Immortal For Quite Some Time: Part One

Scott Abbott, Utah Valley University
Immortal for Quite Some Time
(an excerpt)
Scott Abbott

I
Greek eutanasia, a saying for oneself: auto-eat - own - again; right
—The American Heritage Dictionary

July 23, 1991
425 W. Jefferson
Boise, Idaho

I’m Lila, a heat-drugged woman announces, edging her weight out of an overstuffed room into the hall. How can I help you? I see plain we are his family. He says she is sorry. He seemed like such a nice man.

We pick our way up two flights of wooden stairs. Lila’s key opens #41.

The battered refrigerator complains of the heat. Slick white mops swipe a thin layer of garbage under the sink.

A double bed crowds the bedroom. Sealed latex gloves top a trash can. Under them a desperate quartering of vomit. Then cigarette butts. A peach can. An appliance can. Six beer cans. Containers for aspirin, Amoxicillin, Alupent.

French doors open onto a tin balcony dominated by a single kitchen chair. I sit down, stretch my legs across two milk crates, and try to imagine him going across Jefferson Street at the gardens and white dome of Idaho’s state government.

Dark clouds bunch over mountains on the northern horizon. Torn cellulose vibrates on a broken windowpane.

A short piece of purple thread dangles from a needle thrust into the chair back. Under the chair stands a can of “Turpentine Re- placement paint solvent.” The words feel weighty. I repeat them to myself: Turpentine. Replacement. Paint. Solvent.

In the slope roofed living room, Christy holds up a cardboard box, the shapes of feet cut out of one panel. Jill finds greasy work shoes lined with new cardboard.

A WC-2 form tucked into a Manila envelope reports his total wages for last year as $15,235. A cash register tape lists his groceries: a case of Heineken, a six-pack of Olympia beer, a bottle of Listerine, two bars of soap, a can of apple sauce, and one of peach jam.

We shove his things into plastic garbage bags, carry the bags down the stairs, stuff them into the van.

A hunched man and a pregnant woman approach from the sidewalk. Are you the family of the deceased? the woman asks. My husband was the one who went into the room and found him. The café called the paramedics here and asked them to check why he hadn’t come to work. My husband helps take care of the place, so he went up. It’s the second one he’s found.

A woman Mom’s argan-gray hair, white shirt, blue skirt, and apron—is putting salt and pepper shakers on tables. We tell her who we are. She beams into trays. Ted, a big man in suspenders, sits us down at a table.

He worked for me regularly for two years. Sometimes he slept in Saturday mornings. We’d send a waitress to wake him up, and he always came right over. One night he asked me for a hundred-dollar advance on his wages. The next day he walked in with flowers for all the waitresses. That’s the way he was.

We leave the café and drive to a mortuary. A mortician offers condolences. I say I would like to see him. He explains that most family members, especially after an autopsy, find it better to wait until the body has been worked on. I explain that I need to see for myself and follow him downstairs. The smell of pizza and the sound of laughter from a side door. Three bodies lay out on tables. The mortician points to a plastic bag on the corner table. I pull open the folded plastic. Don’t touch him, he warns. His face is drawn. An open eye peers upward. A scruffy growth of beard and mustache. The sagging jaw reveals uneven teeth.

My teeth.

From shoulder to shoulder, down the chest to the hips, a surgical Y. The top of the skull has been sawn off, then replaced. Severed locks of hair litter the forehead.

I stand before the body. It is unrecognizably present. His feet are livid.

II
Those who want to approach their own burned� paul must ... not be afraid to return again and again to the same facts; to bring them back as one street earth, to rest around them as one rock around in earth. ... Broken lines from all water associations, the images stand as precious objects in ... our later taught.
—Walter Benjamin

July 22, 1991
American Fork, Utah

John died early this morning. A Boise coroner called and asked Mom if she were related to John Herbert Abbott.
July 23, 1991
American Fork, Utah
Driving west across southern Utah, Jim’s husband, Mike, points to the Snake River Canyon between Twin Falls and Jerome. A long time ago, he says, a car crash split it apart. See how the sides fit perfectly. Some say it happened at the time of the crucifixion.

