

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

tell me about the red

Lindsay Killips

it seethes, ferocious as a sunrise that sears the stars' forest and leaves cloud-white burns across the sky. red drowns me in its brilliance: draws my pupils to it like an anchor to the cold, dark sand, bearing the weight of the entire ocean.

and i can't even scream. my voice is lost in that crimson abyss and i—i close my eyes. blind myself some tragedies we don't have to be our own witness to, my throat whispers to my cells. my boyfriend's truck screams scarlet, for everyone, until the minivan's brake lights bleed across his truck's navy exoskeleton—pushed into itself, wrinkled and disheveled the same way i will be removed from his passenger seat.

i open my eyes, forgetting when they fell asleep, discovering myself: forearms and thighs parallel on the seat, my bellybutton smells my thighs, my chin stretches to kisses my left knee. i twitch each muscle, make sure i am not paralyzed. then, the exhaustion is just too alluring to evade, i close my eyes, delve into unconsciousness.

this time, i wake with my head on a soft, crinkly airbag. blink my eyes until the ethereal watercolor smears and my vision clears. jackson uses his fingers to investigate something with his lips. a brilliant sunrise aura creates a halo outside his window, blurry and bright, enticing me to come, but it seems so

far, and jackson looks like a boulder between me and that light. instead, i embody air's senseless shape; i let my eyelashes fall from brows to cheeks until i am ready to face this accident.

before i give my eyes to the crimson abyss, i begin to talk to the universe, or maybe it was god, or a god. i plead, make a deal, hoping it is not with evil:

please don't let me die or die and be brought back. the last time that happened i didn't want to float back into this body. but no matter what, please let me be okay. i'm not ready to face the foreignness of a body that looks the same but has lost its innerworkings. and i'll smile as i turn scars into unrepeatable tattoos; what i mean is, i can deal with the hatchet creating rivers from my skin, but i will drown in my own blood if i lose myself entirely or just parts of me. please. i'll stop drowning my brain in vodka—i know that was never the intention for this mind. if you haven't already taken pieces of me, i promise when i open my eyes i will be who i need to be. please, let me try again.

still buckled, now sitting upright, i wonder how long my eyes have been open, enough for me to sit u—ow. OW, rages and swirls inside my head and i can feel lukewarm blood covering me. my fingertips begin investigating, searching diligently for a wound. none. it is just the coffee, that painted me using the impact as its brush. like a neanderthal scanning the horizon for danger, my eyes dark. nowhere for

long, pausing peculiarly on the red outside the windshield.

a guy from the minivan attempts to interrupt my dazed being by turning the window between us into a drum. but i am hypnotized by the way the flames seem to dance to the bellowing window. probably too late, i realize the truck is on fire. and where the fuck is jackson? why am i trapped? red, belligerent in its attempts, runs like mascara through his windshield and down the cheeks of his dashboard, down trying to have my cheeks, too. but the guy will not give up, the trepidation in his voice magnetizes my eyes to him. panic vomits past our corneas and i finally can hear his words, "you have to get out. the truck's on fire."

everyone, everything, seems to have language. a voice. i think mine is still hiding beneath the rugs at the bottom of my lungs, hitched a ride with the last breath i swallowed. it didn't want to watch the accident, either. i drag my palms across my leggings, digging for my sound, until it patiently waits at the cliff of my uvula, until it catapults into the world, "i know. i can't." and neither will the window. but our mirrored expressions as we witness the unlocked door hug itself too tightly to let me go, speaks for itself, as does the rolled-up window, a forgotten winter danger.

all the drivers who pulled to the shoulder ignite their legs, eyes, fingers, desperate for a fire extinguisher. the chaos bubbles through this metal and glass cage, demanding me to feel. bodies are spinning out there, trying with everything they can to not let "the girl still in the truck trapped" become a story. and just my eyes are darting everywhere, then my

head begins to awaken, brings my torso with it, lassos my arms and fingers. my legs are last to join. i guess they have been overtired. i reach for jackson's door—locked, window—shut. how did he get out? even without being paralyzed, there is nowhere i can go.

helplessness devastates me in this shock, this fear, there is nothing i can do to save myself. time is a strange thing. i have no idea how long i've been in this truck, but i'm sure the gas in the engine is almost ready to erupt into the atmosphere like magma from a volcano if the engine gets too close to that blazing red. how tragic would it be to die, surrounded by so many hearts? isolation cocoons me while sadness races through my veins—i haven't lived all the life i intended to. but

the guy breaks my window, helps pull me out of the car. "my hand's here if you want it." i've never felt skin like his: it sheds love like pollen. he is the last person i share the air from my lungs with, spewing words at him like i am not hurt—"i'm okay." he is the last heartbeat the patterns on my fingers hear, listening to his cells surfing through his tunnels, before i walk the canyon segregating the broken brake lights and bumpers storming savagely from the vehicles. he is the last time i feel love before i trek through that gulf that nearly took my pulse.

i can't remember if i thanked him.

the concrete median steals my gaze as i walk, trying to make my way to jackson. when i reach his old spice deodorant sweating skin, i listen to the officer asking him questions. she turns her attention to me: "yes, i always wear my seatbelt;" "yeah, the airbag went off."

jackson's red river tongue leaves my own words gurgling below the surface, forgotten, unheard. "no, hers didn't." the officer transcribes his words into the truth in her black-ink handwriting and walks away. "i woke up with my head laying on something, though," i contest to jackson. "it was the sleeping bag. there are no passenger airbags." i blink spastically as he explains, "it's very old. it was my grandma's." it dawns on me with the radiance of a sunrise void of clouds, if there were airbags, i would be a new color in the morning watercolor canvas. my knees would have pierced my ribs like my nose piercing—sharp, all at once. i would be covered in the cherry tide that swims with the squid and the salmon beneath my now blue-and-black-tie-dye sheets of skin.

