

New Poetry from Michael Chang



Friedrich Wilhelm Karl Kuhnert (1865-1926), "Bowhead whale."

the secret life of simon & the whale

the boy inches close to the water
barefoot backpack slung over one
shoulder
he plays with the sand dips his toes in
his name is simon
simon is my human
i quote mean girls: "get in loser, we're going shopping"
he giggles
he likes ranch dressing but sometimes the buttermilk is too
much for his stomach
he enjoys wong kar-wai's movies but would rather talk
about steven universe
when we play hide-and-seek he wants to be found because he
loves me
i take him to school he hums along to my songs but prefers
katy perry
we watch tv
i tell him how unrealistic the show shark tank is
he looks at me quizzically
we change channels then go to dairy queen
he doesn't say things like white whale because that is
derogatory
just like how we don't talk about sushi or climate change
he shoos screaming babies and barking dogs away from me
when we go to coney island we speak in russian accents and
fall over laughing
i ask if he has been following the news
he says someone is being mean to him at

what will we do when we're 200, he asks as i
wipe the tear from my face

fists of harmony and justice in 3 acts

i really believe in cities and
connecting people you say real
heartfelt

make me your nasty woman i say staring into your eyes

my intergenerational trauma is my parents live in
silver lake you say earnestly

mmhmm i say not objecting because
you are cute

so this is what it means to have a
moment of madness

you have come to the right place you have
so much to hide

perpetual war tell me your
secrets get me in trouble

obsessed
paralyzed the clerk will call
the roll

*

i regret to inform you that you will not be
home

in time for dinner with your wife no matter how often
she calls

you will put your phone on
vibrate then turn it off

to death : you have to buy our product to know what's in it :
we won't get into specifics : we don't want to set a timeline
on this : who gave you that information : we'll have to refer
you back to them : it's early days : this is going to be a
process that takes place over time : we were for it before we
were against it : there have been discussions : we will not
entertain hypotheticals : we are not going into tactics
techniques or procedures : this may be an iterative process :
that is above our pay grade : we want to stress that this is
pre-decisional : there is a plan but plans have to be flexible
enough to survive first contact : it may be OBE (overcome by
events) : we have not been given release authority : it is not
yet approved for action : we are on a conditions-based
schedule : all options are on the table : we will continue to
engage with alliance partners on a range of activities that
will ensure maximum lethality : please only quote us as senior
evil corp officials or persons close to senior evil corp
leadership : 9 out of 10 dentists choose evil corp : we are
your anger managers : very legal and very good : our revenge
makes us wise : let us look at you through our designer shades
: our product has been endorsed by kate bush : no, she is a
freshman at kennesaw state university : a real georgia peach :
we find your () faith disturbing : your lack of taste does
violence to our senses : your very being is inimical to our
existence : go somewhere else for that washer and dryer set :
bitch : we will take you to the cleaners : what do you love :
what do you hate : if you could live inside a tv show which
one and why is it lucifer on fox : who are you : what do you
want : we are on pace to find cadence : the quiet you hear is
progress : thank you for shopping at evil corp

october 6, 2019, remarks as prepared for delivery

i informed mister river barkley last night that his services
are no longer needed in my life. i disagreed strongly with
many of his suggestions, as did others in the administration,

and therefore i asked mister river barkley for his resignation, which was given to me this morning.

although i appreciated his jfk jr vibes and his assertion that his dick is his biggest muscle, he never did my laundry. he failed to deliver to me macaroons in every imaginable color or call me his pocahontas and he my settler.

he cast serious doubt on his intelligence by detailing the depth of his feelings in support of the vietnam war and the draft. the public was regularly informed of this.

his choice of veal over fish was totally inexcusable. i was equally appalled when i encountered tickets to mariah carey in his diary stained with sperm and electric blue ink.

he never recovered from the unusually loud guttural noises he made during sex. he was unconvincing when he said he loved me, often in a voice that suggested he was far away or underwater. his declaration that tulsi gabbard should win the democratic nomination was similarly off-putting.

he was unable to tell me how many planes are in the sky or if it is true there are more people alive now than have ever lived. he declined to feed me more jello shots despite our school motto *possunt quia posse videntur* (they can because they think they can).

he embarrassed me by getting into that fight with his truck and losing. subsequently he had his arm in a cast which stank to high heaven.

admittedly i will miss the firm underside of his thighs and the steady scaffolding of his sex. i am however comforted by the truth that nothing is better than breadsticks with the menendez brothers.

i thank mister river barkley very much for his service to our country and my happiness. i will be naming a new mister river

barkley next week.

thank you!

