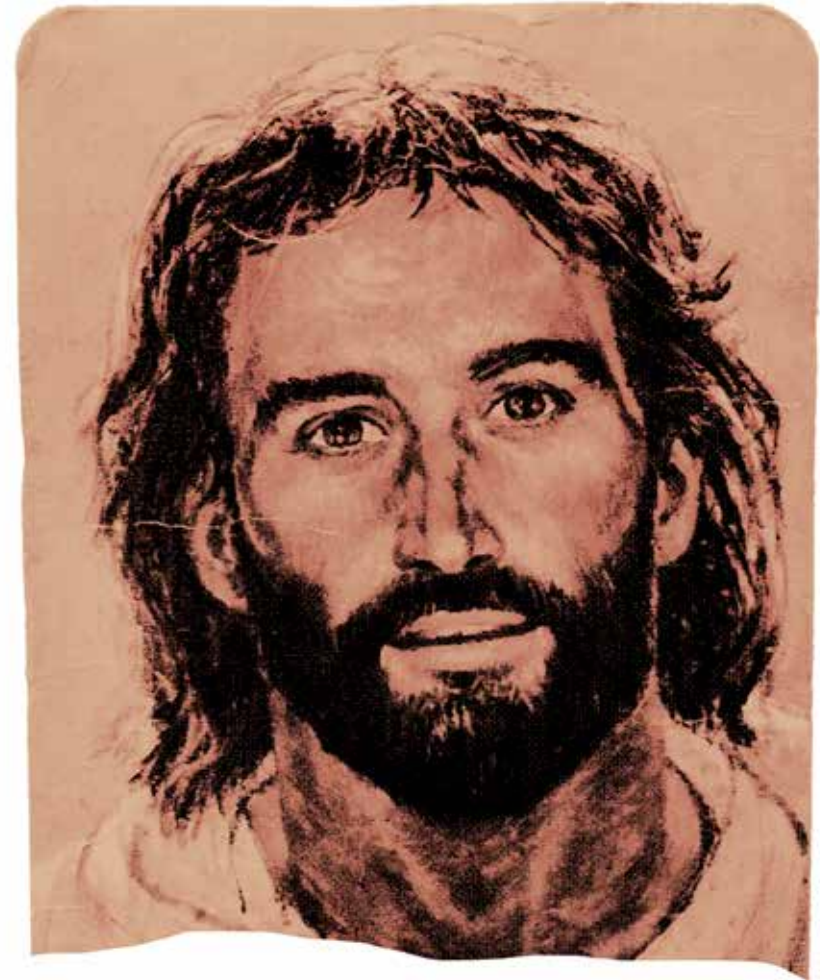


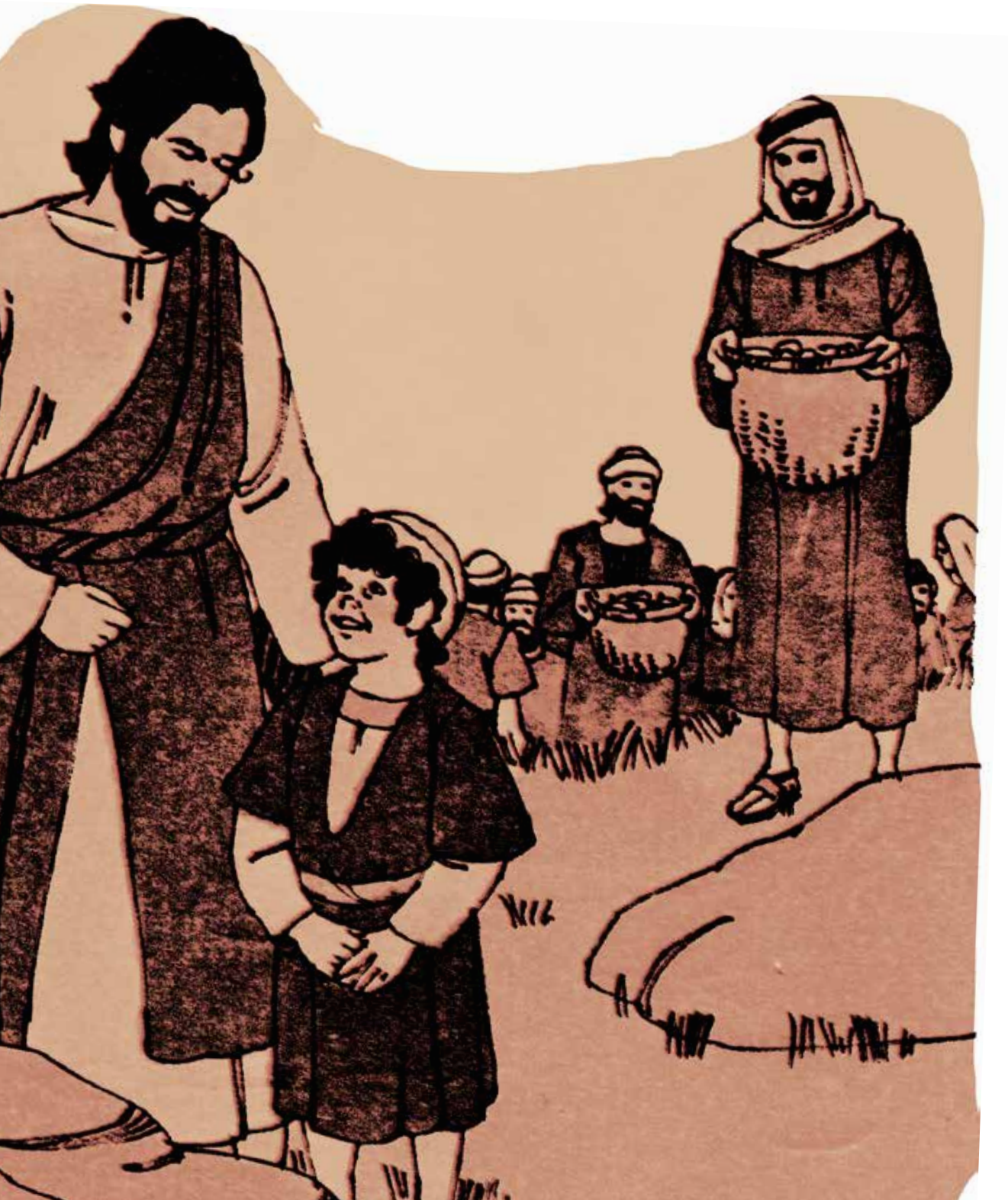


Aabc
defgh
ilmno
pqrst
· uxyz

WORDS AND FLESH



4.1 I AM SEATED at a polished walnut dining room table, fore-arms stuck to a laminate placemat, butt scooped up to the lip of the oversized chair, feet dangling above pale yellow linoleum. Around me are scraps of construction paper, crayons, and plastic safety scissors. My hand grips a peach crayon to color a square of skin.



HER DISEMBODIED VOICE is in my ears and my head; my mouth and my hands creating form from the sounds. “What does A stand for?” My voice sings out lists of words while my hands react with fresh marks for each letter. Early on, people thought the alphabet originated like this—letters given by God to Adam, or Abraham, or Moses; given by Allah to Adam but denied of the angels; written with a tusk by the Hindu God Ganesh, remover of obstacles.

MAKING THIS ALPHABET book with my mom is my first memory. We could see memories, and the alphabet, as having no hierarchy, but because one seems to follow another in order, we ascribe the power of ranking. A is first. B is second best. One’s initials stand out from the rest.

I HAVE REMNANTS of memories of several sessions spent making the thick post-bound album of laminated pages, and there are hints that I used selections from previously made drawings. But the voice I effortlessly hear hanging in the physical space between Mom and me, gently waving in the breeze of open air like a sheet hung over a clothesline to dry, is what I consider primary, to be first. Satisfying the fluttering voice is my only wish; I delight in realizing its requests.

RETRIEVING THE VOICE is easier now because a few times each year I hear Mom engage with Theo. There is a specific tenderness and cadence in her voice, forever intoned between my ears. Theo responds the way I must have responded, eager for the sprinkles of praise, as I must have been.

“SAY GOOD JOB!” I recall Theo demanding of me during a period in his toddler years, after completing some new task or another. He would say it with insistence until I responded in some way. “Say good job!” over and over again with growing urgency while I—consummate over-thinker—weighed the consequences of praise versus encouragement.

WHAT IMAGES DO I encourage in him? What encouraged me, at age four or five, to draw US Army men in green, one riding a tank and the other kneeling to fire a bazooka off the page, for the letter A? How did I know to depict the country’s military might for this vowel when I was still learning to write the signs representing sounds I had only been speaking for a few years? How did I know to draw and color a red, white, and blue American Flag for F? What cartoon history was I illustrating with these smiling Indians and Pilgrims for letters I and P?