jackson is snapchatting the remnants. i am dissociating, lingering like a beached whale between the grey median and the bed of his truck i make plans to babysit. i don't need to be at this accident. i can't be here—the officer discovers me, in the open, surrounded by no one. here, but not really. asks me if i am okay, "yeah, i'm fine. my head hurts, but i'm fine."

and i am left, back in my solace. then i reenact the same dialogue with an emt. this one is more difficult to lie through. i can't remember my address; i blame it on moving a few too many times. he walks me to the ambulance and i scribble my name on a black line—i'm sure it doesn't matter what it says. my eyes don't care to read, now.

it is eight months later. july heat back in illinois

is comforting, it doesn't strangle me with humidity like it did in maryland. i am with nate, because he is the best, or only, distraction i have from the pain, tonight. my head still seethes, sears like skewers, piercing through my hair follicles down to the center, bottom of my brain, out through my brainstem.

he offers to bring weed—tonight, we are smoking. tonight, we are having fun—and he drives us around some neighborhoods, disturbing the dark with our small talk that makes its way through the cracks in our windows. smoke paints our lungs ashen. a red light stops the cars in front of us. he presses his brakes. asks me a question that i still can't hear. my face matches the haze in my lungs. he stops at the red light, like the rest of the world

but mine is falling apart. like the night could not contain all her strength and erupted, vicious, violent. blood moons in the brake lights surround me. they grow. millions of moons race towards my head like hail leave my pupils motionless in their pigment.

i know i am not in maryland. i know my soles are bearing roots in his car floor mats. i know we have already stopped. i know we are safe. i know. i know. i know

but a part of me is trapped back in that accident. i transplant myself into that garnet night and there is no escape. this encroaching red cuts me like a scalpel held in a trembling surgeon's hands. everything hurts. parts of me are swimming out of my tears, bleeding all over his car and i don't know how much of me i have lost. and i don't think i can ever siphon enough back.

i command my eyelids to my lower. demand their shelter.

nate lifts his foot from the brake, presses the gas, slowly, we accelerate. the blood moons are stored once again; i open my eyes. "i need to go home."

sweat stains my palms. my ribs expand the angle they make around my lungs, until they are arms hugging me. straining with my intercostal muscles to convince my heart it is loved it is okay as my heart bellows so loudly my breasts tremble with every thud. pretend i am fine. i feel time distance itself, clocks rewind i am 8 months younger. and i want to be home, to feel safe. it's been so long. and i can't get past this. time, it just keeps bringing me back. i should have known not to smoke, i know it changes how time touches.

faint and stoic, finally, i step lightly on each square leading to me and my mom's apartment door. my abs are magnetizing themselves together, desperately trying to pump blood to my head. stars fall in front of my vision, i wonder if i will become one. my calves, femurs, knees, and all the rest rely on their memory to get me inside. i cannot see until i stare at the shell of my own existence in the bathroom mirror.

nate has already left. i take Benadryl like it is xanax, knowing this is not an allergy i can sleep through forever. this tragedy is branded on my skin, deep in the crevices and mountains of my brain, and weaves itself into the tissues meant to keep me connect, but it only unravels me. i refuse to look at any of its burn marks. i don't think i've healed enough to see them. i don't think i'm ready to see the heat still trapped, still

trying to expel itself from my flesh. i am still not ready to face this trauma.

my mom passes the bathroom while i brush my teeth, asks if i am okay. toothpaste filled words answer her, "yeah, i'm just tired." two-minutes is torturous, the mint feels like sun blisters littering my mouth. i spit, expecting to see blood streaked toothpaste and saliva. just white comes out. i rinse my raging mouth with lukewarm tap water, let it swish and swirl, taste my cheeks and teeth. turn off the light. retreat to my bed. lie on my left side, the right hurts too much, again, it may collapse if it has to endure any pressure. curled in a fetal position, i shield my blue irises. i disappear somewhere i don't have to be conscious. today, i have felt enough.

Ruminations on the Image of the Christ.

Javier A. Padilla-Gonzalez

Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine.

—Patti Smith

Jesus died on that cross for so many reasons: for us, for me, for your grandma, for love, for the world, for peace, as punishment, an act of cruelty, for nothing. To sacrifice selflessly, to give. I started to doubt all of this long ago—then again, couldn't he just have died because of the socio-political circumstances he found himself in? My Catholic mother loves entertaining my blasphemous suggestions on the way to church. She only cries because she is so happy that I am thinking about our lord. And I do think of him, his fleshy gut suspended over a delicate girdle, long locks framing his face. I think about comely men like this all of the time.

My twin bed is propped up against a wall in my studio. I am standing in front of it with a blade in one hand and a hammer in the other. A long time ago, I was praying before sleep on this bed. Some time went by and I started watching music videos or porn instead. I tried to limit the porn because my guardian angel hung on the wall behind me, and he could be a bit of a prude at times. I lost my virginity on this bed. I felt remorse, or disgust. I had desecrated a temple, a religious site where I had communicated to God my deepest cravings and anxieties. This was the bed that my guardian angel had steered through nightmares, and now I asked myself, standing in front of the mangled mattress, *why did I destroy something so valuable?*

I cut a gash in the center of the mattress and stuffed a portrait of Jesus there. I sealed the entire thing in lard and lace. "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." God could have my innocence and my guilt, this mattress was my gift to him. A couple of days later, I decorated my bed's wounds in baby's breath and pink roses. White tinged by red.

I am standing alone in a Spanish colonial chapel in Santa Ana, Jalisco. It is modest and bleak. I am far from anything important, and yet I have made the pilgrimage (a two hour walk through cattle ranches) to visit the holy site. In front of me, there is a glass case stocked with relics - the remains of saints and martyrs. My gaze is fixed on a vial of dried blood that belonged to the canonized martyr, Santo Toribio Romo. Santo Toribio is supposedly my great great something, and I say 'supposedly' because this celibate man is somehow related to the entire state of Jalisco. Yet, I feel an intimate pride or disdain for this vial of blood, for the chapel that was built on Romo's family home, where he was seized and tortured before his execution. During the Cristero Wars, soldiers would skin the feet of priests who refused to stop ordaining mass and made them walk miles on dirt roads. What did I have to do with a soldier of God, a selfless man who had the courage to die for his values?