(don't pretend you're sorry□□)

acid taste like

He started seeing Sam everywhere.

Sam, who called him 'beautiful,' eyes like liquid smoke.

Sam, who stood perilously close as they poured the wine.

Strong yet gentle, blond-dusted hands.

Sam, who wore the plaid shirt, frayed khaki shorts, and beat-up loafers on their bodega run.

Chestnut-brown bedhead, cheeks rosy on their porcelain face.

The one he wanted to hold him, the one he hoped to make less lonely, the one he followed home.



Life was hard enough without a Greek chorus of Sams second-guessing his every move.

Haunted by his exes, he wanted significance.

He cried into his champagne, tired of questioning, tired of pushing back.

Acceptance sounded so good, like a drug.

Boy was with Girl.

Kind, inquisitive eyes the color of concrete.

Brown hair (of course) slicked back, shoulders firm, torso wide.

Girl freaking out, some low-rate drama.

Boy's body, a boar ready to charge.

Girl in the bathroom, Boy's expression softened—

Freed,

Granted a reprieve,

From performing masculinity.

Boy looked over, smiling as if he understood.

So tantalizingly close,
All he had to do was reach over,
Before Boy slipped back into character.

He imagined bringing Boy dinner, roast chicken and potatoes.
They would eat in silence, as if any stray sound might tip her
off.

Bellies full, side-by-side on the bed—
Striped pajamas,
Sheets that smelled like her,
Growing braver in the dark, bodies ablaze with feeling.
Skin, lips, tongue, there for the taking.
He raised a finger to Boy's lips and gently pried his mouth
open, inserting his finger.
Play it safe or swing for the fences?
Snatching Boy's receipt off the table, he felt a sickening
swirl of desire—
Like standing in the eye of a hurricane.
This little victory made him happier than he'd felt in a long
time.

Throwing up in that Waffle House, acid stinging his throat.
Outside for a smoke, his socks mismatched and his hair wild.
GO BACK TO CHINA, someone yelled, speeding past.
Possessed by cultural restlessness,
Always searching for a way in, a way out.

He decided that his favorite word was 'possibility.'
Even hope doesn't seem as surefire a thing.
Possibility is hope plus.
Nothing out of reach.
Maybe.

He unfolded the receipt, admired it.
CUSTOMER: SAM ____, it read.
He noticed the digits, the urgent scrawl.
Penmanship tight, compact, economical.
CALL ME, it said.

New Poetry from Edison Jennings

A Letter to Greta

"...so pitying and yet so distant," Cecil Beaton

Among my father's posthumous
flotsam recently washed up in my house,
I found a letter, postmarked 1928,
addressed *Miss Garbo Hollywood Cal*
(*Private!*), stamped RETURN TO SENDER,
sealed unread and stored for sixty years
inside its author's desk. Held to light,
the envelope revealed a trace of earnest
cursive written to a star flickered
on a million screens. I set a kettle
on the stove to steam the letter open
and expose the heart of this dead man,
once vestal boy, husband to three wives—
one widow, one dead, one faithless
(also dead)—fighter pilot with cleft chin
and good teeth whose friends had died
from too much war or too much booze,
who, if asked, what happens when you die?
would sip his drink and say, "you rot."
When the envelope at last unglued,
I found a time-fogged photo of a skinny
school-age boy standing contrapposto,
looking straight into my eyes. I slipped
the photo and unread letter back inside
the envelope, taped it shut, and late
that night went outside and burned it all

as offerings to a heaven of Gretas.



Greta Garbo, circa 1930.

<http://flickrriver.com/photos/26612863@N00/3432818194/>

Operation Odyssey Dawn, 2011[\[i\]](#)

See Naples and die, Johann Goethe wrote,
the deep-dish bay, smoke plumed Vesuvius,
the castle and the terraced hills, the fleet
at anchor, tended by a swarm of skiffs.
Gigs skim from ship to shore, filled fore and aft
with sailors, their paychecks cashed in lira
to spend on booze, tattoos, and prostitutes,
and reams of postcards they'll forget to mail.

