

# Church Not Made with Hands

BY BARRETT SWANSON

## 1. Exodus

Once, during a temperate summer, a Christian girl whom I was dating claimed to see “so much of God’s light” within me. Though at the time I wondered what particular torsion of mind made divine valences legible to her—what, in other words, made her so special—I was nevertheless flattered to be counted among the elect, flattered in the way that secular folks are when confronted for the first time with fulsome Christian kindness.

In the end the compliment failed as evangelism. The last time I perused the Bible with any kind of hermeneutic rigor was the eleventh grade, during a fling with Christianity that seems common among my contemporaries—“the Jesus Phase,” one calls it, often with a rueful chuckle. But over the last few months, the Christian girl’s statement has colonized my head, particularly whenever I spend time with my group of closest friends. Uniformly atheistic or agnostic, these academics and musicians, poets and doctors, have nevertheless begun to strike me as a weird kind of religious sect, a tribe banished from the city, in part because all of us had begun to seem, in uncountable ways, so irretrievably lost. Which is not to say we lacked ambition. Over the last eight years, we watched each other attend grad school and submit dissertations, sign book deals and get promotions, but while our workweek had been varnished with professionalism and achievement, our weekends had become imbued with an altogether more desperate form of longing. I suppose we had entered the telltale period of adulthood in which one’s youthful aspirations give way to the resigned

weariness of middle-age. Suddenly, pop culture like *thirtysomething* and *The Big Chill* feel urgent and necessary to us. Desperately we approximated that generation's solutions, pillaging their fragments to shore against our ruins.

Of the many routes we took to soften the blow of this revelation, the most salient was the rather adolescent recourse to drugs. Arguably this could be seen as making up for lost time, since many of us, in our youth, had been sanitized overachievers, millennial do-gooders who followed a stately procession from high-school to top-tier college, and were thus woefully naïve when it came to hallucinogenic indulgence. I hope it's not cruel to mention that our talk during this time was vacuous and sad. "Barrett," one of my friends (a public defender) asked me, with sheer earnestness, "have you ever smoked marijuana and listened to the music of Bob Marley?" Another night two friends, both grad students in their late thirties, ate mushrooms for the first time. On the night of their experiment, they biked through long flaxen meadows and very quickly became as woozy and loquacious as Dorothy among the poppies. "What is that? Is that Elvin castle?" they squealed, pointing to a haggard building that sidled up to the train tracks. All night they giggled like children, and I wanted very badly for their trip to end.

Of course the quasi-religious tenor of these outings wasn't difficult to locate at a distance of years. It seemed we were trying to imbue the deadened landscape of reality with the qualia of divine significance, recovering the sacral mystery of a world long before science had exsanguinated everything. Even the teetotalers among us were touched by these transcendental longings, though they channeled them into more familiar pursuits: yoga, Tinder, the vague and seemingly futile devotion to "being present." And yet I don't mean to exempt myself from these accusations. If anything, I am the worst offender. Among friends, my quests are the subject of gentle mockery, and at dinner parties, they place bets on how long my fervor for vegetarianism will last. Will it be longer than my bout with effective altruism, they wonder, or the months I spent practicing Shambhala? Remember the Ketonic diet and those three weeks of celibacy? Hey, Barrett, are you still reading David Graeber, or this week is it Eckhart Tolle? We all laugh, and my wife pats my thigh under the table, but I can't help but hear an echo of the playground taunt, the epithet we



had for such people when I was boy. We called them poseurs—people who adopted certain modes of existence not as an authentic identity but as fad, as cursory fashion. Such unfortunates were roundly shunned and condemned to the mulch-softened periphery. But I'm beginning to see now that our derision was misplaced. The poseur doesn't riffle through credos with a frantic longing to please. Rather there's something darker and more urgent that propels his search, a nameless dread that makes his journey seem clumsy and errant.