I TELL THE STORY of making the alphabet book as my first memory, but its creation must have extended over days or weeks. I have certain earlier recollections: the skin of my knees and palms crawling on blue shag carpet; the skin of my legs stuck to Dad’s leather La-Z-Boy; telling my baby sister to put a pea-sized rock up her nose and the subsequent drive to the emergency room in the back seat of Dad’s Jeep, with him shouting at me to explain to her how to breathe through her mouth. But I say that making the alphabet book is my first memory because at some point I decided that the dominant narrative of my identity is that I have made and thought about books as far back as I can remember.





I GOT THE ALPHABET tattooed on my shoulder at a time of determinedly choosing a life of making and writing about books as art. By getting the abecedary inked into my flesh I was thinking of the living consciousness that is my body as a book being written for as long as its energy exists in this form. Considering only its shape and size in relation to my shoulder, I selected the particular graphic arrangement of letters from a collection of abecedaries, stone-carvings, and designs made over centuries. After peeling back the bloody saran wrap laid over the oozy black ink to show a friend, she asked, “Why are letters missing?” Mortified, I realized that until that moment I had honestly not noticed their omission. The contours of the idea of the alphabet inked into flesh had been enough. Like everything else I have ever made, barely scratching the surface did not give life to my body as a book.

GOING A TOUCH deeper, I later learned that abecedaries from different periods and places of course contained more or fewer letters than today. In the 18th century alphabet, the letters I and J were one letter, as were the U, V, and W. I learned how dominant cultures would prevail in the representation of sounds we call the alphabet. Abecedaries were often exercises for children to practice letter combinations and, when Christianity became dominant, Bible verses.

LOOKING MORE CAREFULLY at what I thought of as my first book, I now understand it as Mom’s abecedary, meant to teach me her deeply held Christian beliefs. Each letter is accompanied by a Bible verse and many are illustrated with the white, bearded Jesus figure of my childhood.

When I would tell the story of my first memory, making the alphabet book, I would joke that for J I drew Jesus as a peach square with eyes, nose, mouth, and mustache, inserted within a brown circle representing hair connected to a beard because these basic shapes were all I knew at the time to construct a man with a beard. What I thought was funny never connected. People who didn't come up as Christian must have required additional explanation of what I thought to be natural: J is for a white, bearded Jesus, C is for three crosses and a church with a steeple.

THESE DIARIES SEEM to ask repeatedly how what I newly learn gets combined with what is already incorporated to become a novel whole? An alphabet is a collection of letters representing single sounds. Any collection is defined both by what it includes and by its omissions. The alphabet book of my body vivifies an absence of J, K, V, and W. In my first abecedary J is for Jesus, K is for kite, V is "I love you," and W, a web.





4.2 “FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL...” I say to a white-bearded faculty colleague I haven’t seen for most of the summer. We pour our coffee and collect a scone made by Christine for the occasion of this first-day orientation and introductions. “It’s work for us, not school,” he grouses before wandering off to find a seat. I stand pondering why it feels each year that it’s me who is starting the graduate program that I have directed for over a decade. Because I too attended this program, perhaps I see the start of each fall semester as a memory of my own first day? Beginning a new academic year has always been a more exciting, yet dread-filled transition than I’ve ever experienced with the changeover to a new calendar year. I’ve heard it said that those who work in higher ed are afraid to graduate or, more generously, acknowledge there is no finishing point to education. As if on cue, the spell of my hexed thoughts is broken with the arrival of two first-year students, both nervous, pale-skinned young white men with manicured black beards appearing just as I must have fifteen years ago.

AND LIKE WE DID BACK THEN, people each give a ten-minute presentation on their research by way of introductions. An art historian colleague shares that she has recently been thinking a lot about beards and hiding. Every man in the room has a beard, myself included.

A CHILDHOOD FRIEND of my first wife asked her at our wedding reception why she loved me and her response was that I was everything she ever wanted in a woman, but in a man. It’s been over twenty years and I still don’t know what her explanation meant, but I think it makes me a beard of some kind.

ONCE, CHRISTINE AND I had a rescue dog that barked fearfully and backed away from me when I entered any room it was in. An animal behavior specialist, multiple dog trainers, and friends all suggested my beard interfered with the dog's ability to read my emotions and recommended I shave, though I didn't.

THE ART HISTORIAN'S thought causes me to freeze, stuck between fight and flight. Why is my response to become so emotionally unresponsive? Is it because the comment creates shame, making me question whether for years I have been trying to appear as something other than I am? In the moment, I wish to somehow shelter the bearded male students in the room from the comment, but I'm stuck without movement, without thoughts.