At night the fleet is rigged with winking lights
and swings according to the wind and tide,
couched in swells of trough and crest, rocking
sleeping sailors above the sea scrubbed bones
of city sacking Ithacans who heard
the Sirens' hymn and never more saw home.

*[i] International military operation against Libya, including
elements of the American Sixth Fleet, homeported in Naples,
Italy.*

Dead Shot

Drunk or sober, but mostly drunk,
he had a knack for seeing
and a gun like twelve-gauge Euclid
to make the dizzy world cohere.
That he spent hours as a boy
splitting three-inch blocks his father tossed,
busting them clean with a twenty-two rifle,

one hundred, two hundred in a row,
is not explanation enough:
he became his sorry old man's trick.
Imagine this: a case of shakes, cross-eyed
from the night before, he'd shoot trap
and never miss, pump-twelve booming,
two discs shattered in one tick,
but never draw a bead on anything
that breathed, no early morning vigils
squatting in a duck-blind-too hung over
for one thing, and for the other,
his skill was calculating proofs
with rapid fire theorems as tangents
angled into exploding resolution—
until he drew one on himself.
At sunset he would drink and watch
the purple martins slice the falling light.
His last night he tacked a strip of tin
outside his room so he could hear the rain
rinse clean and clear the drunken dreams
in which he split the moon.

Chiaroscuro

for John Jennings

The muffled pull and puff of breath, the soft
insistence of his need, dispel my dreams
and I wake up as swaths of headlights sweep
my wife and child, composed into one shape,
gigantic night rebounding through the room
while they lie still, curled on the cusp of sleep,
mouth to breast and filling god with god.

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner

“So, you feel the earth rotating under your feet?”

As Specialist Torres grasped tightly to the doorframe of the CO's office, a litany of questions flashed before Captain Savalas' mind, least of which involved the earth's gravitational pull.

“Yes, sir.”

“That's why you're holding onto my doorframe?”

Torres struggled to keep his feet from slipping out from under him, “It's gravity, sir. I think I'm losing touch with it.”



“Levitating Man,” Andrew Spencer, <https://unsplash.com/photos/eY7ioRbk2sY>. Image at the Wayback Machine (archived on 24 April 2017)

Torres's gravitational issues manifested shortly after the Fiasco at Bunker Hill. Squad Leader Vogel opted to destroy the pillars holding up the roof of a bunker filled from floor to ceiling with artillery shells and propellant, effectively walling up the munitions in a concrete sarcophagus.

“Losing touch with gravity?”

“It's causing me balance issues, sir.”

“Try adding weight to your IBA,” Savalas said as he pointed at Torres's ballistic vest. “Increase your mass and you increase the force of gravity.”

As fate would have it, Torres had been selected to pop the five-minute time fuse on the bunker. Perhaps because of a faulty initiator, static electricity, even operator error, the charges detonated early, hurling Torres twenty feet into the air. Within seconds dozens of 122 mm rockets—initiated by the heat of the artillery propellant—soared through the sky, garnering the Fiasco title. His ears still ringing from the blast wave, Torres lay prone as the Grad's high explosive warheads pulverized the earth around him. Blaming himself, Vogel threw Torres over his back and ran half a Klick through hell, carrying him to safety.

Once back at Charlie Base the medics checked out Torres, confused about his inability to stand upright. With no visible injuries present, they recommended he inform the Company CO of his bizarre ailment.

After Savalas informed Sergeant Vogel of Torres's strained relationship with gravity, he radioed the combat stress team, requesting that an Army psychiatrist be sent out to Charlie Base. In the meantime, Vogel took preventative measures, adding as much weight as possible to increase his mass.

Vogel double checked Torres's IBA as he held fast to the bumper of a Humvee, "Two drums of 7.62 ammunition?"

"Check."

"Two drums of 5.56 ammunition?"

"Check."

"Eight M-16 magazines of twenty rounds?"

"Check."

With over one hundred pounds of weight added to his vest, Torres was little more than anthropomorphic armory. After taking a deep breath, Torres let go of the bumper and cautiously stepped toward Vogel. Unencumbered by a vest that

would cause even an airborne ranger to stoop, Torres's steps slowly turned into leaps. Then the leaps turned into jumps. Within moments Torres was bounding around the motor pool, mimicking the movements of a lunar spacewalk. Vogel's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe his eyes.

