

# In His Own Image

Jeff Landgraf

I am another man's autobiography. From all his thousands of moments he picks just a few to write in a book and these moments are mine. If he loses the impact arising from the sheer accumulation of events, he steals it back by choosing exaggerated moments serving exaggerated purposes. The events he leaves out are the small details he doesn't think matter, but they are the reason why my memory is spotty and diffuse. Some days I feel so alive that I could choose to lift the earth and spin the globe on the tip of my finger. Other days when I lay down in my bed at night I know not even whether I rose that morning to meet the day. It all depends on the omissions wrought by this man with the pen whose life I live.

He writes our life just a little worse for me than it was for him. When his wife left him, my wife left me. The anger threatened to overtake him, but then he rose to the comfort of practical tasks. There was a house to sell, an apartment to find, legal documents to sign and some complexities in his tax forms to attend and finally it was over. So he wrote, and so I lived. But it was only the beginning for me. I am the victim of his pen. It is his pen that turned her betrayal to the icy bite of steel twisting in my gut. Yes, those are the words he used, "The icy bite of steel twisting in my gut." For him it is only a poor metaphor easily written. But has he any idea how it hurts? For me, these internal lacerations are no metaphor. This agony he writes is my truth. If he would give me the words, I would hate him. I share with him even his own name, and look what he is willing to inflict upon me.

It is not easy for me to distinguish the events of my life from the events of his. How am I to know if he lies? I can only guess, arguing from the plausibility of internal evidence. He hides the knife cleverly behind a disease. He calls it Crohn's disease. He says it is an inflammation of the small intestine. He says the walls of the intestine swell up until the passageway is blocked. He writes in his book that he suffers and so I suffer whether he lies or not, but I am inclined to believe him for he hates the disease as much as I do. Who would not? Only someone who likes nausea and vomit and barium milkshakes and the piss they make you drink before every colonoscopy. But no one likes to shit their pants. No one likes to lose control of their own body. No one likes the mix of terror, embarrassment and disgust. No one likes the mess. No one likes the pain. If the man with the pen suffers even a fraction of the distress he gives me then I understand why he writes. And if he must write it then I say write. But I pray to him, "Please sir, leave off your metaphor. Leave off the icy bite of steel twisting in my gut. How does it help you to make me to suffer even more? Have some pity for me. I am your autobiography and I beg you to stop."

Fifteen years. Fifteen years of the icy bite of steel twisting in my gut. Were there no moments but pain? No kisses? No love? I have only one clear memory, sparkling in the haze from before she left me and before she was my wife, when we were simply in love. "Do you know what your problem is?" she asked, and then with a crooked smile she answered her own question, "Not enough kisses." But there must have been a few even if he did not write them down for me. There must have been some happy moments, for he could not have survived a single night of this pain without something to reinforce his will. If the pain did not kill him, he would have taken his own life. I would have, and

gladly had he but written it and yet I survived and thus so did he. My choices are bound to what he writes, but his are free. If he survived, it was his choice and it can only be the influence of these unrecorded kisses. Imagine, these kisses that made his life worth keeping are, of all things, the small details he chose to omit.

He did not choose to omit the fistulas. After witnessing the affliction on my own body even I can not believe the story the he wrote was true. I have no thoughts but for what his pen records, yet I do not believe. Did he invent the Latin word, *fistula*, just to make it seem more plausible? The inflammation, he wrote, erupted to form secondary channels. Channels of intestine formed with no function but to spread infection throughout my body, first to the bladder, then to the skin and finally to pierce through the abdomen. Could logic ever explain how some quirk of nature might reroute the anus to the belly button? No, I have caught him in a lie. This can be nothing but the physical manifestation of the image of the stiletto through my body. It is some morbid metaphor of his that could only be served by the image of shit seeping from my belly into the gauze bandages I used in a hopeless attempt to staunch the flow.

I thank him for his lie, for now at least I can begin to distinguish myself from the man with the pen. He tried to ratchet the pain even higher. But how could he, having already pushed the icy bite of steel twisting in my gut to its ultimate conclusion? The pain he chose to add was from the red welts inflicted by the tape holding the bandages. The raw skin stung from the ripping tape, but this too was my victory. It was only skin. It was only surface pain and if anything it served to distract me from the icy bite of steel twisting in my gut.

And yet, I hear his thoughts as my own when he writes them in my head. He struggles to compose his life. He has chosen the shape of love eclipsed by pain. The shape was once expansive but now it fades. However, the promises of chance and hope still stir for him. He is only able to deny me their ambiguous thrill and even he is not always strong enough to keep life from intruding on his theme. This is how he came to let a woman with her face flushed with life escape on to the page. Although she disrupted the story he chose, she was my only hope, for love drives away evil exactly as light drives away darkness and what is pain but evil instantiated in the flesh? When she placed her hand on my sleeve I wanted to draw her lips close and steal a kiss. If I was slapped down at least I would be a participant in my own story. But the man whose autobiography I am took his pen, and instead of drawing her lips to mine, he drew only my spinning thoughts and trembling muscles. He says she does not fit into the envelope he composes for his life. But again, I have caught him in a lie. It is only my life he composes, for no man composes his own life but this man who writes me as his autobiography invents a shape for his life and as his life it is false and he knows it, but the shape he invents is the true shape of my life for I am nothing but the words he writes. And so he creates me as a perfect image of his own cowardice.

I wish I could ask him why he chooses this shape and not another. I don't ask for a better life, but only to remember the good with the bad and to beg for the justice of an unscripted future. Although his life is new each day and it goes on, his own autobiography is a document too dreary to contemplate. There are no kisses. He loses interest in his own story, so he finishes me. I am unable even to hate him for confining

my hopes within the pillars of his thought. I have no strength to resist, for I am only words printed on a page. I am another man's autobiography.