For my own part, the crisis began shortly after I was hired as a tenure-track professor at a small Midwestern university. While such tidings should have been a happy affair, in the weeks after signing my contract I suddenly saw the course of my life radically foreshortened into a distressingly narrow road that pointed unswervingly toward death. This feeling was not at all helped by the barrage of emails I received from the Human Resources department at my new employer, who informed me about accidental death insurance ("a good idea for commuters like you"), as well as the protocol for retirement, for which I would be eligible after thirty years of service. *Thirty years of service?* Soon visions of my dotage were freely available to me. In my mind's eye I manifested as an wizened professor hunched over a disheveled desk, croaking to some apple-cheeked undergrad tired interpretations of *Beloved* and *White Noise*. Readily imaginable were scenes of geriatric-me standing behind a walnut lectern and suffering a bout of incontinence while shoals of unruffled students futzed with their VR headsets. What should have been a cause for celebration instead struck me as a mortal taunt: *death is near*.

If my spiritual restlessness didn't seem like an idiosyncratic dilemma, it was because I saw it faithfully represented in a spate of contemporary novels, the most recent of which was Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*. The book centers upon a misanthropic Huysmans scholar named Francois who teaches literature at the Sorbonne. Anhedonic, single, and alcoholic, Francois mourns his dwindling sexual prospects with a dose of Updikean fervor and regards the approval of his dissertation as a kind of death, the end of an intellectual quest that had given his life meaning. I confess to practically melting with commiseration upon confronting this sentiment in the novel's opening pages. "I spent the night of my defense alone and very drunk...I realized that part of my life, probably the best part, was behind me."

Francois solaces himself with visits to prostitutes, hoping these carnal gratifications will mitigate his despair. But their galvanizing effects are regrettably short-lived. One of the book's central questions is whether, like Huysmans, who converted to Catholicism after wavering darkly between "the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross," Francois can undergo a similar rebirth and resuscitate some semblance of feeling for the world he inhabits.

Yet this is a world growing stranger every day. The novel takes place in 2022, and an amiable Islamic moderate named Mohammed Ben Abbas has won the most recent election, running on a platform of regressive social reforms and igniting turmoil among the electorate. Soon after his inauguration, burka mandates go into effect and polygamy becomes voguish again. When Francois can be bothered to glance at these upheavals, he regards them through the cataracts of a solipsist—corpses in the street and the shuttering of his university are read as nothing more than harbingers of his own mortality.

If his spiritual journey ends in ambivalence, it is not for want of trying. Toward the middle of the novel, as Paris crumbles, Francois retreats to the countryside and visits the Black Madonna at Rocamadour, where he maintains the larkish hope that he can vault himself into piety. Sitting reverently before the statue, Francois meditates on the history of Christian pilgrimages and feels his "individuality dissolving," but in a moment of droll bathos, he realizes that a couple days have passed since his last meal and dismisses his widening moral aperture as "an attack of mystical hypoglycemia." Eventually he wolfs down a pile of duck legs, giving into the gustatory urges of his "damaged, perishable body."

In the end, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood offers Francois a chance to return to academic life, so long as he embraces Islam. Francois undertakes the conversion not as a Pascalian bet or a Kierkegaardian leap, but rather as a calculated sybaritic maneuver. Just before the curtain goes down, Francois realizes that, despite Huysmans's lofty example of religious transfiguration, the novelist's "true subject had been bourgeois happiness." Such hearth-warmed comforts involved having "artist friends over for a pot-au-feu with horseradish sauce, accompanied by an 'honest' wine and followed by brandy and tobacco." It's this image of tearjerking bonhomie that propels Francois to become a Muslim and join the



Brotherhood, along with the promise that he'd get "three wives without too much trouble." The conversion, in other words, is nothing more than a pious shell-game. While Francois has endorsed the Islamic faith, the gesture is perfunctory, and his perception of the world—as a banquet of sensual delights—remains bullishly unchanged.

Well, as the old saying goes, a prophet is not without honor except in his own country. Houellebecq was vilified in his native France where the novel was condemned as an Islamophobic rant, its author a craven reactionary. This opinion seemed to disregard the flurry of interviews Houellebecq gave during the book's promotional tour in which he professed a genuine interest in the succor of faith, particularly after losing his parents. Intentional fallacies notwithstanding, *Submission* does seem to earnestly wonder whether neoliberal hedonism can endure as a viable ideology, a sentiment that proved far more amenable in the U.S., where the book enjoyed a favorable showing. Perhaps we Americans could sense that in a hedonistic vacuum a tyrant could more easily rear his head. Perhaps a hunger for spiritual solutions didn't seem so ridiculous.