I am beginning to wonder if Robert Mapplethorpe's transition from an altar boy (even described as looking like a "young shepherd" by his partner, Patti Smith) to an active member of the BDSM community was a unique development—or, if there were underlying

motivations. Bondage: The Binding of Isaac. Discipline: Rules and Commandments. Sadism: The Old Testament God. Masochism: Martyrization. I have been painting images from some *NSFWhardcorebighubfuckXXXsextube* website, and trying to find images that parallel scenes from the Bible. You'd be surprised. My favorite is one that resembles Jesus on the cross (*Crucified Twink Fucks Himself With A Dildo - BDSM Gay Bondage*). I make these on cheap butcher paper, and fold them into small squares when I am done. I can't remember the last time my mother saw my artwork. I am also beginning to understand why Robert Mapplethorpe rarely talked with his family after moving to New York City.

Summer 2016: A nun is showing me to my room in Sacred Heart Cathedral in Jalostotitlan, Jalisco. I travelled down here without my parents, because they cannot leave the United States, else they might be denied reentry. I am only sleeping in the church cloisters overnight for the Perpetual Adoration of The Holiest. The Holiest is a hunk of gold with a glass case in the center where the Eucharist is placed. This is interchangeable with God in the flesh, and God in the flesh wants to be worshipped perpetually for 24 hours on days of religious observance. Members of the parish agree to pray alone in the main chapel for an hour out of the day.

My parents insisted that I take a night shift, because these were reserved for energetic young adults. I can't sleep, so I try to swat the mosquitoes in the room by following the sound of their wings. A nun knocks on my door at three in the morning and leads me to the cathedral nave. We approach the altar from behind and pass through the sacristy which is lit by a handful of votive candles in a corner of the room. The room is dark and small and I have to be careful not to stumble over a kneeler. I look up to try to make out my guiding nun, but I am frozen in place by the sight of a corpse.

The man in front of me was nailed to a splintered cross, and his body slumped to the ground as if the nails were about to tear through his palms. His body was covered in gashes that oozed blood, but they were only visible because of the candles glimmering off of his porcelain skin. This crucifix bore a wig that I later learned was made of real human hair. Something about the hyperrealism of this particular rendering, or maybe my sleepy mind, defamiliarized the all too familiar image of the Passion of Christ.

What if Jesus had his brains blown out by a firing squad? How would we go about turning *that* corpse into a symbol, an icon? *Headline: Cartel Violence, Gang Member Found Dead in Plaza.* God was a journalist, he knew his message of love could not be spread without a little shock value, drama.

Just for good measure:



There is a new pantheon of saints in Mexico, the saints that help criminals and drug lords. Jesus Malverde was a criminal that stole from the rich and gave to the poor (a very original plot, undeniable), but he was executed in the early 20th century. Narcos and bandits pray to him to bless their actions, and maybe even to justify them. El Chapo has a chapel dedicated to Jesus Malverde and La Santa Muerte in his villa (the chapel was run by his mother). The images of Jesus Malverde are compelling, his eyes are tender, and he has an air of humility about him. Portraits and busts of Jesus Malverde are often decorated in marijuana leaves and gold jewelry. Who gives permission to change religion to suit one's needs? The unchanging truth has shifted, and I don't know if this new Jesus is a breath of fresh air or a slap to the face. All of these years, had I been praying to the same God as my parents?

I was bitter when I lost god. It didn't seem enough to just not believe in him, I needed closure. Maybe the switch was too fast, my knees were still sore from kneeling. My remission into Catholicism happened when I was 19 years old. Except, I was exploring a much darker, enchanting side of Catholicism. You see, in Catholicism monotheism is only a facade, a remnant from Judeo-Christian origins. God was really three people, the father, the son and the holy spirit—but these are three parts, manifestations of a whole. Nevertheless, there are three distinguishable entities with distributed powers. And one cannot forget the cast of diverse saints that are associated with anything from the arts to soccer. But, I was not interested in St. Scrosoppi; rather, I wanted to know about the other powers. I understood the world in opposites because of this religion: for every god there is a Devil, and for every angel there was a Demon, for every christ there lurked an Antichrist.

I began staging performances at three in the morning, sprinkling spices on a linoleum tile

under twinkling candles. Dancing effeminately under the guise of nightfall. Little rituals consisting of spelling wishes to the wrong deity, or conjuring lucifer to keep me company, to see if he was real. At first I became submissive to this freedom, mistaking it for the Devil. How decadent it felt to bathe in a sigh of moonlight in the nude. In front of my balcony window. Curtains agape. A seductive voice would wake me from boredom, when the house echoed with snores, beckoning me to rub fresh thyme on my navel and offer my body to Nero. At first I felt a sweet satisfaction, it felt gluttonous or lustful. Maybe rage took hold of me, and I was feasting on a secret vengeance. Maybe these were ludicrous, lunatic attempts to hurt someone I did not believe in. The night these stopped, at least the rituals performed with these intentions, I begged lucifer to take my soul, to possess my body, to open the earth and swallow me whole ['que me trague la tierra']. I prayed to no one, arms outstretched to a star, satellite.

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

—William Carlos Williams, *This is Just to Say*

Robert Mapplethorpe photographed other members of the BDSM community quite often. A new system of belief that had hierarchy and structure. He perpetually honored the same image throughout his life: the tortured and empowered christ he feared as an altar boy. The leather straps and metal studs were only liturgical vestments reinvented. The BDSM photographs were reenactments. There was the god who demanded obedience, or a priest to fulfill these commandments. Followers, subs, and gimps to bend over in submission. Devils to indulge in sin, and proclaim this indulgence: *Self-Portrait with Whip (1978)*. Mapplethorpe's motivations behind these pictures were complex, he had transmuted the violence and inadequacy he felt into an excruciating sadomasochist thirst. A vengeful or self-indulgent pursuit: *Self-Portrait with Gun (1978)*. This is how he performed god. An angry, old-testament god. The kind of god that ordered the deaths of newborn children or the sacrifice of an eldest son. These photographs were justice.

