

**Disseminations: An Autobiographical
Midrash on Fatherhood in John's Gospel¹**

By Jeffrey L. Staley

“ . . . to say the opposite of Scripture is often precisely what midrash does.”

Jon D. Levenson

“In midrashic, somewhat parabolic fashion our leading stories complicate the binary or polar thinking that would cleanly distinguish the ethical from the critical, the analytical from the applied, weapon from tool--the kind of thinking that comfortably relies upon pure distinctions and categories.” Phillips and Fewell

Fragment One

They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jn 8:39

And Abraham knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son, and they named him Isaac. And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked west. And he saw that the land of Indiana was good land, and he journeyed westward and settled there. Abraham Staley and Mary had two sons and two daughters. Abraham lived seventy-seven years, and he died and was buried beside his wife beneath a grove of hickory trees near Cumberland, Indiana.

And Isaac knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. And they named him

¹An earlier version of this essay was published under the title “Fathers and Sons: Fragments from an Autobiographical Midrash on the Gospel of John” (Kitzberger:65-85).

Abraham. Isaac and Lavinia had five sons and four daughters. Isaac lived seventy-five years and he died and was buried beside his mother and father, beneath the grove of hickory trees near Cumberland, Indiana.

And Abraham knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. And she named him Arlonzo. For she said, "There have been far too many Bible names in this family." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked west, and he saw that the land of Kansas was good land, and he journeyed westward and settled there. Abraham and Eliza had nine sons. Abraham lived eighty-two years and he died and was buried beside his wife in Ottawa, Kansas.

And Arlonzo knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. And they named him Lloyd. Arlonzo and May Belle had five sons. Arlonzo lived ninety-one years and he died and was buried beside his wife in Wellsville, Kansas.

And Lloyd knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. And they named him Robert. And there was a famine in the land, so Lloyd and Mary moved to the city. Lloyd and Mary had six sons and three daughters. And when they were old, lo, they lifted up their eyes and looked west. And they saw that the land of California was good land, and they journeyed westward and settled there. Lloyd lived eighty-eight years and he died and was buried beside his wife in Atascadero, California.

And Robert knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. And they named him Jeffrey Lloyd. And Robert lifted up his eyes and looked west from Kansas, and he saw that the land of Arizona was good land, and he journeyed westward and settled there. Bob and Betty had four sons and two daughters. And Betty died and was buried at Immanuel Mission, on the Navajo Reservation. Then Robert took Esther for his wife,

and they moved to Phoenix, a royal city, a miracle of glass and steel rising like a gigantic bird out of hot desert ashes. And there they live, even until this day.

And Jeffrey knew his wife . . .

Fragment Two

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Jn 6:53

And he said,

“This is my body;

take, eat ye all of it.

Run your tongue

over its soft round smoothness.

Breathe deep its heavenly scent.

Gaze long at its fragile opaqueness.

Cup it in your hands, caress it tenderly.

Nibble its outer edges

slowly, slowly.

Then swallow me whole.

Eat me up, up, up;

sup on me, one long,

everlastingly long sip--

dip in,

dine, thine.

Come to me,

oh come.

Come unto me,

on to me

now, now,

and I will give you rest.”

And it was so.

And he said,

“Here is my life blood

poured out for you;

drink deeply of it.

Remember me

in the rhythmic passages

of your life.

Wash your body

in my heavenly flow.

Find in its tingling flush

yourself

unearthed,

rebirthed.

A wriggling mass

of unumbilicled joy.”

And it was so.

And so she conceived and bore a son, and they named him Benjamin, for they

said, “It is a good name, a family name.”

Jeffrey and Barbara had one son and one daughter. And they are alive, even until this day.

Fragment Three

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Jn 1:1

I have always wanted to be a father,² just like in the beginning. But I wanted to be the father of a daughter first. A son could come later. Just give me the daughter first. My mother promised I would have the daughter first: Moments before she died I saw my daughter in her eyes--a translucent embryo in her last, silent tear that said, “I’m sorry I will never get a chance to hold your baby girl in my arms.”

Now I have two children. A son and a daughter. But my mother was wrong. The son came first.