In some sense, the history of American belle letters was built upon the genre of spiritual quests. I suppose it's not surprising that a country founded by pilgrims would covet stories about motley seafarers hunting down white whales or New England scofflaws venturing into forests. But as much as these stories were billed as swashbuckling adventures against many-tentacled villains (whales for Melville, trains for Thoreau), their climaxes hardly ever pivoted on the lampooning of fish or the vanquishing of foes. Instead, what lent these stories their voltage was that their protagonists underwent an encompassing change of vision—they ended up seeing the world in a new way. The wayfarers aboard the *Pequod* recognize that "all visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," and their voyage is as much a perceptual expedition as it is a nautical one. They want to stick their fingers through the holes of the mask and palpate the divine mysteries lurking beneath. The tenant of Walden Pond experiences a similar attunement of mind when his onerous regime of yardwork and moseying allows him to escape "the games and amusements" of the nineteenth century and reawaken to "what is sublime and noble."

To some contemporary readers such characters will seem, at worst, like contemptible prigs, and at best, naïve fools. We all know

there's no quicker way to offend the modern sensibility than to suggest that the world has been endowed with sacral mystery, that certain aspects of nature will elude even the adept, grasping fingers of science. So what does this mean for an American readership weaned on tales of spiritual epiphany and God-haunted perception? After Nietzsche sounded the death knell for religion, after Lyotard dissolved the possibility of grand unifying narratives, it has been interesting to witness the reemergence of this foundational genre, with more and more contemporary novelists (like Houellebecq, Sheila Heti and Karl Ove Knausgaard) fashioning what we might call "the post-religious quest."

## 2. Crop Rotation

If there is a persistent anxiety that undergirds this burgeoning genre, it is the way in which the trajectories of our personal narratives remain stubbornly infused with the motifs of Judeo-Christian parables, particularly those of wandering, persecution, and redemption. Nowhere in recent memory is this more apparent than in Sheila Heti's novel *How Should a Person Be?*—a book that was roundly mischaracterized as a *bildungsroman* about millennial friendship, when it could've been more accurately shelved next to the works of Kierkegaard or Rilke. Described by its author as "a novel from life," the book stands as a notable touchstone in the emerging landscape of autofiction. But unlike other practitioners of this school, who deliberately muddy the line between author and protagonist, Heti endows her text with a useful ironic distance, allowing the book to transcend the concave fixations of autobiography and enter the outward realm of representation. She does this by comparing the itinerancy of her friends to the aimlessness of the Israelites who "took what they had, which was nothing, and left their routines as slaves in Egypt to follow Moses into the desert in search of the promised land." The novel, in other words, is meant to be read as a contemporary update of Exodus, an allegory for millennials who see themselves as unshackled from religion, ideology, and history and are thus free to hunt down the riches of this ostensible "promised land."

What this nirvana might look like in a post-religious age is suggested on the second page of Heti's book. "How should a person



be? I sometimes wonder about it, and I can't help answering like this: a celebrity... My hope is to live a simple life... By a *simple life*, I mean life of undying fame that I don't have to participate in. I don't want anything to change except to be as famous as one can be, but without changing anything." The next three-hundred-some-odd pages follow the exploits of a group of Canadian friends who doggedly pursue this brand of stardom. In their late twenties or early thirties, they are fledging artists, armchair intellectuals, and tepid writers who stand in cool judgment of the world around them, trading unleavened opinions about the culture, often with the bemused acedia of dorm-room stoners. Their preoccupations, such as they are, are fundamentally adolescent—they want community without sacrifice; celebrity without inconvenience.

For Sheila, the book's main character, the effort to garner recognition allows her to experience a special "kinship" with Paris Hilton, the fame-craving heiress whose sex tape Sheila watches with no small amount of commiseration—"She was just another white girl going through her life with her clothes off"—but Sheila locates more immediate examples of inhabiting the world in the departments of her friends, an investigation that generates the book's conflict. What seems like innocuous adulation—a loose version of Stanley Cavell's perfectionism—soon degenerates into a creepy form of appropriation. Sheila begins cannibalizing the personality of her friend Margaux, going so far as to record their conversations and use them as fodder for a play she's struggling to write, a form of imitation that reaches a zenith during a trip to Miami. There, Sheila buys the same yellow dress as Margaux, a twinning that practically disembowels their friendship.

