

EDEN

PETER JOHNSON

“What’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and ain’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?”—Huckleberry Finn

I AM 22 YEARS OLD AND IT does not seem patently absurd that my degree in English from New York University should qualify me to teach beekeeping to subsistence farmers in Latin America. I have an abiding sense that the world is fundamentally unfair and that the modern enlightenment—of whom I am a newly christened member by virtue of my college degree—will play a key role in overcoming deeply entrenched systems of structural inequalities, institutional racism, and economic exploitation.

Peace Corps officials have made it clear to me that it is not essential that I have any real agriculture experience. What is essential is that I have a college degree from an institution like NYU, where I have learned to identify all the surreptitious injustices that typify the development of western civilization.

And, upon further reflection, I find that it is not so hard to make the case that my university education had, in fact, prepared me for the difficulties of life in a developing country. Hadn’t Jacques Derrida’s jaded post-modern critical theory prepared me for the world’s depraved indifference to the poor and marginalized? Hadn’t *Grapes of Wrath* and *As I Lay Dying* given me a nuanced understanding of the hidden causes of rural poverty? Hadn’t *Walden* shown me that the trappings of modern western culture could be shed like the heavy chains they are? Yes. Yes. And definitely yes!

Plus, I have spent four years in New York City cultivating what I consider to be the unflappable, urbane, world-weary persona of someone who cannot be shocked by any amount depravity. Surely this *weltanschauung* will help me cope with the devastating poverty abroad.

Peace Corps officials concur. I am deemed thoroughly competent and they waste no time assigning me to a village in Paraguay a few hours from the Brazilian border. When I arrive, beaming with munificence, my host family informs me that they have no place for me to sleep.

I am welcome to crash on their kitchen floor, they explain.

It takes me approximately three nights to hate my host family—and, by extension, pretty much everyone in the village.

I move into an abandoned shack on the outskirts of the village and immediately befriend the worst street kid in the community—an 11-year-old boy named **Éden** who has a solid reputation for stealing, drinking, and smoking. I teach him to play chess and he gets pretty decent. Not good enough to beat me, but good enough to keep me from being bored. We play late into the evening, eating beans, cheese curds, and hard yucca rolls that are only palatable when soaked in bean juice. I have this idea that **Éden** is Huckleberry Finn and just doesn't know it yet.

We listen to pirated American music on CDs that I bring from the capital. He loves Eric Clapton's 70s rock-blues stuff and Tupac Shakur. Sometimes **Éden** follows me around the village, saying "thug life bitch" to locals as if it is an innocuous American greeting. They don't know any better. I try not to laugh; it is our way of giving a secret middle finger to all of them.

At night, over beans and chess, he gives me his pariah's perspective on the intricacies of village politics. The evangelicals vs. the Catholics. The landowners vs. the squatters. The cotton buyers vs. the cotton growers. Sometimes he whispers because he knows that there are spies.

"You won't hear them," he whispered in Guaraní. "The *pyraguës*." The people with hairy feet.

I have learned this common term in Paraguay—a holdover from the totalitarian Stroessner era, when people were "disappeared" for holding views that contravened the government. The spies are clever and so quiet it's like they have hair on the soles of their feet. The existence of *pyraguës* is a widespread belief and I am regularly accused of being an American spy whose main goal is to steal the *agua dulce* (fresh water) from Paraguay.

Éden isn't wrong. I sometimes hear people walking around outside my little hut late at night. I figure they're just nosy or curious or casing the joint for when I go on my monthly trip to the capital. I keep a machete next to the door just in case.

I pay **Éden** to stay at my house when I go into the city. He tends to my rabbits and horse—keeping folks from burglarizing my shack while I'm out of town. I am told that he walks around the village bopping his head to a beat no one else can hear, my Discman in one hand, headphones over his ears, making the village kids jealous. It makes me smile to think of **Éden** doing this when I'm away.

A big, bald, heavily freckled, blue-eyed Okie missionary named Brad Word tells me about all the eschatological horrors for which I must be prepared. On a wall of his home he has meticulously arranged a cluster of detailed charts. I don't have the heart to challenge his interpretation of current geo-political events. I have told him that my mother is Jewish and he thinks I am, too. He likes this about me because the Jews play an important role in the apocalypse. He feels like he needs to talk about this every time he sees me—as if it is the only link between his life and mine. He does not know that I don't have any faith.