We eat breakfast at Mountain Home’s Great Jammer Restau-

rant. Suddenly the thought of John lying on a coroner’s table. The autopsy was scheduled for nine.

4:25 W. Jefferson
Boise
In John’s apartment we find two pink “Patient Copies” from the Physicians Immediate Care Center. The first is dated July 9, 1991, 9:23 A.M. The second July 18, 8:32 P.M. They both list the following information: Sex: M. Date of Birth: 06/31/31. Age: 46. Home Phone: 345-4804 (message). Address: 425 W. Jefferson #11. Em-

ployer: T&A Café.

On July 9, the attendant reports a productive cough (yellow-
grey), post-nasal draining, chest tightness, very weak, S.O.B., X 2 who. Arms and legs go numb, onset 1 month, last time he had pneumonia one side of body was numb. Exam: Hi IC, W: 150; B.P. 116/74; Pulse: 90; Temp. 100.6; Resp: 32. Current Medica-
tions: ASA; Allergies: N/KM; Other Observations: smoker 2 pack(1) per day, pneumonias 3 X in last 3 or 4 years.

The physician states that John’s arm goes asleep if he lies on it. Legs still go numb if he sits too long in one position. Lasts for a few minutes until he shakes it out. Patient denies shortness of breath. Coarse breath sounds and prolonged expiratory phase. Given 2 puffs Alupent and clearing of coarse breath sounds. Bronchitis with possible bronchospasm. Amoxicillin 500 mg. Alu-


The second report, nine days later, says that John lost 20 lbs in 12 weeks, no energy, short of breath, headache, lost appetite, chills. B.P. 118/94; Pulse: 80; Temp. 98.6; Resp: 28. New current medi-

cations are aspirin, Amoxicillin, and Alupent. Seen last Tues.
given the Dr of Bronchitis, started on Amoxicillin. States he forgot to

eat and lost 20 lbs. Has heavy ETOH and heavy tobacco 2 ppd. De-

nies homosexual activity. O: RRBBR.

The cost this time is $14: $50 for the exam, $104 for tests and a chest x-ray. Nearly two weeks’ salary. John wouldn’t go to the doctor, Ted said, until one of the waitresses insisted and went with him.
We find John’s car a few blocks from his apartment. His keys open the door. I try to start the car. It’s a young man in a shirt and shorts comes out of the house. We explain I: know him. I’ve been watching the car for him.

I’m sorry to hear about him. Would you like to sell the car? I could come up with maybe $500. He goes to get another car and jumper cables. By the time he returns, I had decided maybe $450 would be a better offer. The car starts right up. We agree to meet in an hour, when he will bring us $425 in cash. We buy old sodas at a convenience store to combat the heat, and an hour later we add the $425 to the $210.12 in John’s wallet. And John had a $350 life-insurance policy Grandpa Hilton gave him when he was born. Aren’t we blessed? Mom says.

Used-car dealers in the face of death.

Decisions of style, syntax, vocabulary. Does this literature mourn-
ing draw me nearer to John or distance me from my brother?

I look back at “Romany,” at my first attempt to tell this story. When I described to the T&A Café where John worked, I said that “we” sent in, that “we” spoke with the owner. But the truth is I remained in the car while Christy and Mom went inside. I didn’t want to talk with anyone about John. I didn’t want to talk period. Still, I wrote “we” and reported what my mother and sister told me. Great fate.

July 18, 1991
American Fork, Utah
For John, for a man who put cardboard inserts in his shoes and borrowed money to buy flowers for waitresses, we bought a beau-
tifully crafted casket of Carolina poplar.

I drove to a clothing store to buy underwear and socks for John, then dropped them off at the mortuary along with a beauti-

fully feather belt I inherited from Grandpa Hilton. The mortician

Benjamin, six years old, walked straight up to the casket and
pulled at one of the unkempt buttons on John’s coat. The white

uniform represented John’s skill, his creative ability, his disci-
pline. It also bore an unsettling resemblance to the ritual robe

and hat that accompany temple-going Mormons into the grave.