Like so many others of her generation who were fed a steady diet of the-world-is-your-oyster bromides, Sheila crumbles and second-guesses whenever she attempts to commit herself to larger causes. How else are we to understand a moment toward the outset of the book when Sheila decodes an upsetting dream with her therapist. During the course of the nightmare, Sheila finds herself at an airport, "trying to get somewhere, to someplace higher and better"—a Freud-for-Dummies metaphor for personal ambition—but when she finally chooses a route and purchases a ticket, she ends up leaping from the jet during takeoff and landing safely on a knoll of trash bags. Soon she comes upon the smoldering ruins of a

wrecked plane, which she presumes to be her flight, and with a spritz of elation, she congratulates herself on wisely absconding from the doomed voyage. But during the dream's coda, she learns that the ruins belong to a different flight, that her plane is still soaring uneventfully through the air, and it's impossible for her catch up with it.

The dream, as her analyst soon explains, vivifies the extent to which Sheila has been stultified by the broad pastures of freedom and choice, like the shopper in a checkout line clutching his head about which knickknack to purchase. "You remember the *puer aeternus*—the eternal child—Peter Pan—the boy who never grows up, who never becomes a man?" the analyst says. "Such people will suddenly tell you they have another plan, and they always do it the moment things start getting difficult. But it's their everlasting switching that's the dangerous thing, not what they choose." Such an affliction reminds me of the aesthete from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*—a book that Heti has cited as an influence—who mentions "crop rotation" as one possible elixir for boredom and despair.

One is tired of living in the country, one moves to the city; one is tired of one's native land, one travels abroad; one is *europamude*, one goes to America, and so on; finally, one indulges in a dream of endless travel from star to star. Or the movement is different but still in extension. One is tired of dining off porcelain, one dines off silver; one tires of that, one dines off gold; one burns half of Rome to get an idea of the conflagration at Troy. This method defeats itself; it is the bad infinite.

For a while, this system of flux can flatter your taste for novelty, and the glinting carousel of modern hedonism takes a long time to complete its circle before the rider realizes his horse lacks a true destination. Through the prism of religious thought, these crop rotations often took the form of toggling between graven images and false idols, as experienced by the Israelites during their jaunt through the wilderness, embracing by turns ersatz lords and molten calves.

It is with a shudder of embarrassment that I return to this passage from Heti's novel. It condemns so thunderously my own revolving door of surrogate beliefs, from Cross Fit to Transcendental Meditation,



from Effective Altruism to a bout of YOLO-inspired travel, almost none of which has required from me any of the sacrifice and service we might otherwise expect from true communal engagement.

Like Francois of *Submission*, Sheila's inability to make choices stems from an impairment of vision, one so endemic to contemporary culture that readers could be forgiven for missing it. Starved for recognition, monomaniacally preoccupied with the hygiene of her reputation, she remains blind to the ways in which her actions have corroded her most intimate relationships. But in the end, Heti refrains from offering her readers a nostrum for our desolation in the world. Instead, the book closes with a thinly veiled metaphor for the irritation of ethical questing. Sheila watches her friends bound across a handball court, playing a game whose rules are alien to them, their bodies flailing gorgeously in the attempt.

### 3. Submission

While Heti diagnoses the modern existential problem as a child-like inability to make choices—what we might call the “the Peter Pan syndrome”—the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard believes our fundamental error is not one of moral temporizing, but of grossly impaired perception. The urgent spiritual problem, for Knausgaard, is that we are not enough like children. Contemporary adults, as a result of our long tenure on earth, have become inured to the dazzling wonders of the natural world, unable to perceive holiness in the sargassum of everyday life. As a tonic to these ossified habits of mind, Knausgaard suggests, in his new novel, *Autumn*, that we perform CPR on our inner child and aim to resurrect a guileless fascination with humdrum objects, such as apples, wasps, and plastic bags or buttons, piss and ambulances (a few of the subjects to which the book's chapters are devoted). Borrowing the epistolary conceit of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, the novel is written as a valentine to his unborn daughter and labors to capture “these astounding things, which...are easy to lose sight of.”

