

*"We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory."*¹

I took steps into fierce, annihilating sunshine. Whereas the wind was a gentle caress, lavishing the leaves with tender kisses, the sun bore down on the world like a drunkard, like an angry man—intent on suffering, on being seen.

I squinted at the form in front of me. The poet Africa's instructions were to pay scrupulous attention, to grasp every detail with the fist of my eyes. How to do this? Gazed. Gnarled branches, the spray of twigs, an offering of rustling sounds to complement the noonday calm, its overall prodigious mass—undaunted, rising. I thought to myself: *The tree is a hand in praise.*

I sat down on a nearby bench. Opened the notebook. Flipped past my notes from the plenary session—"A Simple Strand of Love"; "Huqúqu'lláh: The Right of God"—discovering a blankness at the back. Took out a pencil. Scraped the brittle lead across the page.

The rasps of writing.

Sing.

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Having glimpsed, during a news reel on a submerged fishing vessel, the outline of a face in the surface of the sea,² a young Karl Ove Knausgaard responds to this terrific sight by

¹ Louise Glück, "Nostos," *Meadowlands* (Carcanet, 1998).

² Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family*, trans. Don Bartlett (Vintage Books, 2014), 7-8.

enacting a similar fiction. His eyes glazed over with tears from a verbal sparring match with his brother Yngve, Karl Ove sees

the room blur as though it had suddenly sunk and was now under water, and so real was this perception that I raised my arms and made a few swimming strokes as I walked towards the writing desk. In my mind I was wearing a metal diver's helmet from the early days of diving, when they strode the seabed with leaden shoes and suits as thick as elephant's skin, with an oxygen pipe attached to their heads like a kind of trunk. I wheezed through my mouth and staggered around for a while with the heavy, sluggish movements of divers from bygone days until the horror of the sensation slowly began to seep in like cold water.³

Notice the penetrative nature of experience, its visceral rawness: Knausgaard swims, wheezes; the cold seeps in, as though he really *is* at the bottom of the deep. Imagination, enacted so literally, voids the distinction between real and unreal, self and world. Experience enters the body of the child unimpeded, like water pouring into a glass. There is no barrier, really, between the infantile eye and what it sees, what it ingests. The soul is a mouth, and in childhood, our maw is open wide. What we incorporate into our bodies becomes us. Consumption as union.

This sensitivity is, as Knausgaard understands, lamentably short-lived: over time we close our mouths, we no longer gorge on experience; our taste, so to speak, becomes refined.

³ Ibid 17.

“As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning,”⁴ writes Knausgaard, older now. When he attempts to articulate the essence of the bereavement of meaning, Knausgaard again and again employs the metaphor of distance. “Understanding the world requires you to keep a certain distance from it.”⁵ “Knowledge is distance, knowledge is stasis and the enemy of meaning.”⁶ Time erodes meaning by withdrawing us from experience, producing distance. This distance, while protective, is spiritually expensive: we grow numb, our appetite diminishes, a weakness settles in. “That is when time begins to pick up speed.”⁷ We sell our souls to time, obey its every edict with poise. Time insists we eat aloofly, with fork and knife, with dignity and decorum, and so we do, obsequiously. Meanwhile, proximity is meaningfulness; the rediscovery of meaning demands we forget our table manners and eat with our hands.

Can we ever hope to do so? Is it possible? How does one unlearn the etiquette of remoteness? Is doing so not tantamount to turning back the clock, defying time?

The answer, as we read a novelist like Knausgaard, is literally staring us in the face.

Consider, for example, Joshua Rothman’s article “Knausgaard’s Selflessness,” in which he explores a curious liberty, a somewhat counterintuitive rejuvenation:

Knausgaard, in writing ‘My Struggle,’ hasn’t conquered his fear of his father; he’s done the opposite and recreated it. [...] In doing so, he’s brought himself back to life. That’s because, in addition to recreating that fear, he’s recreated everything else—beauty,

⁴ Ibid 11-12.