En arche en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros ton theon, kai ho logos en theos.

En can mean “in, with, or by,” says Arndt and Gingrich’s A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. And it can mean a host of other things too. It’s like the Hebrew preposition be. The rabbis speculated about the meaning of the preposition be together with the noun reshith³ in Genesis 1:1. Does the expression mean “In the beginning,” or “With the first thing”? And if it means “with the first thing,” then what is that first thing to which it refers? Maybe it refers to hokmah,

²“But what is a father?” asks Jacques Derrida (80). And Dorothy Lee answers that as far as the Gospel of John is concerned, a close reading “suggests that, far from supporting patriarchal constructions of power, the notion of God as father challenges such projections and radically re-forms the basic symbol within its cultural framework” (147).

³Reshith probably should not to be confused with Ra and Thoth, or Ra and Seth, those gods of ancient Egyptian mythology (Derrida:87-90).

said the rabbis. God made wisdom first, a female creature, and then everything else followed from her and was imprinted with her image. Perhaps John 1:1-18 is a fragment of a hymn to wisdom in which the feminine, Hellenistic sophia or the feminine, Semitic hokmah has metamorphosed into the masculine logos.⁴

Some say that Christians, like those Jewish rabbis of old, also have a theology of prepositions. The real body and blood of Jesus are given “in, with, and under” the bread and wine, say Lutherans in argument with Calvinists and Roman Catholics. You are baptized “en pneumati hagio” says the author of Luke-Acts (Acts 11:16). But does the writer mean “in the Holy Spirit,” “with the Holy Spirit,” or “by the Holy Spirit”? Entire denominations have been founded upon fine-line distinctions such as these. It’s the difference, for instance, between telling my son, “Go play by yourself for awhile,” and telling him, “Go play with yourself for awhile.” The distinction is crucial, but he doesn’t seem to do much of either. Most often he is outside in the neighborhood, organizing games among his friends. My daughter, on the other hand, is more apt to play by herself and with herself.⁵

“See dad, I have a little penis,” she announces proudly as she sits in the bathtub and spreads her labia apart.

“Well, kind of,” I say. I try to explain to her the difference between boys and girls. But she has already lost interest. She is busy blowing bubbles and trying to catch them in the palms of her hands.

I want to be right up front about this gendered thing in John, just as I have been

⁴“ . . . logos is a wild creature, an ambiguous animality” (Derrida:116).

⁵“Play is always lost when it seeks salvation in games” (Derrida:158).

with my children. Gender matters.

“En arche en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros ton theon, kai ho logos en theos,” the author of the Fourth Gospel writes. One feminine noun and two masculine nouns. And the two masculines, hiding behind the one feminine, have overpowered (katelaben) the feminine sophia and hokmah in the history of exegesis.⁶

But if you take the masculine ending “os” off of theos you simply have “the.” “In the beginning was the The.” I like that. The terminal sigma, shaped like a slithering snake, is absent, and in its absence theos loses its masculine power.

In the beginning was the word--defrocked, emasculated, skinned, undone. And the word was with the . . . the . . . whatever--and the word was--whatever. Whatever the os will make it be. And mark my words, the os will make itself into something.

Fragment Four

**All things came into being through him, and without him, not one
thing came into being. Jn 1:3**

That sneaky, sibilant sigma, shaped like a snake, is the one sound I could not say as a lisping boy of four. And not only at four. It would be twenty more years before my future wife finally taught me where to place my tongue.⁷

⁶Or as Sandra Schneiders puts it, “Feminist interpretation . . . attempts to extract from the biblical text the ‘secrets’ about women that are buried beneath its androcentric surface, especially the hidden history of women, which has been largely obscured and distorted, if not erased altogether, by male control of the traditions. Sometimes the feminist task involves pointing to that which is plainly in the text but has remained ‘unnoticed’ or even been denied by exegetes” (185; cf. Lee:152.).

⁷“Let us imagine for this double function, localized in one and the same site, a single transgression, which

“Like this,” she said, smiling encouragingly. And she opened her mouth into a wide Q. So esses came spewing out of my mouth, just as if I were the Gihon Spring or the Euphrates River. And from that day forward the esses have not stopped coming.