The book is a compilation of essayistic squibs, and because its writer assumes the reader has grown callous to the world, its vocal register veers, with dismaying regularity, into the condescending enthusiasm of

an elementary school teacher. Take, for example, a chapter on “Teeth” in which the author ruminates on the apparent similarities between mountains and molars. “When the first teeth appear, these little stones slowly pushed up through the child’s red gums, appearing at first like sharp little points, then standing there like miniature white towers in the mouth, it is hard not to be astonished, for where do they come from?” The daffy wonderment of this last clause kills me, for it suggests that the reader has nothing better to do than meditate upon the quiddity of something so biologically straightforward as the arrival of new teeth. More concerning is that these cerebrations are hardly ever fastened to a life of politics or culture, nor do they purport to be pragmatically instructive. Nowhere does the book announce itself more plainly as an enemy to actionable meaning than in the chapter on “Plastic Bags”—three inert pages that recall the noisome poetics of that one scene from *American Beauty*. After rhapsodizing about a plastic bag floating on the sea near the west coast of Norway, Knausgaard concludes, “This moment was not the beginning of anything, not even of an insight, nor was it the conclusion of anything... I was still in the middle of something and always would be.”

Despite his solemn pledge to offer his daughter a new way of apprehending the world, it is difficult in the extreme to see how the book constitutes a meaningful corrective to the habits of perception encouraged by contemporary culture—particularly, those of the Internet. For me, the book called to mind nothing so much as the catwalk of Instagram, where even the most banal and comparatively trivial aspects of our lives—what we had for breakfast, say, or the creamsicle hue of a sunset—get enshrined as extraordinary simply because we experienced them. These habits of aestheticization rely upon a logic of undifferentiation. Knausgaard reveals this logic when describing a splash of petrol, with its whorl of incandescent color, as “beautiful as conches or galaxies.” Because all the world has been slathered with beauty, brimming with divinity if only we look for it, as Knausgaard seems to suggest, there is no reason to believe that any single object contains more value or warrants more attention than any other—petrol, conches, or galaxies, all sublime and *beauteous*.

Perhaps this approach is only natural for an author whose work come to define the genre of autofiction, an aesthetic that has bred novelists who are erroneously fascinated by the wormholes of their own conscious-



ness and who remain fundamentally doubtful about our ability to connect with other people.<sup>1</sup> As readers we are meant to see confessions about trips to sperm banks or first experiences with masturbation as courageous and vulnerable. Candor and exhibitionism are this genre's twin virtues. But hardly does this rhetorical striptease strike me as particularly brave at a moment of peak transparency, when all of us subject ourselves to the great Sauron's eye of social media. The confessional mode in this context doesn't seem like the daring act of a literary mutineer, but the mimesis of a culture which prizes individualism and champions every passing iteration of the self. Such a vantage doesn't subvert the powers that be, but accords with a brand of capitalism where vast amounts of personal data are harvested for profit. After all, data miners, with a kind of Knausgaardian omnivorousness, make no distinction between the flotsam of our lives—everything is relevant, everything has value.

Because *Autumn* fixates without discrimination on the minutiae of random objects and rarely makes a gesture of connection toward the reader, it's hard not to feel lonely within these pages. The epiphanies Knausgaard describes are so narrowly subjective, so onanistically disposed, that as I made my way through the book I couldn't but feel the way I did when watching my friends take drugs, geeking out over the timbre of birdsong or the scrollwork of ripples on wind-blown water. Their sense of wonder—a gosh-wow appreciation for the world—was a private and inaccessible form of ecstasy, a walled garden, for them alone.

Certainly these novels are not without merit, but the extent to which they might supply an earnest reader with a tenable way of apprehending the world at a moment that has rejected grand narratives and collective meaning is grievously limited. I suspect Knausgaard's books have garnered a sizable audience in America because they celebrate a kind of perception in which we are so thoroughly well-practiced—to see the saga of the world as coterminous with the story of ourselves. It is chilling to me that in a novel that purports to be a record of “the things that make life worth living” the author has devoted not a single chapter to a friend or a member of his family. If they enter into the novel at all, these intimates are merely supernumeraries in the far more compelling drama of dusk falling over his countryside home or the moment when a brood of porpoises surfaces near his boat in an expanse of oil-dark water.