⁵ Ibid 12.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

sadness, frustration, anxiety, innocence, openness—which, despite its richness, was hidden.⁸

This obscuration, says Rothman, is a coping mechanism, a way of distilling our more painful experiences into digestible facts, meaningless statements. While it enables us to more or less survive the days, this subtle process “has a cost: the maintenance of such an idea requires that we simplify what we know and who we are.”⁹ Rothman compares this gradual, involuntary nullification of experience to a “freeze”—and, consequently, Knausgaard’s writing to “a thaw. We’re captivated because we’re watching a person of unusual sensitivity and intelligence get reacquainted with his life and himself.”¹⁰ Writing—and, consequently, reading too—is the torch with which we melt away the frosts of time.

Earlier in his article, Rothman argues that Knausgaard is seeking openness, that above all he is trying to escape a sort of spiritual “[c]laustrophobia.”¹¹ While true in some respects, I think the language of distance more helpful here—and curiously, the two analogies, while obverse, are not opposed. Indeed, as the article progresses, Rothman draws increasingly on the language of reunion to understand the project of *My Struggle*:

Knausgaard writes beautifully about landscapes, and he describes his inner life the way he describes a landscape, simply noting, with tender exactness, what is there. Using the same flat tone, he will describe the green mountainside, the tea in a cup, the feeling of fear. The inner and outer landscapes are united.¹²

⁸ Joshua Rothman, “Knausgaard’s Selflessness,” *The New Yorker*, 20 April 2016, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/knausgaards-selflessness.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

What is unity but an inseparable oneness, a radical renunciation of every distance? In Rothman's own words: "The goal of such a style is to be at one with the world."⁶ Knausgaard's writing endeavours to collapse the distance between ourselves and what surrounds us. By doing so, we repeal—if even momentarily—the ruinous ramifications of time.

Rothman's exegesis aligns well with Knausgaard's own understanding of the writing process. In an interview with James Wood, Knausgaard describes feeling "detached from almost everything" and "not in connection with the world—but in writing, I can be. That's a way for me to open a world up."¹³ Detachment, a lack connection; these imply distance, while a reacquaintance with life suggests reunion. Somehow, such proximity is vast. Somehow the freedom closeness affords is boundless. In this regard, Knausgaard offers a luminous aphorism: "Writing is a kind of ongoing struggle to renew the world."¹⁴

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Twisted by a slow and cyclical Life in the shadow of Time, it climbs high as it may, stretching forth—impossible—its very leaves triumphant because the Seasons cannot ever destroy what is as yet concealed within the Future's Deathless Heart.

The rasps cease; I look up. My tree sways a little in a renewed breeze.

A smile seeks me.

¹³ Karl Ove Knausgaard, "Writing *My Struggle*: An Exchange," interview by James Wood, *The Paris Review*, no. 211 (Winter 2014), www.theparisreview.org/miscellaneous/6345/writing-emmy-struggle-em-an-exchange-james-wood-karl-ove-knausgaard.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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Narratively speaking, Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* opens with a childhood encounter with death.¹⁵ When, after the crew of the fishing vessel have drowned, the ocean momentarily conspires to produce a human countenance, the lifeless and the human come together, combine in a horrible form. Their synthesis is only possible through death. Knausgaard, seeing this, is disturbed into imagination, enactment—an attempt to cathartically expurgate the lingering effects of this impression.

Middle-aged Knausgaard struggles against the sensations aroused by a similarly horrifying oneness; cleansing the house in which his father has died, he vividly recalls the impressions it once produced:

When I was a boy I had been afraid of this downstairs bathroom. The cistern, which [...] always got stuck and flushed long after anyone had used it, and the noise, issuing from the darkness on the floor no one used, which was empty, with its clean blue wall-to-wall carpeting, its wardrobe with neatly hung coats and jackets, its shelf for my grandparents' hats and its shelf for their shoes, which in my imagination represented beings, everything did then, and its yawning staircase to the floor above, always frightened me to such a degree that I had to use all my powers of persuasion to defy my fears and enter the bathroom.¹⁶

¹⁵ *A Death in the Family* 7-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 353-4.