Every time I pass by the reproduction of St. Michael the archangel in my parish, I think of Theodore Roosevelt proudly towering over two dead leopards, beasts. My father works out every morning. Strong, able-bodied, moral men that could provide and protect. Upright and unyielding protectors of humanism, the kind that held that man was 6 feet above nature, and the kind that granted man the right or destiny to manifest his wishes. Rugged, rough riders causing a racket with iron dumbbells, my father's vice grip. Muscular Christ, who only used his mother's womb as a doormat to the earthly realm, prying her labia apart. How selfishly tied she was to her own nature, fainting and hysterical. Men sacrificed, they died for others sins, and after death they were reincarnated as Benjamin Franklin, family guardian. Machismo, Machete, Machito. My grandfather smokes 8 packs of red Marlboro cigarettes every day and only takes

his liter of coffee black. Proactive, undying men. At his ripe age of 80, he could lift a brick house by his testicles and still be home in time to deliver the bacon. Speak softly and carry a big dick. The self-made man was a self-made mass of flesh and obstinance, he needed no one but he seemed to think everyone needed him.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe,
Big as a Frisco seal

—Sylvia Plath, *Daddy*

Until his flesh begins to sag and droop. Countless representations of the pieta agree upon the limpness of Jesus's body slinking over his mother's knees. His abdomen sinks, pulled by the gravity of physics or his own situation, needing to be closer to the earth or his mother's womb. The first home and final resting place. I wonder if Mary ever moved after that moment, or if she had mummified her son's body in her dress. Jesus subsumed in plunging garb. A return to nature, to his creator. How unequivocally dead he looked—cold, cold. Stone cold.

There is an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in my parents' home that has a particular demeanor about his look. He stares out from a shadowy alcove on our staircase landing, eyes cast slightly downward, so as to disapprove of any act you are engaging in at any given time. He also seems to know about your devious agenda, all of the sin that you have scheduled. His scornful eyes are seared into the back of my neck. A tight-lipped smile betrays no compassion, only contempt. I could try to avoid meeting his eyes when I went up to my bedroom and passed the altar, but I knew he was there, waiting for the perfect moment to cast me out of his paradise. At any moment I could have lifted the cheap print off of its hook and torn Him to small shreds. But transubstantiation was his secret defense—the shreds would have coagulated into living, breathing meat, and how the hell would I clean that up? No time. I would have to pack all of the 2 bottles of wine in the house and my clean underwear before train-hopping to the next town south (maybe Trinidad, near the Sangre de Cristo Mountains).

I lament the lack of images of Jesus forgiving Mary Magdalene, or Mary Magdalene washing his feet with her tears, or Jesus washing her feet as an act of empathy. I have been drawn to the story because it was heartwarming to learn that a sexual deviant could hold so much value in god's eyes. A Jesus that could bend absolute truth to include all, forgive all. However, his kindness or revolutionary momentum had been weaponized and exploited. Jesus became a reason to spend in December or a noble cause to excuse the decimation of Native Americans. His image had been plastered around the bric-a-brac in racists' homes, or his name was blasphemed on picket signs. Ideals that strayed far from the simple wisdom of the prophet. If we had met under any other circumstances, I probably would have had a beer with the guy. Nevertheless, I am sobered up by the thought that I was always the one searching for His approval, and not the other way around.

July 2015. I am staying at my uncle's home in Jalostotitlan. It is late and I am showering,

everyone is awake in the living room and I can hear the hum of conversation under the crashing sounds of my shower. There is an abrupt change in the air. A coldness or stillness takes hold of the house, and the hums of conversation cease.

muffled sound outside bathroom window

6 knocks on the door, someone yells for me to get out of the shower

I don't hesitate. I turn the shower off

distinct gunshots, far away

I open the bathroom door. "Get down, away from the windows." I hug the earth and crawl under a bed.

More gunshots, closer now

panicked breathing, heavier and worried and heavier

breathy prayers

truck rattles down the cobbled street outside house window

gunshots, here, now

invocation of all the saints, my lungs can not fill up enough to spell all of their names

Torre de marfil. Ruega por nosotros.

Casa de Oro. Ruega por nosotros.

wailing and gnashing

Arca de la Alianza. Ruega por nosotros.

Puerta del cielo. Ruega por nosotros.

Estrella de la mañana. Ruega por nosotros.

I forget about all of the transgressions and false impressions. I can only think of god, anyone who could divinely intervene. I thought about him before my mother. I thought about him for my mother, because of my mother.

Madre de Cristo. Ruega por nosotros.

Madre de la Iglesia. Ruega por nosotros.

Madre de la divina gracia. Ruega por nosotros.

gunshots, striking the fear of god

Madre purísima. Ruega por nosotros.

Madre castísima. Ruega por nosotros.

Madre virginal. Ruega por nosotros.

gunshots, shaking the house, impending

My aunt shuffles under the bed. I do not notice her trying to calm me.

Assuaging of fear, sounds like more prayers

Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo

gunshots, farther

Asking for forgiveness

santificado sea tu nombre

embarrassing pleas for help

Gunshots stop

Realization of dependence, maybe codependence

I retrieve myself from under the bed. A minor transgression of atheism, it is excused by the intensity of the situation. It was just something to do, to pass the time. Who would have thought the Cartel would be such an effective missionizing force?