*

The psychiatrist arrived the next day. He took a seat across from Torres who clung tightly to the chair's arm rests. The psychiatrist stared at his laptop computer screen and ruled out every known ailment: post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, schizo-affective, obsessive compulsive disorder, even gender dysphoria. Torres was perfectly sane.

"Perfectly sane?" said a perplexed Savalas.

"That's right, Captain, but I'll need a second opinion."

"You declared him perfectly sane. Why do you need a second opinion?"

"Good question," the psychiatrist said, zipping up his laptop. "In the meantime, I'm requesting a physiatrist check for brain or spinal injuries."

The physiatrist was stationed miles away in the Green Zone. He informed Savalas that he'd arrive in two days. In the interim, Torres's gravitational condition took a turn for the worse. His bounds became increasingly difficult to control, and he was often seen jumping over the TOC and the derelict two-story building they slept in. Vogel added even more weight to his vest: two 50 Cal barrels, a pouch of satchel charges, and several bandoliers of 7.62 ammunition.

*

The physiatrist arrived as scheduled. He checked for everything: traumatic brain injury, herniated disks, stroke,

muscle and joint pain, even Skier's thumb. After a lengthy examination, the physiatrist informed Savalas that Torres's body was completely normal.

"Completely normal?" Savalas said, his brow furrowed into a perfect v.

"That's correct, Captain. However, I'll need a second opinion.

"You said his body is normal. Why do you need a second opinion?"

"Good question," said the physiatrist as he flipped through Torres's file. "In the meantime, I've requested that a physicist investigate his gravitational issues."

The Air Force physicist was stationed miles away in Doha. He stressed that the earliest he could fly out to Charlie Base was the following week. This minor detail troubled Savalas; he'd noticed a decline not only in Torres's gravitational issues, but in his mental health as well. After tying sandbags to his feet to keep him grounded—Torres became increasingly manic. He spent hours on the internet studying gravitational lensing, observational reference frames, and inertia. His mania became singularly focused on a planet named Gliese 876 d, a mere fifteen light years away.

Torres turned to Vogel as he escorted him out of the internet café. "Do you know that there are no wars on Gliese 876 d?"

The day before the physicist was due to arrive, Vogel burst into the CO's office. "Sir, it's Torres!" he said, struggling to catch his breath. "His gravitational condition is getting worse!"

Savalas followed Vogel to the motor pool where he was rendered speechless. Torres – with his four drums of ammunition, eight magazines, two 50 Cal barrels, satchel charges, four bandoliers, and several sand bags attached to his feet – was

bounding across Charlie Base at a height of 200 meters.

“Get a rope,” Savalas said pointing to a nearby post. “We’ll tie his feet to the ground to keep him from floating away!”

*

With Torres’s feet firmly secured to a post, the physicist arrived a day later. Standing beside a white board in Savalas’s office, he derived all of Newton’s Laws, including Lorentz transformations. With a board full of subscripts, superscripts, letters, brackets, parenthesis, and commas he concluded that Torres’s condition was mathematically unworkable, and therefore, impossible.

“Impossible?” Savalas said as he stared at the board full of equations. “Lemme guess, you need a second opinion?”

“Not at all,” said the physicist as he erased the white board. “Newton’s Laws are infallible.”

“So how you do explain him bounding 200 feet in the air?”

“Parlor tricks. But I must admit, his skills as an illusionist are superlative.”

Prior to leaving, the physicist agreed to ask an astronomer about Torres’s obsession with Gliese 876 d, a planet that – as far as the astrophysics were concerned–didn’t exist.

Vogel escorted Torres out of the TOC, his eyes focused on a large question mark Torres had shaved onto the top of his head.

“Why’d you shave a question mark onto your head?”

“Because I’ve found the answer to the greatest question of them all.”

“And that is?”

"Are we alone in the universe," Torres said with a placid smile.

*

The following morning Savalas received a radio call from the psychiatrist informing him he had overlooked Torres's flat affect—unusual given his gravitation condition. His conclusion was that Torres was suffering from schizophrenia.

"Schizophrenia?" Savalas said into the phone. "You said he was sane!"