I'm fairly certain that he is nearly mad. He's been in Paraguay for over a decade with a tough, rail-thin wife and a throng of blonde children, all of whom speak Guaraní like natives. I endure Brad's theological rants because he has great stories—when I can get him to tell them—about roaming all over the wild Paraguayan countryside and planting churches. About contracting tropical diseases, about Nazi refugees, insular indigenous tribes, modern slavery, brothels, cattle rustlers, and murderers who prefer a knife to a gun.

He lives at the end of the pavement in a small city called San Juan Nepomuceno. My village is another 42 kilometers by dirt road. When it rains the buses don't run and I sometimes find myself stuck in San Juan. All the Peace Corps volunteers know that if you're stuck in there, Brad is the best entertainment. Plus, he'll let you eat his peanut butter and American cereal.

I ask Brad if he thinks that the end of the world will happen during my lifetime.

“Within *my* lifetime,” he says without pause.

I try to steer him toward stories about missionary work, but he's not interested. He is all worked up about the end times and I am thoroughly bored. Before long I am lying about a meeting I have that evening, trying to get away so that I can go drink beer at a local hotel.

I've eaten, like, four bowls of Frosted Flakes and two peanut-butter sandwiches, so I feel obligated to take the book he thrusts at me: *In Pursuit of God* by A.W. Tozer. I hate the books Brad gives me—all poorly written evangelical screeds by folks who are obsessed with sin. I can barely endure the sanctimony, but I usually skim them because I like Brad and I don't want him to know just how insane I think he is.

That evening I drink beer at a dumpy hotel and ignore the proprietor's flirty daughters. I can't believe I am enjoying the Tozer book. It is not like Brad's other books. Tozer is a mystic, writing in stream of consciousness. Whimsical prayers break up short passages about divine mysteries. Allegories are borrowed liberally from antiquity or from Milton—updated, or not, as needed. Motifs of eternity: sky, sea, universe, love, consciousness, over-soul, rapture, dread.

I read the whole book in one sitting. I'm a little drunk from sipping beer all evening and I lumber to my room, but sleep doesn't come. I rummage through my backpack until I find a ballpoint pen. In careful, neat letters, I write on my arm:

Self is the opaque veil that hides the Face of God from us.

Tupac is rapping about whether or not heaven has a ghetto. The evening cool seems to have pacified every creature in the village. Édén is beating me at chess and gloating about it. He has skewered me twice—with moves I taught him—and it is hopeless for me unless he blunders. He has never beaten me and is chattering nonsense in excitement. I counter using the *Zwischenzug* principle: moves where I nullify his attacks with attacks on more valuable pieces. But he catches on quickly and has begun to develop his own *Zwischenzug* strategy. I haven't even taught him this tactic—unlike me, he has no word for it—but it is clear that he already understands the principle.

We have our own Guaraní vocabulary for chess and I try to think what we might call it.

“I see you have learned the *Luisom* attack,” I say to him in Guaraní. The *Luisom* is perhaps the most terrifying creature in Paraguayan mythology. It is a dog that was cursed by his divine parents and died, but he continues to hunt in the night as a sort of undead werewolf. I have been told not to go to the village cemetery alone because *Luisom* might pass between my legs, turning me into the fearsome creature, too.

“The *Luisom* attack?” Édén whispers, as if the creature might come if it hears its name.

“Yes, your attack,” I say gesticulating as if we are fencing, “was like the *Luisom*. You have taken a curse and countered it with an even greater curse.”

Éden spots the words written on my arm, which have been smeared from the day's sweat. He asks me what they say. I look down at my arm, as if in surprise, but I know exactly what it is. The words have been staring at me through Éden's mischievous eyes all night.

Éden would not understand direct translation, but his eyes have removed the veil from my own.

I look at the pieces on the board and back at Éden. He senses something about the moment and his smile fades. That's the thing about street kids: They survive by their intuition; it is essential to know when the mood has shifted. Éden's family life—if you could call it that—involved a lot of severe, desperately poor cotton farmers who drank big plastic bottles of cheap cane rum. He knew to anticipate danger when eyes turned inward. No drunk likes to fall into introspection, but sometimes the rum makes it impossible to avoid surveying the ruinous landscape of one's own failures and broken promises. When this happened, the men in Éden's life tended to explode with terrifying violence.