Mapplethorpe created a series of works near the end of his life that consisted of black and white portraits of flowers set against the darkest, black background he could produce. Many of these flowers, including the lily, were flowers that were commonly found on altar arrangements. He captured a simple beauty associated with religion, images that demanded a silence or obedience much like the Catholic god had required. I regard this as a final token of peace to the religion. An apology. A display of gratitude. We learned ways to understand the world through god. Catholic aesthetics permeated his work, because we could not distinguish a blue sky from heaven or a deep grotto from hell. Our cosmos were arranged around an inexplicable entity. His final statements were portraits of flowers that could be found quietly contemplating on altar steps, even after it closed and the priests had gone home, and the candles were put out. In the darkness, when no one could witness, they worshipped, they worshipped, because it was all they knew.

The Yoke

Amanda LeJeune

My mother was a roamer. My father never roamed. His ethnic background as Acadian-French, his accent, and his schooling funneled his path directly into the only living wage a man could provide for his growing family of six children in the 1980s and '90s: trade-work. It enslaved him to a merciless cycle of grind and paucity for most of his life... an enslavement that I have seen leave many-a-disgruntled man in its wake for what it took from him. For when Eve was condemned to the bearing of children, that bull-shaped organ called her womb that would bear her pain evermore, Adam was, in turn, condemned to toil in labor...his existence reduced to that of an oxen. The fate of the bull.

Jimmy was a welder for an oil piping company who worked "six on and two off" or some other cruel combination that involved a sizable aluminum weld shop pitched and forlorn in the southeast Texas countryside. The field he found himself in for so many years had its share of stubborn and ill-treated hands that slowly and dreadfully exhausted the fuel from their barrels. Steers deprived of the use of their own numinous will and sense of direction. The shop had no air-conditioning. The large fans the company did place on the perimeter only blew the hot air through the workspace where the men could be found toiling, meat-hands slugging away on dog-legs. The after-thought was more offensive than the heat. It would have been better if they had pretended to forget about the temperature

than to stick such an ineffective Band-Aid over a gaping laceration. In the summers, the heat became so exasperating it was inhumane. The money itself was always "a dime wide and a nickel high." For over twenty-five years this is where he labored from either 3am to 3pm or 3pm to 3am. His home hours were diminished to much needed sleep and food so that he could restore himself for yet another round of work.

How he did it I will never know, but the effects of this sacrifice rippled through the lives of those whose sustenance depended on the misery of this caged and burdened body. The ripples reverberated like polluted river streams coursing under the old iron bridge at the edge of town. A current that twisted tides of both pain and gratitude through all of us... and that had to keep moving or die.

From the time I was a small child until I left home for good, I saw these ripples in colors. In fact, I always saw life in color. The rays of sorrow would solder through the window panes of our old house and somehow bathe our lives in blue. One image scorched into my memory is my father's jet black hair, slate blue eyes, and strong but slumped shoulders at the head of our table while the sun danced into twilight one evening around his fortieth birthday. The fixed look of sorrow on his face as he stared through the bluest of windows during my baby's breath teenage life, smelted me from ore to core. The desperate search for something innocent lost. The

internal rage of something precious taken. The anger was borne like the densest of sandbags that caused him to stomp when he walked—the kind of anger that could only lift in tragic displays within the walls of our small wood-framed house.

I cannot forget the iron he both mustered up into will and smashed into day after day. I cannot forget the heat on his clothes that nearly burned my skin when my brother and I would run up to hug him. I still remember the smell of dirt and metal and combined sweat. That was his signature smell. Over the years I would see him pace throughout the house, walking himself to the front door which had a small opening placed at the top of it. He would sometimes spend hours staring out the tiny window...a man and a fixed gait. You could feel the quiet desperation as he looked out from his prison cell. It was as if he was immovable, a bull permanently stuck in his thoughts, mouthing frustrations to himself... fighting through the delirious exhaustion. He was distant most of the time...unable to connect because of the ever-brewing anger and resentment. Yet after the red muleta had passed we could catch spare moments of his humor and softness which we would readily savor as children. Jimmy was a man under the full weight of the yoke with his mind as his only refuge. The most vital decades of his adult life were tragically distinctive and yet as Catholic as the church he rigorously prayed to for deliverance.

...a "golden arm" with a "poor fit-up,"

...a rig of burn rods that had been "alligator cut,"

...a "fish-eye" of steel blue that never cried.

Saint Joseph the worker was his favorite. The soil where we lived was so dark. Dark and fertile...like the lives we lived. It rained often,

so often that our summers were inundated in it. The pounding of the storms was the pounding of our hearts. The smell of salt in the air before the sky broke was the fragility of our hope and the anticipation that relief might come to us. We will have some alleviation, we can smell it. The weight of the fat drops of rain was the pestle in the mortar of the world that pummeled us into the soil...until we became the soil we toiled in.

And, yet, levity did come to us. It came to us in the most fertile and peaceful of ways...a way that evoked the old egalitarian way of life that depended only on nature for its sustenance. Like all good Acadians, we meandered out onto our porches with family when the sky finally fell and the rain came down. We slowly huddled to watch it, muttering the same phrases over freshmade coffee and either sitting in a lap or gently rocking in our chairs. "We need da rain"... "it's comin' down now, yeah..." Stories about weather, floods, hurricanes and such were always exchanged first as they were always the most memorable of shared experiences. This was our way of cultivating spontaneous family time. It was the time to tell stories that somehow never got old, to talk about important matters, to make clever jokes and to playfully goad each other on. These spontaneous little gatherings were where I learned that you're not true Acadian-French until you've learned that your truest inherited pastime was to hone your skills and wit—and become a fully-fledged professional bull-shitter. With flair. After all, that's what made life entertaining. If you could convey a story well, you were listened to with devoted adherence. If you could tell it while being a smart-ass...that made you a prized member of the family.