Autofiction, in the end, leaves both the writer and the reader to themselves. Or as Knausgaard admits to his daughter at the end of the first chapter, “it is primarily for my own sake that I’m doing this.”

#### 4. The Walking Dead

Despite their shortcomings, these books are nevertheless important because they underscore the *idée fixe* of the post-religious quest: the problem of vision. By this token, these characters are the distant offspring of Binx Bolling from Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, the caddish New Orleans stock broker who undertook a “search” for meaning on the occasion of his thirtieth birthday. Like the characters of Heti’s, Knausgaard’s, and Houellebecq’s novels, Binx becomes concerned about his misanthropic view of other people, which thwarts any chance of a democratic community. “For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead,” he says.

It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death. There is little to do but groan and make an excuse as quickly as one can. At such times it seems that the conversation is spoken by automatons who have no choice in what they say. I hear myself or someone else saying things like: “In my opinion the Russian people are a great people, but—” or “Yes, what you say about the hypocrisy of the North is questionably true. However—” and I think to myself: this is death.

Part of the reason I have so relentlessly chased down these post-religious quests is that I increasingly suffer from this kind of jaundiced perception. Particularly in the wake of the November 2016 election, I have found myself subjecting other people to vulgar taxonomies, watching them shed their nuanced histories and become corpses whenever glimpsed through the begrimed looking glass of political identity. When one of my uncles revealed a profane gratitude for Trump’s xenophobic immigration policies, it was difficult to remember the afternoon when my older brother,



a toddler at the time, plunged neck-deep into a sinkhole in the Mississippi River and this uncle risked his life to save him. Or when a close friend, a fervent champion of identity politics, blithely condemned the Christianity of my wife's family, it was equally hard to remember that this was a person who volunteered at a women's shelter and called her grandmother once a week. No longer manifestations of sublime mystery, gifted with the fluke of consciousness, born of a thousand minute experiences, they had become, through the defects of my perception, dead mouthpieces for dead opinions, always victims of false consciousness, already agents of bad faith. All around me were dead republicans and dead democrats, dead snowflakes and dead working-class voters, dead virtue signalers and dead trolls, dead Bernie Bros and dead Hillary supporters, dead boomers and dead millenials, dead beta-males and dead deplorables. Very quickly the world became a zone of corpses, feeding off the carrion of pundits and demagogues, and I began to see everyone univocally, as though they were only what they betrayed. It was in such moments that I had forgotten my obligation as a writer, which is to eschew generalization for particularity—I had forgotten that in the jurisdiction of my perceptions I always have a choice.

“The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story,” Flannery O'Connor writes in her essay, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” “is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation.” O'Connor has taken her salient term from medieval commentators of the bible who perceived in the dense brambles of scripture three types of meaning. “Allegorical” saw one line referring to another; “tropological” dealt with prescriptions and solutions—“what should be done;” but “anagogical meaning” concerned “the Divine life and our participation in it.” O'Connor puts it like this: “Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included the most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature. It seems to be a paradox that the larger and more complex the personal view, the easier it is to compress it into fiction.”

A longtime fan of Ms. O'Connor, I have often wondered why her stories are reliably peopled by goons and outcasts, misfits and desperadoes, and why these contemptible figures, in one way or other, are almost always afforded some fleeting moment of redemption, an iota of grace. Though she can hardly be said to have succeeded in every effort—a few of her tales depend too heavily on the careful bonsai of themes or moments of revelations so inelegant that they verge upon bathos—I suspect that, for her, writing stories was, in some sense, a religious practice, a way of training her gaze complexly on unwholesome figures and trying to see them as more than what they were, trying to see them holographically, as both depraved and divine—as, to borrow a phrase from David Foster Wallace, both flesh and not.