A FORMER THERAPIST once recommended that when I freeze like this I should study my hands: feel their weight on my thighs; observe the shape of each white fleck beneath the nails; follow the curves of wrinkles; appreciate the ring's contour; note the square thickness of the knuckles and the hair sprouting from them; see the beginnings of liver spots; recall the early-arthritis aches in the thumbs; recognize the "sissy burn," pressured into existence by three older boys who took turns pinning my body and holding my left hand palm down against a school desk while furiously rubbing its top with a pink eraser until an inch of flesh became a paramecium-shaped, weeping ooze that is now so faint in the epidermis as to hardly be a scar. The point of studying my hands is to un-blend from my eight-year-old self and recognize that I am indeed an adult man with an adult's capacity of understanding and action.





4.3 IT IS MY thirty-fifth birthday and as a gift Mom has mailed a notebook of her writings and some childhood photos of me. She went through all of her journals from early 1976, when I was in utero, through 1997, when I was a third-year college student, and transcribed every sentence mentioning me.

AMID MY PARENTS grief over the recent accidental death of my childhood best friend whose parents they remain connected to, as well as their acknowledgment that with this birthday I have now lived more years on my own than in their home, they have near frantically been trying to retrieve, relive, and reclaim earlier times to be assured of memories they feared lost, she writes. And “even if you can’t totally appreciate the value of every entry now, there may come a day when these words will provide a greater sense of grounding and help you know exactly who you are.”

SOMEWHAT DUMBFOUNDED by the gift, I stand in the inconvenient and uncommitted spot in the kitchen between a doorway and the stove—the place where I wait impatiently for coffee to brew each morning—to look the notebook over. I begin to grow contemptful of it as I stare at a photo of eleven-year-old me with braces and a Christmas sweater and think that this can’t possibly be me in the picture. I have consciously re-started my own narrative several times in the eighteen years since leaving my parents’ home. My central nervous system freezes at any affinity with the images and entries.

SKIPPING AROUND, I force myself to browse a few passages:

10-1-76 Tate was circumcised today, and I was sure I heard him and another baby boy screaming down the hall; I cried all morning.

6-28-78 Kenny shaved his beard and Tate wouldn't even look at him or have anything to do with him.

3-8-89 Tate stuck some of Kenny's pubic hair (from the bathroom floor) under his arm and showed us his "first hair" proudly—from a distance. He really had me fooled! He has a daily inspection for underarm hair growth.

I CLAP THE BOOK SHUT after reading that in August '94, the day my parents returned from dropping me off at college, my dad lay on my empty bed and cried for an hour.





4.4 LUBRICANT SQUIRTS from an opaque plastic bottle onto Christine's exposed abdomen.

"THAT'S COLD," she shivers, as the doctor plops the wand end in the liquid to begin positioning it for an ultrasound of the fetus.

"VERIFYING ALL the inflow and outflow tracts of the fetus's heart," she intones, starting her checklist of visuals as we sit witness to the green and black blobs expanding and contracting on screen.

"LOOKING FOR the spinal cord.

"FUNCTIONING lungs.

"NO BRAIN deviations.

"ALL FOUR limbs.

"TEN fingers.

"TEN toes.

"RULING OUT a club foot."

"VERIFYING penis," her inspection near complete.

"EVERYTHING LOOKS normal."

MY SHOULDERS DROOP and my back slouches, relieved; my tailbone slides down a few more inches toward the edge of the padded seat.

IT IS AS IF without realizing it, I have been holding my breath for sixteen weeks, ever since the pink plus sign first appeared on the home pregnancy test, awaiting to register the word I didn't know I had expectations about hearing—normal—and I finally exhale.

AS IF THE WORD AND SUM of body parts checked off now makes this person human: a somebody. Once I heard or read a poet who pointed out the word nobody is to exist without, to possess no body. For whatever, perhaps obvious, reasons the ultrasound makes me think of anti-abortion stances and discussions of fetal viability—politically, morally. There is a body with all its flurrying parts, I think while staring at the ultrasound screen. But it is a developing body that would not, could not, exist outside of Christine's uterus at this stage, therefore still nobody. Not a body on its own.

WHILE THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'm experiencing an ultrasound, it is not the first egg my sperm has fertilized. One time before, a partner had a positive home pregnancy test. Then we were both very concerned about the life that human and we might lead, if the fertilization continued to develop. We—though ultimately she, whose fertilized egg had implanted in her uterus as a scarcely registering part of her own body's totality—decided to stop that development process from continuing.