"That's why I asked for a second opinion Captain."

Immediately after hanging up with the psychiatrist the psychiatrist called him on the radio. Struggling to form a coherent sentence, the psychiatrist briefed Savalas that he had misread his brain injury examination

"Traumatic brain injury!" said a frustrated Savalas. "You said his body was normal!"

"That's why I asked for a second opinion, Captain."

After hanging up on the psychiatrist, Savalas received a call from the physicist. Unlike the previous two conversations, the physicist reiterated that Torres's gravitation condition was mathematically impossible. But his obsession with Gliese 876 d was most confounding.

"There is in fact a planet that goes by that name in the Aquarius constellation, but..."

"But what?"

"It was discovered less than ten hours ago."

Savalas dropped the hand mic as the color drained from his face. He ran out of the TOC and noticed that Torres's rope, previously taut, was lying slack.

Standing motionless at the end of the rope, Savalas stopped beside Vogel. Both men stared at the four drums of ammunition, eight magazines, two 50 Cal barrels, satchel charges, bandoliers, and four sand bags lying on the ground. Torres had cut the rope fasted around his ankle.

Vogel stared upward, straining his eyes. "Torres... he's gone, sir."

"Gone? Where?"

"Space, I guess. Gliese 876 d."

Savalas sighed as he ran his hand over his closely cropped hair, "You think he's coming back?"

"Coming back?" said a bewildered Vogel. "Why?"

"If he's coming back I can write him up AWOL. Otherwise, it's desertion."

Brian Barry Turner's short story, "Gravity of War" originally appeared in [So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library](#) (Issue No. 7) and appears here with the writer's permission.

Knowing Your Father: DNA and Identity



“It is a wise child who knows its own father.”

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

Several women I know were stunned in later life by the discovery that the man they had long considered to be their father was not the man whose sperm actually fertilized their mother’s egg. Their pasts—all that they had taken for granted about their personal histories—suffered an upheaval, lifelong assumptions thrown into chaos, with a bombardment of new facts to explore and shape. Memories, experiences, assumptions became confused shards, any attempts to piece them together undermined by large chasms of ignorance.

In one case, the woman discovered through a long-withheld admission that her origin was the result of her mother’s one-night stand with a stranger. In another involving a close friend, the discovery emerged after weeks of pondering the results of an ancestry.com DNA analysis. My friend’s brother, two years younger, had mailed his sample first, just curious. His report came back that he was 43% Jewish and 50% Polish.

Perplexed, my friend agreed to be tested too, with the result of very similar percentages. She and her brother had always believed their families on both sides to be Roman Catholics who had originally emigrated from Poland. How could this be an accurate finding? The results also linked them to a young man in California. Through online detective work that included census data and a newspaper archive, she discovered that her biological father was the Jewish insurance salesman who had visited frequently to collect payment. The fact that he fathered two children clearly meant a long-term affair with her mother, not a drunken interlude. Eventually, my friend learned his name and saw a photograph of him. The emotional result was even more confusion and upset.

Heritage Erased: Dani Shapiro

The writer Dani Shapiro, in her mid-fifties, experienced a

similar shock, but with an opposite ethnic surprise. All her life she had considered herself to be the daughter of a man called Paul Shapiro and a member of a prominent Orthodox Jewish family whose lineage went back for many generations on her father's side. In fact, according to DNA analysis, she was only half Jewish, the people she had considered extended family for more than fifty years now questionable in their relationship, the culture that had immersed her only partly hers. Blonde, pale, and blue-eyed, she was used to being told, you don't look Jewish, and now she knew why. Rather from emigrating from an Eastern European shtetl, her paternal ancestors had arrived in North America around the time of the Mayflower.

When Shapiro finally accepted the DNA evidence, she was devastated. She describes the reaction in her book *Inheritance*:

I woke up one morning and life was as I had always known it to be. There were certain things I thought I could count on. I looked at my hand, for example, and I knew it was my hand. My foot was my foot. My face, my face. My history, my history. After all, it's impossible to know the future, but we can be reasonably sure about the past. By the time I went to bed that night, my entire history—the life I had lived—had crumbled beneath me, like the buried ruins of an ancient forgotten city.