And so the thunderstorms carried

on. As children we always hoped it would last a little longer since we hungered for more stories and more time listening to the adults tell us about serious matters. We educated ourselves and grew from them. We absorbed their tone. We matured from the way they reasoned and recounted their experiences. We developed ourselves by witnessing with attentive quietude how the conversations were tilled and seasoned carefully by the adults as if they knew they were nourishing fertile soil. As the rumbles and mumbles continued, it drenched and enriched us, weaving that pattern in the family tapestry that only families know. From the deepest roots, those fundamental needs we all share, and in which the entire idea of family is there to serve...to the shoots of the tree, the little idiosyncrasies that make your family genus personally yours. My mother's inimitable laugh and unflinching declaration that she had "gypsy blood." My older brother, John, and his personal stories that made our sides hurt at what would have been the most mundane life events to anyone else. My younger brother, Theodore, playing his guitar and butting in a joke every so often—flawlessly timed. My oldest sister Jean's unapologetic incursion on the world, our ability to laugh at our sorrow, our ability to offer each other compassion rather than pity...and how we skillfully learned how to put the "fun" in the dys-fun-ction of our family circumstances. The secret we carried with us was that all of this proficiently honed bull-shitting wasn't just our way of coping or enriching ourselves with what we were given...but a way of shitting back on the bull.

In the small huddle of slowed time, a reaffirmation of values came into being that was beyond the yoke and its gruesome demands on us and on our lives. A herd that

relied on each other for survival had gathered in its congregation, declaring communal defeat of the beast. When the rain eventually let up, we would slowly retreat back into the house for more coffee...or whatever small leisure we had access to—revived somehow and grounded... ready to plow on. Yet, some of us could never hold the cruel weight of the yoke for too long.

My mother was a wanderer in every sense of the word. Despite the threats to her survival, she never allowed the beast to chain her. She simply could not bear its breath. If she were cornered in a windowless room, she would somehow squeeze through the peephole and become something else entirely to escape its rude demands on her unconquered, yet fragile spirit. She wandered in mind, in creative impulse, and eventually, from street to street. I suppose when a poet cannot defeat the beast by sheer will as my father tried to do, then the only other option is to resort to the wildest forms of creative abandon. Perhaps this was her way of attaining her freedom.

You cannot pin a moving bulls-eye. Life cannot emit suffering unto something that suffers itself unto life. I read that the bull has been with us since ancient times. I read that it has been both an object of worship, and a symbol of material power, along with its symbolic manifestations of servitude. The ancient Romans, after slaying their enemies in battle for example, would make conquered peoples walk under beams as a symbolic representation that they must now pay tithes and submit to Rome's authority. They called it "walking under the yoke." John of Patmos had a lot to say about the bull in all of its material power as the root of all evil. Given what I have seen and felt throughout my life I can't say I disagree with him. I think of my father and his

willful consternation in the face of his grueling life-long bondage. I think of my own life experiences of working two or three jobs since the age of fifteen for very little gain and few moments that edified or nourished me the way I needed to be nourished. Scrubbing floors and toilets, exhausted late nights, hours of awful Clear Channel music that should be classified as a mild form of insanity, soulless corporate environments that bound and stretched my personality into a caricature lest I be deemed “not a fit” and therefore “fired” (as if I always had the option to go somewhere else that would miraculously turn out to be completely different than their special set of dehumanizing corporate demands). I think of the environments that pull on all of us and provoke us when our sustenance could just as easily be gained in plentitude working alongside family and loved ones, tilling and enriching our own soil and educating ourselves in our leisure. Creatures cultivating goods, waged by their own hands, transforming them into profits. In fact, I say with all the satisfaction I can muster in my soul that I resent the bull with the most brazen of contempt. I relish in the molten ball of fire it has ignited in my soul that cannot be extinguished. For it has taken more from me and those I love than death ever could. I have seen it drag my authentic core through its mud. I have felt it stomp out the essence from me. I have smelt its shit. And so like my mother the roamer, I will creatively craft another path... one the illustrious beast cannot track or follow. And like my father, the welder, I will craft my metal carefully in this molten core. I will eye my oxygen levels, keeping my hands still and steady. I will muster my iron will to withstand the brutality of the heat on my burdened body, and you may watch me craft my swords with the utmost care. I will slay the beast in my

father’s honor. I will celebrate with my mother’s creative flair. I will not set myself fixed lest the beast catch me. I will learn and therefore adapt, lest the beast tempt me with its self-degrading conveniences and expedencies. I will enrich my life in ways the world has not yet thought of. I will nourish myself beyond the yoke with wit and poetry and so make it my servant. I will roam.

Horses or Zebras: Misdiagnosis and Self-Definition

Alex Sardanis

March of this year, 2019, in a rental condominium in East-Vail, I am seated on an L-Shaped couch—the ‘L’ part—facing my dad, who is sitting on the other end, sipping a vodka-tonic. We have been in Vail for five days, skiing and catching-up—we don’t see each other more than once a year these days. Roughly a 30° angle bisects either end of the couch, making our eye-contact less than straightforward, which I appreciate. The couch is faux-leather and perceptibly squeals when I shift into a more laid-back position. *Perhaps I shouldn’t have*, I think, while my dad begins recounting, in a morose tone, a series of events regarding my grandfather’s recent medical scare. In great detail, he describes how the best oncologist in New York misdiagnosed his dad with colon-cancer—he says it like that, *his dad* (he never does that). My grandfather, who lives in Zambia, in southern Africa, was unaware of his misdiagnosis and thus traveled the 8,000 miles back to Zambia with the blessing of his esteemed oncologist only to discover, mere hours after arrival in a third-world country, that something far worse, far more complicated than colon-cancer, was to blame. By the end, I’m leaning all the way forward. Dad’s crying, and I want to.

I first heard of *Occam’s razor* in a philosophy class; I wrote it on the corner of a piece of loose-leaf paper to be forgotten with a number of other marginal notes. The

¹ *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Occam’s razor.”

principle was initially stated by the 14th-century scholastic philosopher William of Ockham in the Latin phrase: *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*. “Plurality should not be posited without necessity.” It is more simply stated as follows: *of two competing theories, the simpler explanation of an entity is to be preferred*.¹ Interesting or obvious—I’m not sure.