YET NOW, THERE ON THE SCREEN, is the evidence of what Christine's body has been doing these past twenty weeks to develop another body so it can one day exist on its own. Now I see the flutters of form and already start





to think of the questions with which this developing human body may wrestle with one day. Questions I recall another poet saying that parables and poetry were created in part to address: What connects me to others? What does it mean to be part of a family? What does it mean to be part of a citizenry? What does it mean to be complicit in something you may not always agree with?

AFTER THE WELLNESS CHECK-UP and ultrasound, we go to reproductive genetic counseling. I disclose to the counselor and Christine (for the first time) that our developing child is likely to have Dupuytren's Contracture, a congenital malformation of the hands that affects a layer of tissue under the skin of the palm, forming knots and thick cords that pull one or more of the fingers into a closed, claw-like position.

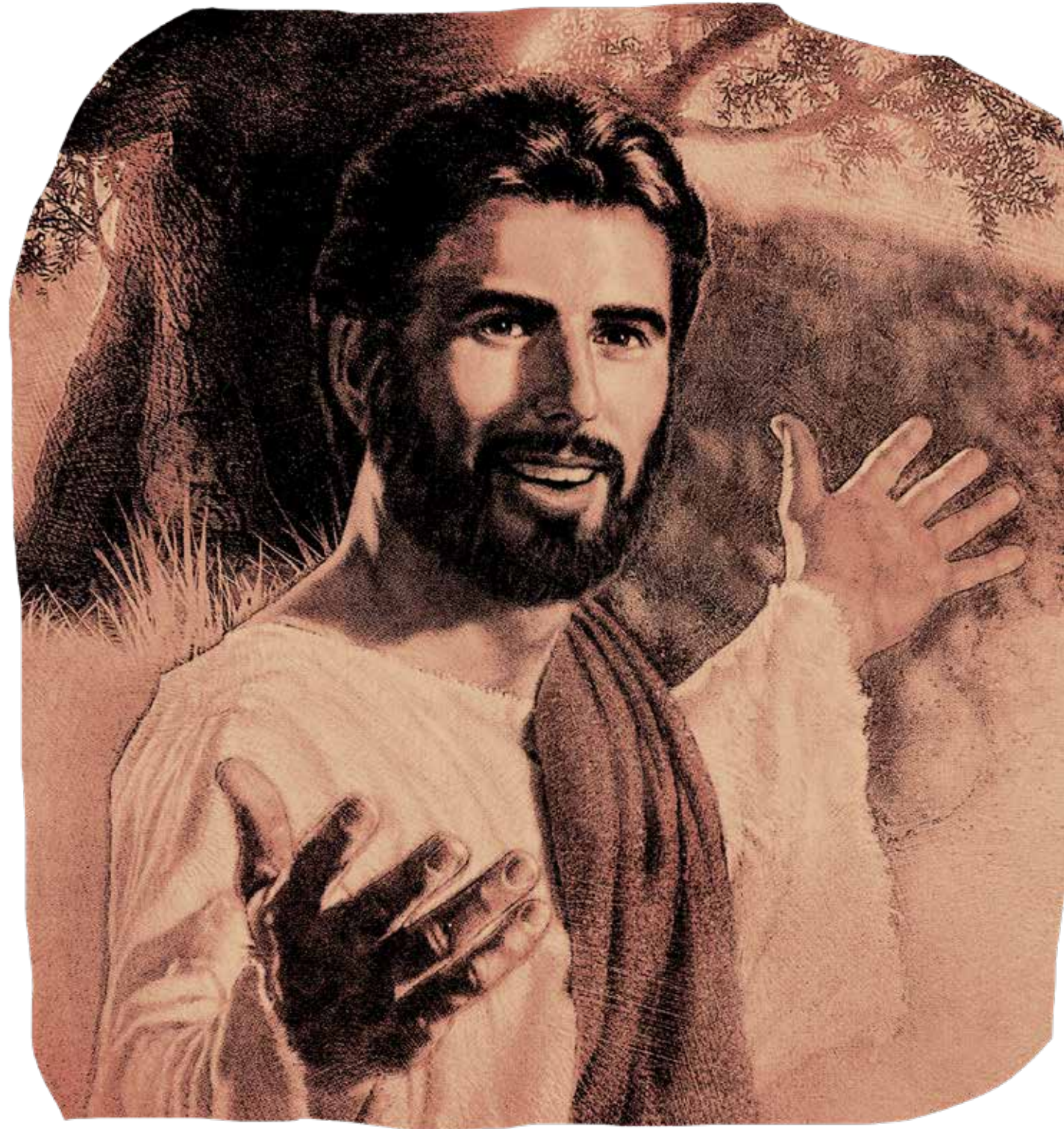
LOOKING UP THE DISEASE in her database, the genetic counselor makes a printout that explains what I already know: that Dupuytren's may be exacerbated by repetitive and vibratory tasks.