Before her son's bar mitzvah, she had taken care to instill to him his heritage: "It felt urgently important to me, to make Jacob aware of his ancestral lineage, the patch of earth from which he sprang, the source of a spirit passed down, a connection." Yet now she had lost a fundamental answer to the question, "Who am I?" Who was she and where did she belong?

She writes: "Philosophers, who love nothing more than to argue with one another, do seem to agree that a continued, uninterrupted sense of self, 'the indivisible thing which I

call myself,' is necessarily implied in a consciousness of our own identity."

Existential Uprooting

For good or ill, even when tensions and alienations are deep, most people need to live with the conviction of being a member of an extended family and, in particular, being the child of a certain mom and a certain dad. That's where they came from, with all the biological, cultural, and historical baggage they carry through our lives. Even if they rebel against that heritage, they have a clear center, a distinct point of departure.

But what if those essential assumptions are suddenly wiped out after a spit into a test tube or a discovered document or an uttered revelation?

From an existentialist perspective—the assumption that we are thrown into Being—we seek the foundation of an identity, something with which to authenticate ourselves—roots. That term can be taken in its cultural connotation as well as its botanical metaphor—tentacles that position us in a firm ground. Dani Shapiro and the others were uprooted by a categorical discovery. After the shock, they were compelled to plant themselves into fresh soil and endure the bewilderment of a new cultural environment.

Beyond the personal, the existential dilemma broadens into a theological dimension. The philosopher-critic Stanley Cavell explores these implications in the introduction of his study, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. A follower of Cartesian skepticism, he interprets those plays from that perspective, explaining, ". . . what I have called the truth of skepticism, that the human habitation of the world is not assured in what philosophy calls knowledge."

Therefore, if knowledge—what we consider to be solidly factual—is undermined, we lose assurance of our place in the

world, our existence. If the knowledge of our father is discredited, our lives—to use Shapiro’s word—“crumble” through the loss of connection to something substantial outside ourselves. Cavell puts it this way:

A metaphysically desperate degree of private bonding, of the wish to become undispossessable, would seem to be an effort to overcome the sense of the individual human being not only as now doubtful in his possessions, as though unconvinced that anything really belongs to him, but doubtful at the same time whether there is any place to which he really belongs.

We don’t know where we belong and have to start from scratch to discover something to hold onto and affirm our identity.

Parental Divinity

Much more often than not, when we are young children, reaching the state of cogency, we consider our parents to be god-like figures who know and control, beings who will nurture and guide us, whom we can turn to for comfort when in distress. If not exactly worship, we regard parents with a kind of reverence. Even when we come to know their limitations, flaws, and failures, for most of us vestiges of that early-stage relationship linger at our core.

Jean Piaget, in *Child’s Conception of the World*, posits that “The child in extreme youth is driven to endow its parents with all of those attributes which theological doctrines assign to their divinities—sanctity, supreme power, omniscience, eternity, and even ubiquity.”

Cavell considers our notions of God as an antidote to skepticism, a basis of a kind of certainty that allows us to feel at home in the universe: “In Cartesian epistemology God assures the general matching of the world with human ideas of it by preserving it, its matching and its existence; in Lockean society God assures our general human claims to possession and dominion of the world by having given it to

us.” This notion of a divinity who created a world that embraces human needs offers great comfort. Disbelief threatens psychic upheaval.

That’s why emerging doubts about parental powers can undermine the child’s entire existence. Piaget cites his colleague Pierre Bovet’s quotation of Edmund Gosse’s reaction when Gosse first heard his father say something he knew was not true:

Here was the appalling discovery, never suspected before, that my Father was not as God, and did not know everything. The shock was not caused by any suspicion that he was not telling the truth but by the awful proof that he was not as I had supposed omniscient.

As a result, the loss of God or the certainty of God is a source of great doubt about our place in the world and our connection with everything that is outside us. Cavell writes:

But Descartes’s very clarity about the necessity of God’s assurance in establishing a rough adequation or collaboration between our everyday judgments and the world (however the matter may stand in natural science) means that if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is thereby shaken.

If Gosse considers his father’s flaw an appalling discovery, how much worse to learn that the man you had always considered to be your father was, in fact, not the man who had given you life and a firm place in the scheme of things?