Mid-August, I’m traveling to a physical therapy appointment by bike, which leads me to illegally cross some train-tracks to avoid a ¾ mile construction detour. I arrive at the Northeast Boulder warehouse one minute early, though the physical therapist I am here to see, Matt, will make me wait at least five minutes longer. Inside the warehouse, there are endurance athletes with serious, expressionless faces and lean frames using the alien exercise apparatuses that line the walls. It smells of sweat. Nobody wants to be here; being here means they are injured. My running-coach, Adam, tells me: *Matt is the best in the business, he’ll get you running again*. And that’s the exact thing I haven’t been doing, running. Three weeks back, I dropped out of a 100-mile foot race in California. I dropped out because I got heat-stroke at mile fifty, though my knee—the pain that I am here to diagnose—didn’t begin hurting until two days after, walking my dog on the beach in Santa Cruz, CA.

Matt welcomes me to lie on my back

on a light-blue massage table, then proceeds to torque the lateral (outside) of my right knee, the locus of the pain, in various directions with a casualness that suggests he does this for a living. At this moment, I trust him implicitly—he was, after all, partially responsible for bringing a friend of mine back from multiple fractured bones after she fell 200 feet off a cliff during a mountainous running race. I mention this connection. He tells me *recovering from broken bones is much more straightforward than what you're dealing with. Oh, I say, well, what am I dealing with?* He leads me to the far corner of the warehouse and places small electric nodes along my body. He asks me to perform a single leg squat, wearing the nodes in front of a camera. The exercise is awkward; I can't find my balance, and it's embarrassing—I'm a runner, not a gymnast. The video is pitiful to watch. My body's alignment is *not good*, he says, *you have IT BAND Syndrome. Syndrome*, I ask, surprised he can diagnose such a thing from two repetitions of an exercise I have never done. *You don't want to watch me run?* I ask. Syndrome sounds chronic. Deadly, even. *Shouldn't he see me run first, just to make sure?* He hands me a red elastic exercise band and, placing me before a mirror, asks me to perform a single leg squat with the band affixed to my knees, *with good form*. In three repetitions, I can do it more or less correctly. *So, it must be something else*, I tell him, *since I can do these exercises with good form*. *Nope*, he says, *this is caused by a weakness in your Gluteus Medius—you can't do anything until you make that stronger*. I pause to take it in—*nothing?* He prescribes me three sets of twenty reps for ten days and asks me to

make another \$150 appointment with his receptionist after that period.

The connection of Occam's razor to the diagnostic process is best manifested by this well-known maxim in the medical community: *when you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras* (dubiously attributed to Dr. Theodore Woodward, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in the 1960s).²

Though his diagnosis, *IT Band Syndrome*, may have been correct—it is the most common running-related-injury (read: non-contact-related—i.e. a meniscus tear) to the lateral side of the knee—Matt perhaps overlooked the possibility of nuance (such as a slight-hitch in my running stride, which led me to, over the period of ten years, accrue tens of millions of repetitions with bad form, severely damaging the underlying tissue and fascia). That is to say, he sought the most straightforward explanation and prescribed treatment accordingly. The diagnostic process of the *best* oncologist in New York bore an eerie resemblance to Matt's: he took into account my grandfather's age, late eighties, simply dismissing his ailments as symptoms of his pre-diagnosed colon-cancer, and told him he was fine to go back to Zambia for six months. The oncologist told my grandfather that he was old, but okay—he would live to walk the lush front lawn of his safari lodge, Chaminuka, for years to come (the oncologist was far more interested in Zambia than he was in my grandfather's condition, my dad told me). In most scenarios, this is my grandfather's death sentence. Those were tears of anger, my dad's. When my grandfather arrived at the

lodge—after a thirty-six-hour journey—he went into subsequent sepsis in a country without the medical knowledge to treat his specific problem, which was not colon-cancer at all, but a leaking intestine—literally leaking bodily discharge into his chest cavity, filling his lungs. Zebras, not horses.

After finishing my exercises on the tenth day, I take one step and feel pain on the lateral side of my right knee. Six out of ten. Same spot as always. No better, no worse. I email Matt to tell him as much and discuss the protocol moving forward. Simultaneously, I email John, a chiropractor that a runner-friend recommended to me in passing last week—she suffered from a similar injury.

John responds first by a long shot, within ten minutes (that's the kind of responsiveness I'm looking for when I'm desperate). Plus, he takes my insurance, so I have nothing to lose.

I arrive at the office complex they share with a small law firm, traveling again by bike, and enter a traditional waiting room with an array of self-massage tools and pain-relieving creams for sale on the wall to my right. He comes out to greet me, taking me back to his office, which has a mechanical table in the center and a counter, fitted with a sink where he has laid out several steel tools that look like they'd be more at home in the last scene of *Braveheart*—the disfigurement. Unlike Matt, who was a lacrosse player, John is a runner, training to break four minutes in the mile. I tell him about my high-school personal record, 4:19, to convey worthiness. Asking me to lie on my stomach, he lowers the table and reaches with both hands onto my hamstring. *I wouldn't even consider running 100 miles*, he says, conversing through various self-imposed interjections—touching a particularly tight spot and mid-sentence blurting out things like

oh, man, that spot is lit-up or I think there is an adhesion there. I nod like I understand.

I find myself revealing more than I expect to this veritable stranger. He uses what he calls *the Active-Release Technique*, leaning heavily into *trigger points* on my right leg with his thumbs, looking for *sticky adhesions*, scar tissue between muscle and tendon. Then he takes the aforementioned steel tools and scrapes the length of my quadricep until it turns bright red. I wince in the massage headrest, trying to keep the conversation going. He concludes the session in a typical chiropractic fashion: *face the wall, deep breath, exhale, crack!* He tells me: *nothing is really wrong, but everything is kinda wrong*. With the treatment he gave me, \$90 worth, he says I should go for a run. *A little pain is good. Necessary even*, he says. When I leave, I have an email from Matt in my inbox. I delete it. I haven't run in one month. Who is a runner who can't run? Short answer: a biker, sometimes a swimmer. An endurance junkie. I'm going for a run.