No other character from Ms. O'Connor's oeuvre enacts this ambition more tellingly than Hazel Motes from her novel *Wise Blood*. A twenty-two year old grandson of an itinerant preacher, Motes loses his faith while fighting in World War II and returns home to become an evangelist of non-faith, instituting with no apparent irony something called "the Church Without Christ." With the self-unawareness of Gertrude, he protests the dangers of believing in the world of God and sin, and spews atheistic brimstone on street corners, attracting the attention of outcasts and conmen. Eventually, Hazel realizes the sinfulness of his blasphemous campaign and buys a satchel of quicklime with which he blinds himself, a form of self-mutilation that inaugurates his new regime of penance. Soon he straps barbed wire around his torso and pours a glitter of broken glass into his shoes. Baffled by this gruesome atonement, Mrs. Flood, his landlady, ends up becoming strangely obsessed with him. "What possible reason could a person have for wanting to destroy their sight?" she wonders. "What possible reason could a sane person have for wanting to not enjoy himself any more?"

A modern reader will, as I do, bristle at the fanatical nature of Ms. O'Connor's parable. Yet I find myself eerily moved by a character who, at the end of his rope, struggles to the point of self-blindness in order to see the world from an other-directed vantage. So backward-seeming and retrograde does this desire seem that it rarely shows up in contemporary fiction. But now and then these practitioners of anagogic vision—these heroes of perception—still return to the present realm. You can find one



such character in David Foster Wallace's story, "Church Not Made with Hands," in which an art therapist named Day fails to rescue his step-daughter, Esther, after their backyard pool malfunctions and its subaquatic drain pulls her under. Unable to swim, Day is forced to watch the girl wriggle helplessly beneath the Windex-blue water, a trauma from which she ultimately survives but not without significant brain damage.

Much of the story is told through Day's "dreampaintings"—impressionistic hybrids of memory and delusion, flashback and fantasy, demonstrating the extent to which guilt has marooned Day upon the island of his own subjectivity. Wallace dramatizes this isolation in one dream-painting where Day sits in a field, miming the movements of his old art history professor who's teaching him how to swim. "The dry field is an island. The blue water all around is peppered with dry islands. Esther lies on a thin clean steel bed on the next island. Water moves in the channel between them."

In between hospital visits and these oneiric visions, Day works for the county's Mental Health department and helps victims of trauma process their grief. One client is a mother whose son was murdered in a gang-related dispute and who refuses to clean up the Jackson Pollock of blood that remains on her kitchen tile. Another client turns out to be Day's old art professor, a Jesuit who has been cited for disturbing the peace by kneeling in a public field and praying to a painting that depicts an image of himself praying. Like Day, these characters are grievously sequestered on their own islands, preoccupied by fixations that foreclose the possibility of connecting with other people. Day's boss, Dr. Ndiawar, "likes to make a steeple with his hands and to look at it while he speaks." His coworker, Eric Yang, has a "special talent" where he can mentally rotate three-dimensional objects, assessing every angle of banal items, such as a phone bill, which distracts him from noticing the suffering of other people. But there's a curious moment toward the end of the story when Day remembers a moment from college, when the old art history professor gave a lecture on Vermeer's *View of Delft*. The painting, he suggests, offers a stark rebuke to the myopia of these individual subjectivities, for it has been rendered with such infallible clarity that it provides a "window onto interiors in which all conflicts have been resolved," so that "the viewer sees as God sees."

It is precisely this perception—the image of how God would see us, if God were to exist—to which the old art history professor prays in the public field and which strikes me as the artistic vantage that Wallace hoped to achieve in the story, one beyond the nearsighted imperatives of his own subjectivity. He can't have it, of course, but the story, even in its ineluctable failure, testifies to the curative powers of art, serving as a prism through which we might see ourselves and other people from a more merciful, godlike vantage, one whose perceptive aperture allows the entrance of “the most possibilities.” (It's telling that the art history professor is the one who teaches Day how to swim in the crucial dream-painting—he's teaching Day how we might swim across the water and make it to Esther's island.) The alternative, of course, is to view the world exclusively as a diary, through a self-made frame, a steeple constructed with our own two hands. But for those of us whose lives have been marred by tragedy and disaster, who find ourselves wandering and lost, it is precisely this monochromatic narrative of self that we are trying to escape. Or as Dr. Ndiawar reminds us, even our “one best church leaves no hand free to open the door.” Only by relinquishing our own constructions, only by aiming our gaze toward something larger than ourselves, can we enter into a communion with other people.