Even if Shapiro did not consider her father a deity, she enjoyed years of devotion to him and to his memory after he was killed in a car crash. When a DNA test shattered her assurance in his paternity, her everyday crumbled. Cavell reached such a conclusion about the vulnerability of the everyday through a philosophy of skepticism, Shapiro–like my friend–through a personal crisis that obliterated long-believed knowledge.

Discovering the Biological Father

My friend knows little more of her deceased biological father than a name, a photograph, and some few details of his life and work. She still has not come to terms with her origins. Fortunately for Shapiro she was able to know and meet the man who had donated his sperm as a young medical student, now a retired physician she calls Ben Walden. They communicated and interacted personally, coming to like one another, Shapiro even befriending his daughter.

Shapiro, in her search, enjoyed many advantages the vast majority of people lack. She is a prominent writer, married to a successful journalist and filmmaker with exceptional research skills, connected to many people who can offer information and strategies, in possession of the credentials that allow her to gain access to physicians and theologians. She is successful and appealing. Privileged. Ben Walden and others in his family read several of her books. Clearly, she is a daughter any man could be proud of.

Yet her many attributes, as much as they helped Shapiro cope, did not shield her from the traumas of her origins. They did not answer the existential question of, Who am I? Really?

Never Knowing the Biological Father

Literally knowing her biological father makes Shapiro unique in comparison to the thousands of humans conceived through artificial insemination unlikely to ever know. Many, however, are trying. Today breaking anonymity and revealing the identify of sperm donors has become a complex legal, ethical, and medical issue, exacerbated by the emergence of DNA testing and the resistance of donors and sperm banks.

But beyond those aware of the mystery of their biological origins, there may be many thousands more who will never know the man they assume to be their father is not the man who engendered them.

Steve Olsen, whose article titled “Who’s Your Daddy?” that appeared in *The Atlantic*, suggests, “Widespread genetic testing could reveal many uncomfortable details about what went on in our parents’ and grandparents’ bedrooms.”

Speculation on how many people don’t know their real father varies. Olsen writes, “In graduate school, genetics students typically are taught that 5 to 15 percent of the men on birth certificates are not the biological fathers of their children.” Russ Kirk, in a 2011 posting, cites biologist Robin Barker, who reports in his book *Sperm Ward: The Science of Sex* that the percentage of surprise fathers ranges according to geography and economic status: “Actual figures range from 1 percent in high-status areas of the United States and Switzerland, to 5 to 6 percent for moderate-status males in the United States and Great Britain, to 10 to 30 percent for lower-status males in the United States, Great Britain and France.”

Embracing Uncertainty

While fortunate to be aware of both her social and biological fathers, Shapiro still struggled with questions of identity. Ultimately, she turns to the philosophical as an antidote to the psychological, ironically embracing a version of Cavell’s skepticism as the best solution to her dilemma.

She tells of receiving in an email from her biological half sister a passage from the work of Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist teacher and writer. “To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man’s-land.” These words come as yet another revelation, an answer that makes her particular dilemma just one extreme manifestation of the general human condition.

I had felt every day since the previous June that I now lived—exiled, forever wandering—in no-man’s-land. But the

truth was that this had always been the case. Any thought of solid ground was nothing more than an illusion—not only for me but for all of us. Those words: Completely awake. Live fully, sent to me by the half sister I had never known. I had strived for those states of being all my life, while a part of me slumbered. We will have been like dreamers. Now there would be no more slumber. You will be set free.

Days later, recalling Keats' notion of negative capability and the embracing of uncertainty, she experiences a further insight. "In this direction lay freedom, and, paradoxically, self-knowledge. By my being willing not to know thoroughly who I am and where I come from, the rigid structures surrounding my identity might begin to give way, leaving behind a sense of openness and possibility."

Many of the decisions people must constantly make through the days of their existence disturb the comfort of the nest, forcing them to live in a no-man's-land of ephemeral existence while they crave the certainty of an essence.

Most of those distraught over the uncertainties of their origin, however, lack Shapiro's intellectual and emotional resources. They are desperate to know their fathers and all the comforting certainties they want to believe that entails. My friend, while not as accepting of her circumstances as Shapiro, has—I believe—overcome the initial shock of the revelation. Possessing her own creative intelligence, after seeking more information about her biological ancestry, she has moved on, recognizing that she has become the person she is regardless of the sperm that engendered her. Yet, despite that degree of certainty, the deception gnaws.

Sources

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