Intellectualization did little, though, to mitigate the fear. Knausgaard says he “knew no one was there, I knew the flushing water was only flushing water, that the coats were only coats, shoes only shoes, but I suppose the certainty only magnified the terror, [it was] a feeling which the dead non-beings intensified.”¹⁷ It’s curious, paradoxical: Knausgaard fears being alone with the “dead non-beings” whose apparent aliveness is responsible for his fear. Notwithstanding the intervening decades, Knausgaard can “still recognize that way of perceiving the world. The toilet seat looked like a being, and the sink, and the bath, and the bin bag, that greedy black stomach on the floor.”¹⁸ This perspective disturbs him, so he searches for a way to “keep this feeling at arm’s length”—¹⁹that is, to maintain distance. Observe the adulthood psychology of self-narcotization at work—although, of course, it is in order to survive (the days).

Knausgaard is equally cognizant, as a boy, that the oceanic face is an illusion.²⁰ Nevertheless, the impression is too powerful not to possess its own force, its own truth; so Knausgaard tries in vain to communicate its urgency and importance to his father and brother, both of whom shrug him off with peevish disinterest.²¹

What explains this urge to communicate what one has seen, to get across the fact of astonishment to one who is not? “The moment the face disappears I get up to find someone I can tell.”²² If it is true that, to quote Charles Bukowski, it is a “sickness / which started him

¹⁷ Ibid 354.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid 16.

²¹ Ibid 10, 16.

²² Ibid 8.

/ typing / in the / beginning,”²³ I think Philip Larkin, in his poem “A Writer,” diagnoses Knausgaard’s ailment in characteristically crooked terms, concluding: “It was a gift that he possessed alone: / To look the world directly in the face; / The face he did not see to be his own.”²⁴ We see Knausgaard clinging to this perspective, terrified by the alternative—that the world’s face, the face formed by the sea, really *is* his own. To accept this as true would be to accept death—or, what is the same, the proximity of death to life—their oneness, even. It would require him to gaze at those living non-beings without flinching.

Returning to the morgue to observe his father’s corpse for a last time, Knausgaard is composed, sober, *unflinching*. “This time I was prepared for what awaited me, and his body [...] aroused none of the feelings that had distressed me before.”²⁵ Candidly, with the bluntness of a butter knife, he remarks that his father—dead now, reduced, made corporeal and nothing more—has become molecularly indistinguishable from the inanimate objects that surround him. “Now I saw his lifeless state. And that there was no longer any difference between what once had been my father and the table he was lying on, or the floor on which the table stood, or the wall socket beneath the window, or the cable running to the table lamp beside him.”²⁶ What follows appears, at first glance, to denigrate the human, to spit upon our lot. “For humans are merely one form among many, which the world produces over and over again,”²⁷ writes Knausgaard—dismissive, it would seem, of the human condition. We are *mere*, banal,

²³ Charles Bukowski, “about the PEN conference,” *The Pleasures of the Damned*, ed. John Martin (HarperCollins, 2008).

²⁴ Philip Larkin, “A Writer,” *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (The Marvell Press / Faber and Faber Limited, 2003), 159.

²⁵ *A Death in the Family* 490.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

continually (re)produced with the nauseating ubiquity of things like “sand, stone and water.”²⁸ Finally, this “Scandinavian Proust” turns his withering, desacralizing gaze on death itself: “And death, which I have always regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor.”²⁹ Death becomes once more a revelation of oneness, dissolving away the illusion of separation, of differences. Everything is the same. Knausgaard’s father is molecularly indistinguishable from an electrical socket. Our grief is shared by trees whose branches crack in a cruel wind. We are not unique; but we are also—and for this reason—not alone. Reunion—the very object of Knausgaard’s novel—is finally attained.