## 5. *Ménages à God*

At the end of the summer, two of my close friends got married in the mountains of Salt Lake City, and our group travelled there for the long weekend. While we mocked the most immediate connection—Mormonism, with its chastity belts, decaffeinated beverages, and golden spectacles in the sand—the more preoccupying thought was that traveling to a holy land with this group of friends was so metaphorically apposite that it seemed to confirm the existence of fate. In our rented sedan, we traversed the barren landscape, snapping photos of the mountains on our smartphones and promptly updating our social media. Soon we arrived at our Airbnb, a basement apartment outfitted with the slender gadget Alexa—Amazon's talking bot—whom we gradually anthropomorphized as we asked her more and more questions. Almost uniformly existential in nature, the queries



began to strike me as moving and sad. “Alexa, do you think there’s an oversoul?” “Alexa, do you think this marriage will last?” “Alexa, when will I die?” I was reminded of that one scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when the black obelisk appears on a craggy mountainside and a cluster of bewildered apes start screeching and thumping the ground in an attempt to decipher its meaning. I was reminded, too, of the end of *Heti’s* novel, when her friends amuse themselves by playing a game whose rules they do not understand.

All this cynicism and doubt left me only when we were sitting on the deck of a ski lodge, waiting for the wedding to start. The deck jutted out over a splay of mountains, which were smothered verdantly with sumac and pine, their peaks dolloped with old snow, but down here, it was still sunny and warm, with everyone sipping champagne and my friends picking lint from each other’s blazers or pushing behind an ear a rogue strand of hair. A concerto played over unseen speakers, lending everything a regal tinge, and soon I was swept up by a Knausgaard-type feeling, where everything from the configuration of the clouds to the ostinato of the mountain birds seemed inflected with divine meaning. But deep down I knew the goodwill brought on by aestheticism was an isolating sensation and, for me anyway, simply would not last.

Soon everyone took their seats. As the nervous flower girl, no older than three, tottered down the center aisle, I remembered a moment from my own wedding, when my wife’s grandfather, a devout Christian, offered a tender homily, suggesting that marriage was a triangle with God at its apex, that as you drew closer to God, you drew closer to each other. After the ceremony, during the wee hours of the reception, my wife and I kicked off our shoes and wandered down to the beach with our friends, where they lampooned her grandfather’s suggestion. “You guys need to have a *ménages à trois* with God,” they said. “A *ménages à God*.” In that moment we squealed with laughter, but I’m beginning to see now that, even though I cannot sign up for his particular religion, the marrow of his advice nevertheless remains. What else is marriage, after all, but a public renunciation of self, a wholesale shift in vision? Though faith has always been a light under a door I could not open, to crib a phrase from Eudora Welty, I suppose my own spiritual quest has found its destination in marriage, in a commitment that requires a daily abandonment of the

self, not a diary but a dialogue, one of several ways we might go about constructing a church not made with hands.

Night was falling. A soft wind tussled the trees in the mountains, and under a modest altar, my friends made their pledge. The two women, with hands threaded at the fingers, were vowing to see the world not through the myopia of I, but the panorama of us. Of course the extraordinary heroism of this oath has been cheapened by the tropes of matrimony—the pictures, the cake, the Cupid Shuffle—not to mention the ozone of cynicism and the oft-repeated statistics about divorce. But at this moment of history, our persistent coupling seems like an act of defiance, the only semi-divine commitment most of us will ever make. It is in the context of these thoughts that I'm asking you to forgive a saccharine indulgence, to watch as my two friends smile radiantly in the mountains and lean in to kiss. How easily we forget that it's only when they both close their eyes that they choose to connect.

1. One signal example is Tao Lin's *Tai Pei*, whose last paragraph dramatizes the extent to which other people manifest to his protagonist as nothing more than figurants or figments, marionettes without souls: "He was startled, entering his room, to see Erin already moving, *as if independent of his perception*. He briefly discerned her movements as incremental—not continuous, but in frames per second—and, like with insects or large predators, unpredictable and dangerous. He wanted to move backward and close the door and be alone again, in the bathroom..." (italics mine).



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