An international conference of surgeons happened to be staying at Chaminuka, my grandfather's safari lodge, at the precise time my grandfather was arriving from New York. On the first night of their arrival, at dinner, a French urologist introduced himself to my grandmother. She was in a desperate state; her husband of sixty years was unconscious in a Zambian hospital. A day later, the urologist was at my grandfather's side in an operating room, fixing the problem the oncologist failed to diagnose (for reasons that now seem disconcertingly similar to convenience). *It was a simple misdiagnosis*, the French urologist told my grandfather, professionally. *It almost cost you your life*. I take a moment to decide between twenty

² Hart, Ann M. "When You Hear Hoofbeats, Think Horses—But be Prepared for Zebras." *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2019.

pairs of running shoes. My brain turns into an Excel spreadsheet: which shoes have the least miles? The least wear? I lace up a pair of Nikes. By my estimation, they have six miles—one run, two years ago, I hated them. Only an hour since leaving John's practice, but still pain-free, I start down my block at a brisk nine-minute pace, turning onto the Boulder Creek Path, feeling alive for the first time in a month. The September air is temperate. My lungs burn. Two miles is something. I'm coming back. When I get home, I book another appointment with John.

Back on the mechanical table in the center of John's office, he tells me that I will probably need five sessions to get back to 100%. I trust him. Five sessions for \$300. *Your deductible is too high to go through insurance*, his receptionist tells me, taking my credit card. By the third session, the pain is a distant memory, and I rave about John to everyone I meet. One week after the first session, my dog, Storm, stares at me, tail wagging while I strap on his running harness. *We haven't done this in a long time*, his eyes seem to tell me. Out on the creek path, Storm sees a squirrel and the leash, tied around my waist, jerks violently—on the lateral side of my right knee, the pain is instantaneous. I hobble home, cursing Storm, knowing it was probably my fault. I email John and my coach, Adam. The email is dramatic, verging on hysterical. I have since deleted the evidence.

Adam suggests to me in a coded message that I should get an MRI—he tries not to worry me, but after two months of pain and no conclusive explanation, it is clear that more extreme measures must be taken. I receive a voicemail from my grandfather on the first day of October. He is alive and well, better than he's been in a long time. I'm happy for him.

When I enter the CU Sports Medicine Center that same day, his message gives me hope. I meet with a doctor, an MD, not a PT or a Chiropractor or a pseudo-anatomy expert on an online web-forum. She takes X-Rays, then sits me down on an examination table with crinkly sanitary paper and prods my knee. She leaves the room, comes back and says, *as far as I can tell nothing is wrong, why don't you explain to me what kind of treatment you're looking for?* I shrugged at the question. *Well, that's pretty much why I'm here*, I tell her. I explain my pain using all the anatomical terminology I have learned from my sessions with John: *Valgus-moment, Tensor Fasciae Latae, IT BAND, fourth epicondyle, sticky adhesions, glute-med exercises, etc.* She looks taken aback by my technical language. *You ultra-runners sure do your research*, she says, flippantly, as if it should suffice to settle the tension I am consciously creating. *On your way out, you can book a \$200-dollar appointment with Tim—he'll watch you run and tell you if anything is wrong.* I walk out of the room, but not before she prescribes me a high-strength anti-inflammatory ointment. On my way out, I do not make an appointment with Tim. I am going to be late for my 2PM Literary Analysis class, which is surprisingly upsetting given the fact that I actually have a doctor's note.

John is my rock in this healing process, despite my growing sense that his treatment is doing very little to relieve my pain—the root of it. The success I had with him at first has thus far been unreproducible. I am drawn to his practice for another reason. He explains things to me in a matter-of-fact way. Concerning *Occam's razor*, John is a firm believer in looking for zebras, not horses. Each week, he focuses on a different part of my body, trying

to figure out where the tension is coming from. *Tension*, he tells me, *is built up over years of repetition; once you hit that critical mass, things start going haywire.* Unlike my grandfather, there is little risk involved in this trial and error process, and he assures me, even after seven sessions, that I *will* get better. But this fact alone does not make the stakes seem any less dire.

I haven't run in two months. Who is a runner who can't run? Longer answer: perhaps he is no-one, waiting to become himself again, or perhaps he is something else: a blank slate poised to be rewritten. I worry about life without running, life without my superpower. Since my first run ever—three miles when I was nine years old—I have defined and redefined myself as a runner. Not just a runner, but someone who confronts physical limitations, pushes through pain, and finds joy in suffering. I don't understand a world without this eventuality.

Horses and zebras, as I have stated, are the medical terms we use to describe the number of assumptions going into a diagnosis. Horses require the fewest assumptions—when you hear hooves, you assume horses—they are the simplest explanations. Colon-cancer or a muscular imbalance. Zebras require more assumptions, although I'm unclear on how much more—when you hear hoofbeats in the United States, you'd be rather shocked to look up and see a zebra—they are the most complicated explanations. Ruptured intestines and sticky muscular adhesions, pain that verges on psychosomatic—could I really just be making this shit up? Horses and zebras are, then, quite useful in the diagnosis of who we really are. How we define ourselves. Imagine one hundred horses, then imagine one hundred zebras: is it not inconceivable

to say that by sight alone, one might come to differentiate between each zebra? That by coming to know each zebra's unique pattern of stripes, one could come to know them as individuals, as unique? And is it not, then, similarly inconceivable to say that by sight alone, one might never come to know each of the one hundred horses as individuals? That, due to their commonness, one would only come to know them as such—by their breed? When I call myself a runner, attaching my ego to that phrase, am I not in some crude way diagnosing my simplistic fate? Perhaps I could be a writer, too, maybe even a philosopher. Perhaps I could entertain a foray into the legal community—I do enjoy suffering, after all. Perhaps all these things are just horses, and we're zebras. Perhaps a *simple* misdiagnosis in the self-definition process is the most fatal of them all.

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