DAD'S LIFE OF HARD LABOR in the Navy, on construction sites, in wood shops, mechanical rooms, and garages probably contributed to his right hand becoming a claw. My paternal grandmother had a claw from Dupuytren's after a life of daily work in kitchens, and evenings rolling and cutting hair in a home salon. She had a surgery to correct her contracted fingers, the required anesthesia for which was thought by her children to be the cause of her sharp decline from early dementia symptoms to full-blown Alzheimer's (another genetic concern altogether). Despite reservations about the

surgery, Dad too committed to having the cords in his right hand severed so it could grip and clasp again.

IT IS LIKELY I have Dupuytren's too, but my own acts of labor—after starting out in restaurants, art galleries, and other mildly repetitive and lightly strenuous jobs—are mostly thinking, speaking, reading, and writing, due in large part to opportunity passed down by preceding generations' much more physically taxing work. It is even more likely that our developing child will avoid hard labor—generational growth of education, wealth, and the cultural privilege of whiteness being what they are.

AND WHILE that may be so, it is the disclosure of this family disease that gives me serious misgivings about the relief I experienced at the ultrasound and makes me add another enduring human question to the ones listed above: What body could possibly be considered normal?





4.5 MY HIGH SCHOOL girlfriend visited The Art Institute of Chicago museum and returned with a gift of a red souvenir t-shirt. On it were the signatures of dozens of the famous artists in the museum's collection. Thinking of the different screen-printed inscriptions recalls for me the childhood quest to establish my signature for my own drawings.

WHAT DID THE AUTOGRAPH reveal about me to others? What did it reveal to me about myself? I think of how most of Theo's drawings are both signal and message—performance documents, records of actions, encounters between characters, and things signified by a certain style of line or colors—all made while creating sound effects, humming, and dancing around, the notebook flowing from table to floor to couch. There is no separation of art forms in these full-body-mind drawings. He will occasionally want to sign one, but I've observed that it is only after spending time with boys who are two or three years older than him that he wishes to append his name.

AT THE TIME I was gifted the t-shirt, I had not made a drawing in several years. What drawing became for me as a kid—and what to this day, when drawing, I still have to work at wriggling away from to escape—is a loop of shame related to dominance. When the kids around me started signing their drawings in order to mark their territory and claim ascendancy, the potential for feeling unworthy arose simultaneously. Thinking back to this early self-judgment regarding drawing, and its lingering effects on me, I resent the kind of tyranny of self-narrative that resists my being human, which is to say a more collective than individual being. What do all these past events mean beyond the squaring of them with my

present or future self and therefore insisting upon limits of any evolutionary change?

WHICH IS WHY this moment in high school relative to the t-shirt and its masters' signatures stands out in my memory. Thinking of the t-shirt, I pull out a notebook and sign my name, as if making little curly-cue drawings, over and over again in a deeply attentive state.

THE MORE ATTENTION I pay to the meeting of the lines and the page, the more I feel my identity coming through. Not because of any of the letters I write, or their order, or my name and its meaning. Not because of my body-mind's deep knowledge of the fluid movements it uses to make my autograph. Rather, my identity deepens the more attention I give to things other than myself, like the variegated loops of black ink or the flare of a letter I didn't intend to widen out in a particular way.

MY IDENTITY DOESN'T depend on any belief I have in who I am; it depends upon the meeting of the things I think are me (as represented in my repeated signature and the drawings) and those I think are not me.

CERTAIN LINES, SHAPES, and marks I think clearly represent my expressed intention. Yet subtle details of the ink and paper I write upon react without my complete mastery and refuse to be transformed exactly as I intend. Every time I begin to make a mark, half of what is about to occur is unknown to me. When I feel there is a me that is real, it is because of my awareness of the meeting place between what I think is me and what I didn't control. The more I notice about what I didn't mean to happen, the more I let myself alone.

DOMINANCE DIARIES

PAMPHLET
SERIES NO. 4

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