“Tell me what the words mean,” Éden insists.

Tears well up in my eyes. I want to apologize to him, to make a grand speech about how I have already failed him just like every other adult in his life and that he won't even know it until he is grown and I am long gone, a distant memory. Instead I knock my king over and tell Éden he has won.

He is gleeful and I hope he accepts that my tears are sour grapes over chess. I say I am tired. We clean up the pieces and he slips into the sultry Paraguayan night to go to wherever he sleeps.

I sob quietly in the dark because the *pyraguë* outside, listening, can't know that I am weak.

an answer. My faith reminds me that things do not have a definitive end, and I bore that in mind when writing this piece. Healing goes deeper than a touch of a robe.

MARCI RAE JOHNSON

“This Morning in Church” explores the idea that our earthly encounters with God take place in the intersection between the seen and the unseen, the material and the immaterial, the spiritual and the incarnate. As one of the sacraments, partaking in the Eucharist is one way to do this, but so also are the connections we have with other people, including physical connections. Indeed, sometimes our physical and sensual interactions with the world around us seem more real and meaningful than the world of the spirit.

PETER JOHNSON

My parents moved from Waukesha, Wisconsin, to Mobile, Alabama, when I was in tenth grade. It wasn't long after the move that I joined my high-school chess team, mainly because it was the only place where I seemed to fit in. We were all misfits and weirdos on that team, so no one made fun of my Yankee accent. I made some good friends there. Perhaps this is why, many years later, I would again start playing chess: I was in the boondocks of Paraguay—once again a total misfit in the community in which I lived—and I needed a way to pass the time, a way to avoid feeling so desperately lonely every night. And chess delivered again. I have been out of the Peace Corps for over a decade, but I still cherish the memory of those quiet Paraguayan nights spent playing chess with my buddy Édén, eating beans, listening to Clapton, gossiping about village life.

I recently bought a chess set for my six-year-old daughter, who I am teaching to play chess. Of course, by now, I realize that I don't need chess—what I need is relationship. Chess is just a means to that end. It's an excuse for me to sit down for some quality time with my beautiful little girl who is increasingly finding reasons to avoid spending time with me. What it has taken me nearly my entire life to realize is that the sorts of relationships I have with others are a strong indication of the sort of relationship I have with God. For some, this might seem manifestly obvious, but for me this was never so clear. Because literature is by its very nature a social endeavor—both in the way it portrays social life *and* in the meta-sense that it must be written for

a reader in mind—the truest expression of human interaction must have a sense of this great Mystery that permeates all relationship. My boss—who happens to be a Catholic priest—says it this way: “We all contain, within us, eternity.” Literature I find deeply moving, the works that elicit the most visceral emotional response, are stories that give me a glimpse of this eternity. The writer does this both by putting me in relationship with the characters through some sort of ineffable universal appeal, and by putting me in relationship with themselves, through their delicate imagination, which has persuaded me to invest what is the foundation of all relationship: my trust.

IRYNA KLISHCH

The connection between literature and faith has always been questioned, and I hope “Ukraine” allows you to do just this: question. Let the words seep deep into your bones and leave scars. Faith is not about a single belief; it is about understanding the cluster of chaos in our world. Stop looking for answers with your faith. Stop trying to find meaning. Instead, let faith bring you to new questions. Questions you’ve never thought of before, questions you can’t even comprehend. Let faith help you arrive in a five-dimensional world. Let literature do the same.

HANNAH LARRABEE

I believe the act of writing is a leap of faith in that a certain trust in something intangible takes place: the writer vying for a reader who might understand the unique equation of thought, emotion, and corporeal existence that inhabits every poem. For me, with every year that passes, I notice my attention drifting to the outside world in an effort to correspond with the internal. This happens to be where I have found a fair amount of peace: reconciling the plentitudes and complexities of the simplest things: cell, vein, even the sharp-pointed toes of a bird.

In the poem “Basalt,” this internal and external dialogue takes center stage. The poem reflects an idea of worship that has expanded to include far more than I ever gave it credit for. “Basalt” is also a direct reflection of my interest in the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a devoted Jesuit and scientist alike. In this case, I am exploring the concept of desire and sin, and I have rooted that context in something as fundamentally physical as the fossil cliffs at Joggins