Unlike the bishop’s earnest promises of a reunion in an after-
life, my再度-American friend Alex’s “Funeral Instructions”
give me something physical to chew on:

1. I came in naked, let me go naked
2. Wash me like a baby
3. It should be a simple rectangular box
4. Leave the eyes alone
5. Breathe on the face so I can hold fast to the wind
6. Imagine the beating of earth upon wood is yet another heart.

In another poem, Alex writes that he enjoys “reading the bi-
ographies of suicides. I start at the last page and read back to
before the thought ever came up; back to the child with the big eyes
who can’t tell the difference between the cloud and his own head.”

In the grass by Grandma Abbee’s back steps, another John

and I have yet identified himself as the image in a photo or as the one in the mirror. The thought of suicide is still impossible for us. Leave the eyes alone.

Abbee: Immortal for Quite Some Time

July 28, 1991
Owen
The tiny bluish-colored can of Emergency Drinking Water among
John’s things was for that horrible moment, perhaps, when there
was nothing stronger in the house. During telephone conversa-

tions with Mom, John routinely promised he would quit drinking and get more education. His calls to me were often fortified by al-

cohol.

I don’t get drunk. Nor did I call him.

John phoned Mom while he was still in Houston where he most likely contracted AIDS. He said he was in trouble, that he needed $400 or he would go to jail. She sent him a check immedi-
ately. Then she got a call from a man who said she had filled out the check improperly and that it couldn’t be cashed. Would she

send a new one? She did. And someone cashed both checks.

How much I don’t know about my brother.

July 31, 1991
Owen
In the afternoon sunshine, John’s death certificate glows bright

green on my desk.

Never married.
Sex: Male.
Autopsy: yes.
The sun transforms the books on the north wall into an or-
dered riot of colors.
The coroner told us John had never tested positive for AIDS.

Otherwise his name would have been in a national database?

I remember squatting next to a Colorado wheat field with my

father and grandfather. There had been a drought. Between my

little hands, I separated wheat from the prickly chaff. A puff of

breath left only unidentifiable, wisened grains on my palm. We

stared across the fields, and my grandfather said: Needed rain
the first week of June. Dad nodded and chewed moeroa on a wheat

stalk. A month later, after a merger harvest, I played hopscotch in the

warehouse, jumping from unbelievable heights into what seemed to me unending hills of grain.
Small thunderstorms sweep discreetly through the valley. Benjamin struts by, swinging a plastic basket filled with beetles. The horizon to the north is high and close, spectacularly drawn by the sharp, sure peaks and ridges of Mount Timpanogos.

On the radio this afternoon there was an interview with a Utah AIDS patient, surprised but philosophical about the drastic changes in his life. We all, he said, feel immortal for quite some time.

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Spurred by John’s death to gather these fragments, bits of photographic and syntactical memory marshaled like Maxwell’s imaginary demon against entropy, my pen is drawn, I am drawn, into indelible territory.

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Note


“Take No Thought”

Adam S. Miller

They call it Christianity, I call it common sense.

—Emerson

You’re going to miss it. You’re distracted. Sit up straight. You’re not paying attention.

God does not come and go—your attention does.

All sins are just variations on that same desire to do something else when you’re already doing something. Multitaskers are children of the devil. You can’t serve two masters. Divided attention is just dress-up inattention.

“Hear, O Israel,” the Shema begins, “the Lord our God is one Lord.” (Deut. 6:4) But are you one? Or do you keep getting stucked, splintered, and spread by every distraction that wanders by?

Put your phone away. Recent studies agree with Jesus. In their distressing 2009 paper “Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers,” Ophir et al. found that heavy media multitaskers (or HMMs) “have greater difficulty filtering out irrelevant stimuli from their environment.” They are “less likely to ignore irrelevant representations in memory.” And they are “less effective in suppressing the activation of irrelevant task sets.”

Do multitasking tasks remind you of anyone? Do you know anyone who can’t filter out irrelevant stimuli? Do you know anyone who keeps getting sucked down black holes of memory and fantasy? Do you know anyone who can’t suppress the impulse to do something other than what they’re supposed to be doing?

Hmnn. Do you know anyone who does? In this description?

Such is the human condition: unable to filter stimuli or shut impulses, everyone sins. “There is none righteous, no, not one”