This is something that, as a child, Knausgaard intuitively grasped. For the child, everything is new because everything is one; and a glimpse of this truth materialized on a television screen compelled Knausgaard to seek out other ears, to tell his story. Larkin is wrong in this regard; the writer begins by seeing the world’s face as their own. Nevertheless, with time, the urge to suppress this insight produces an untenable relation with death; and only the artwork can resolve this, it alone can restore us to a vision of the world undistorted by time. In *this* sense, Larkin is correct; the erroneous dichotomy we perceive between ourselves and what surrounds us *does* produce the need to write. We end because we began. Compelled by a sense that the world’s face is not their own, that they do not belong, the writer ends by remembering that, in strange, disturbing, occasionally luminous, quietly uplifting ways, we somehow do. We know this once, as children. Really the struggle of writing is to

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

dissolve an ontological dichotomy accreted over time. Writing demands that we allow the sight of ourselves to proliferate everywhere, an abundant selfhood—a selflessness. The writer believes, at the outset, that Larkin is correct; but they end by remembering that he is wrong.

A Death in the Family ends when Knausgaard remembers this—when he learns to accept what, for the majority of his adult life, he has striven to deny. Knausgaard begins an unwitting witness to a macabre illusion and ends having understood the incidental truth enshrined therein. The novel’s concluding lines constitute an irrepressible echo of the oceanic countenance—an insight into horrifying oneness. His father is dead, reduced, made corporeal and nothing more; and the intervening years, the intervening pages, constitute the struggle to accept the darkling oneness. The novel ends as it began—it comes full circle, to an insight of innocence, to an understanding from before time was limpid and long. Death is the catalyst, for death is where being becomes non-being—where the two merge, dissolving together. Death testifies to the oneness of our bodies with the ground.³⁰ Properly understood, death returns us to the unwieldy genius of the child, the innocent candescence, the unaware glory. If, as Wordsworth wrote, “Heaven lies about us in our infancy,”³¹ then Death is a reacquaintance with eternity.

³⁰ Knausgaard, in *Inadvertent*, describes “the connections between the body and its surroundings, how teeth resemble small stones and the mouth a cave, how the tongue is attached to the floor of the mouth like a mollusk to its shell, how the moist orifices of the body are to the surrounding skin as wetlands are to adjacent dry areas” (30). The paradigm is all-encompassing, total: “That my identity, the person I am to myself, is interwoven with the world of things in such a way that it is impossible to say where one begins and the other ends, while my body is in a sense itself a thing, as finite as things and as limited, but also just as open, for water runs not only down through the soil, but also down the gullet, and the air that fills every room also fills the lungs, to say nothing of all the plants and animals we ingest and expel again when we have absorbed everything in them we can use—and one day the body too will take the final step into the world of things, becoming a thing among other things, like a fallen leaf, a stick, a mound, and go on existing as separate elements of a mute reality” (31). For Knausgaard, this insight “created a new connection to reality” (30).

³¹ William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed 4 April 2020, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood.

That Knausgaard articulates the novel's closing revelation through a string of metaphors is no accident. If the goal of *My Struggle* is to become proximate to the world, to renew a closeness that was lost through time, nothing does this so well as metaphor—nothing, that is, collapses distance so completely. Metaphor discloses a shared essence; it violates the reverence of differences. The endeavour of every metaphor is oneness.

When I wrote that poem five years ago, I wasn't writing about a tree. I saw before me something gnarled, a marvellous survivor of time's uncompromising paradigms. I saw the unlikely triumph of a thing cyclically everlasting. Above all, I saw myself; the tree and I were one in time, united through the ever-present threat of death. I think of William Blake's "To see [...] a Heaven in a Wild Flower,"³² which collapses together the sacred and profane realms through a single charged act of *looking*. "Auguries of Innocence" indeed: To prophecy the past is to insist that time can be undone. *My Struggle* does this. The novel repudiates the finality of growing old, of forgetting the ability to marvel. In other words, it auguries innocence. The message of Knausgaard's work is sharp and clear: Time cannot ever destroy the deathless heart.

³² William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed 4 April 2020, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence.