had blinded my eyes and clogged my throat. I don't know if I cried, but I'm sure I didn't laugh.

Kid rodeo: relentless ewes, unleashed with a kid strapped to their backs. This is a precursor to the full-sized rodeo, the adult rodeo. Both events, I think, harken back to the gladiators of Rome, mankind battling the fiercest of animals. This is all the more believable—the kids being gladiators—because of the fierce expressions on the kids' faces. Some of the kids were more than willing to face off with an ewe. Others were terrified.

This whole thing was part of a bigger celebration, part of Fairview City's Pioneer Days Festival. The Kid's Rodeo was by far the best event. Because I was the city's official photographer, I could get right down into the pit and get real close to the action. The animals were possibly more afraid than the kids. When they ran out of animals to ride— or maybe it was kids to ride the animals—the

people running the show transitioned to animal chasing. They'd line kids up on one side of the rodeo grounds, and then release a torrent of small farm animals: ducks, chickens, rabbits, a goose. If a kid caught an animal she got to keep it. It was mad chaos. It was amazing. They capped off the small animal chase with a pig chase for the kids. They greased a pig and let it go. The crowd went crazy as little boys and girls chased the pig to exhaustion.

When they announced the adult pig chase, I hadn't even realized I'd been thinking about the time I caught the pig as a little boy. I didn't realize I had been wondering if I could still do it. Not until my wife, Elise, and my dad and younger brother egged me on.

"You should do it, Zac," they said. "It'll be fun." Suddenly I knew I had anticipated this moment from the beginning. I was going to chase and catch myself a pig.

I thought you were supposed to see a light, or have an epiphany—see a vision, or see your life flash before your eyes when you faced death. I had none of that. Maybe I didn't really believe I was going to die. How many people do? At the bottom of the pile, I tried to breathe but suffocated instead. There was nothing I could do but wait out the end. It was near. My obituary would read, "Died trying to catch the pig, crushed by the mob." Just when I couldn't stand it anymore, when the light came, it was because someone, an angel, had started peeling people off the pile, freeing me from certain, miserable, embarrassing death.

I had faced the end and survived. Wrestling. People on top of people. The pig, the greased pig that we were trying to catch,

escaped. And somehow I, I ended up on the bottom, suffocating from ingested dirt and sweat. Wondering why I had even participated. The lights of the rodeo ground eventually came through the mass of bodies piled on top of me. I was plucked from the earth, leaving my dirt angel behind me. Embarrassed to have come so close and to have failed. At least I had survived.

As we walked off the rodeo grounds, as the big overhead lights began to shut off, my dad yelled out to a man in a dirty white t-shirt near the fence, "Hey Steve, thanks for saving my boy here," and laughed. Elise laughed too. So did my brother and sister.

What had I been thinking? When my family urged me to go down into the pit—like a gladiator of old—to relive my glory, I thought, *I did it as a boy. What is to stop me now? I can do this.* So I foolishly lined up, along with two hundred other people. I was wearing cowboy boots, Jeans, and a t-shirt, but that didn't matter. If I could do it as a boy I could do it as a man.

Now my family never talks about the time I caught the pig, only the time that I was smothered by hundreds of bodies, face compressed with dirt, and how funny it was to watch. My experience wasn't fruitless. It taught me one thing: Pride is expendable. I had reached my limit. I was stuck in a position I couldn't get out of. I'd faced the inevitable. I'd survived, but without pride.

## Thesis Book List

*Partly Cloudy Patriot* by Sarah Vowell

*Silk Parachute* by John McPhee

*A Postcard Memoir* by Lawrence Sutin

*Loitering* by Charles D'Ambrosio

*White Indians* by Michael Gills

*The Soul of an Octopus* by Sy Montgomery

*Refuge* by Terry Tempest Williams

*Sublime Physick* by Patrick Madden

*Lamentations of the Father* by Ian Frazier

*The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion

*The Empathy Exams* by Leslie Jamison

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life* by William Finnegan

*Running the Books* by Avi Steinberg

*Hold Still* by Sally Mann

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## **EDUCATION**

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|------|---------------------------------|
| 2012 | BA English, BYU                 |
| 2006 | High School Diploma, Provo High |

## **EXPERIENCE**

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|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| September 2015-June 2016 | English 170 Teaching Assistant  |
| October 2014-March 2016  | Writers in the Community Intern |
| January 2015-March 2015  | Get Lit Festival Intern         |
| August 2013-July 2014    | High School English Teacher     |

## **CREATIVE PROJECTS**

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### *Manulua Book Arts Project*

- This was a book art project that integrated Western art practices with traditional Polynesian tapa cloth making.

### *Mapping The West Project*

- This was an art project that involved a group of artists from a university in Liverpool England. They came to Utah to participate in a collaborative project with BYU students, in which they made books in response to Utah's geography. I was part of the local entourage that took them camping in Southern Utah.