

**Readings – Pain, Hospitals, Subjectivity and Empathy – Grammy – Anecdote as Measure of Wasted Space and Time –  
The Anxiety of Epigraphs and Collage – Milena: The Classically Trained Pianist:**

I've done a reading before, you know. A few years ago, I read at ATA. I remember that I drank 2 IPAs at the Phoenix before the reading began, I was so nervous. It was October. One of those nice October San Francisco days, and, most of my fellow readers read their stuff and then left, and by the time I read, most of their friends and family members had left too, and it was so nice outside, you could hardly blame them, just an hour of light left or so, one of those days the light cracked white around the heavy curtains white it's hot a day when Dolores street, its palms, its crowds, makes sense; and since I was all alone now, really, just me and the reading organizers, just one or two other people dawdling and heat and I go up and read, just as I am now, a story about an event in a particular place and time, taking deep breaths, and remembering to keep bending my knees, remembering to flex my thighs, to keep me standing, to keep from falling, and as I read, looking at these two people in the audience, I thought, that writing was and was not meant for this venue, this day, in this heat, with these people; I thought: the farce of emphasis: the italics farce; the farce of rapt attention: the eye contact farce; the farce of pausing: the throat clearing farce; the farce of comprehending: the bowing head farce. An indulgent feast? Was I being a pessimistic boy? But that's what we have to do, isn't it? Reveal something. Show some layer of something underneath.

I was a new hire in the ER when a man – a seeker, I was told – came in with pain. He'd already clocked in over 100 days that year – which I'd learn, soon enough, was not rare – and as I wheeled him to radiology, and he told me, told all of us again and again, that he was in pain, I told him, once I'd boosted him onto the x-ray table, and looking straight into those brown flaked irises surrounding his pupils, those rings, the few millimeters that reflect expand and contract, and that part of us within which all of our human empathy and compassion should derive – I told him that I was sorry, I said, but that pain was just a part of life.

Later, much later, I regretted saying that with such certainty, rather than asking a question - any question - about his pain.

My grandmother loved shows. Talk shows. Gossip shows. Silly shows she loved, so harmless. She used to do so many silly things, my grandmother. When she was a girl, in the 20s and 30s, she did little things like drink gasoline and lead pellets, like stare fixed for hours at the ground. Sillier things she did after my mother was born, my mother, who'd come home from school and encounter her, my Grammy, in various states of existence abstract and of discontent, bottles of gin on the ground, pink pellets like animal droppings littered throughout the house, and my grandmother, like some resting libertine fawn, her tawny neck at rest near the porcelain. And when she'd awake, my mother said to me once, there she was: sad and confusing, turgid, circuitous.

The last time I saw her, my Grammy, or, maybe it was the last time we spoke, her legs were swinging back and forth from the bottom of the hospital chair, another round of treatments, electric and obliterating, both through and behind her, and she'd begged us, that sad doe, to believe her. She couldn't move. She said, "You don't understand. I cannot move." It wasn't funny. Really it wasn't, we've told each other, my mother and I; but, of course, it was funny, and, of course, too, it's true: she couldn't move.

She loved watching golf, my grandmother, and Lee Trevino. We were both insomniacs. I used to stay at her home at least one night a week, for years. During the night, we both enjoyed old programs: Bewitched, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, The Bob Newhart Show, Newhart, Soap, I Love Lucy, The Lucy Show, Here's Lucy, Life with Lucy, The Andy Griffith Show, M\*A\*S\*H, Dragnet, Fraggle Rock, The Addams Family, Mork & Mindy, Growing Pains, Dennis the Menace, The Courtship of Eddie's Father, WKRP in Cincinnati. She used to hear me awake – for years I woke at 2am – come out to the room where I slept, turn on the television, and tell me she'd scratch my back until I fell to sleep. She'd scratch, some nights, till dawn, for hours on end.

Once, I was helping my stepfather do some gardening. We were checking irrigation lines, and doing some stuff like suckering unproductive stems off of vines. We'd left the water running, and I had worked down to the end of this row of grapes, and I felt a thorn or something in the sock at my right ankle, and I started to scratch at it with my left ankle. Then, I felt this thing again, this prick or pain, and I felt it in my left ankle too, and I, for a few moments, I remember how I was moving one ankle up against the other, trying to brush off these thorns, until I became aware of the sound accruing around me, this humming . . . and after I'd looked down at the dozens of wasps that were on my ankles, just packed around them, right above where I had flooded them out of their nest, afterward, I was complaining to my stepfather – I was counting the stings – and he said to me, but not without compassion – that that was just physical pain. You're never really in trouble, he said, with physical pain.

But what's the point of that story, really? It's just an anecdote, I guess. A little thing. It may be just a lot of wasted time, a lot of wasted space on the page. I couldn't really read, this one day recently, but I started grabbing books I own and looking at them, started looking at the epigraphs and letters to the reader, if they had one. The first sentence of a letter to the reader of *Albucius*, by Pascal Quignard, says that When the present offers little joy and the inevitable months ahead bring only the prospect of repetition, monotony can be avoided by raiding the past. In *Bird Lovers, Backyard* by Thalia Field, the epigraph in it is quote For my son who asked me, quote, What if everyone in the world wasn't nice? unquote unquote. I hated the texture of this book when I first got it and Milena loved it. It has this texture they keep doing with paperbacks now – it's kind-of soft and fuzzy, it kind-of gives me the chills, and it feels to me as though, like a peach, were I to press my finger into it hard enough, my finger would go right through the cover. Thalia Field's epigraph in *Point and Line* is by Wassily Kandinsky and says, quote, There exists still another force which develops not within the point, but outside it. This force hurls itself upon the point which is digging its way into the surface, tears it out and pushes it about the surface in one direction or another. The concentric tension of the point is thereby immediately destroyed and, as a result, it perishes and a new being arises out of it which leads a new, independent life in accordance with its own laws. This is the Line, unquote.

We were in the car listening to music from the 90s. This led us, giddily, to the internet when we got home. We wanted visuals. We weren't satisfied and we wanted more. Milena is from the Basque country, in Spain, and, she doesn't really know anything about music. Sometimes I think that this has something to do with the politics there – at least when she was growing up, (she was in one of the first class of students who could legally attend a Basque language school) – but it probably has more to do with her and who she is. Anyway, it's not her fault, but she knows almost nothing about it, really. Almost nothing. Even so, it's a long wandering route – what I want – what she wants – but eventually we land on Nirvana, and, after some hits, we start looking at videos from the Unplugged concert.

This was yesterday.

The show is from late 1993.

He dies April 1994.

Milena says he looks sad.

She's sitting across from me, at the kitchen table.

Look at him, she says; it's like he's in pain.

Then: How did he die again? she asks, an overdose? heroin?

No, I say.

No. Not heroin.

I'm indignant.

And, too, I'm excited to let her know. To tell her.

I tell her.

She's shocked.

It's all new again. She watches.

Yeah, she says, look at him. He looks hurt.

He looks like he's hurt.