Then one day a son came out. Right out of a wide, pulsating Q. The unique child of his father. Half Chinese. The first non-Caucasian Staley child that I have been able to find in my family genealogy; the first non-Asian child in my wife’s family. A wrong-headed child from the Staley-Wong family. His mixed up genetics are a metaphor for my own mixed up life.

The Father is in me and I am in the Father.

I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together. . . .

I am the eggman. . . .

I am the walrus, goo goo g’joob, g’goo goo g’joob.

In the beginning there was my son. And then three years later a daughter came along. My son is now eleven and my daughter is seven.

“Seven and three-quarters,” she hastens to correct me.

I always wanted the girl to come first. Just like in John 1:1, where the feminine arce precedes the masculine logos and theos. But for five generations in the Staley family, boys have come first. I am not as different as my mother thought I would be, nor as different as I had hoped.

I watch my firstborn slowly poke a head through the widening Q, into the great unknown. Before the child is waist deep in the world I hear the strong cry of life.

Regardless of gender, the child will be strong and healthy. I helped make this child. I

would be generated by a simultaneous use of speech and kissing. . . .” (Barthes:141).

will teach this child--born, borne, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh--about truth,
about love, about the ways of the world.

Oh.

Boy.

It's a boy.

Fragment Five

“Look, here is the Lamb of God!” Jn 1:36

My newborn son's penis is huge. And it is not circumcised. He is not like me.
What do I do now? I don't know anything about foreskins. This is America. American
boys aren't supposed to be born with them. Snakes shed their skins. Baby boys shed
their foreskins. Take him out behind the woodshed and have him skinned.

What do you do with a foreskin?

My son's is the first I've seen. Maybe we should cut it off.

“Do you want to make the first cut?” the doctor asks.

“What??”

“You know, do you want to cut the umbilical cord? Lots of fathers do nowadays.
It's kind of a ritual.”

“Oh. No, not really. You can cut it. I'll just watch.”

Clip.

My daughter is different. We know she is a girl almost from the beginning. We
saw her in utero, in a frontal position on the sonogram. A head, two arms, trunk, two
legs. No penis.

“Really?”

“Really. See?” says the doctor. “Looks like a girl, all right!”

But just to be safe we pick two names: Allison Jean, if the sonogram is right; Stephen Isaac, if it has somehow missed an important part of human anatomy.

I was sicker than a dog when my daughter was conceived. My wife and I had been trying for months to have another child. The child should be born in summer, we decided, just like the first one, because I am a professor, and I will have the summer off to help with the new baby. So in September 1987 we begin babymaking in earnest. But no baby. Now it is February, and I have a horrible cold.

“It’s that time,” Barbara nudges me in the dark.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I just took my temperature.”

“It can’t be,” I groan, “Not tonight. I can’t even breathe!”

“But you’ve got to!” She whispers fiercely. And then she touches me.

I know it’s going to be hard, but I give it a try anyway. After all, I am the eggman.

Much to our surprise a child is conceived that night. Our daughter will be born in October, mid-semester, just in time for midterms. Oh well, I don’t sleep much then anyway.

Allison’s umbilical cord is wrapped around her neck. It stretches taut, her heartbeat quickens. Her face begins to turn blue. With a quiet, urgent tone that sends chills down my spine, the doctor commands my wife, “Stop pushing.”

Then she slips a knife blade between my half-born daughter’s neck and my wife’s vagina. Slowly, carefully she cuts the cord. I am surprised at the rush of air that escapes my throat. I feel lightheaded and look for a chair.

The boy is red and smooth; soft, like crushed velvet. He nestles in my arms as I try awkwardly to hold his huge, swaying head. He is perfect, not one blemish or mole on his entire body. A spotless lamb of God.

My daughter is different. She is born with a wine-stain birthmark in the middle of her forehead. It is a special sign. A bright pink star.

A nurse, noticing my intense gaze, says encouragingly, "It will fade with time." But she misunderstands my staring. I want the star to stay.

Star light, star bright,

first star I see tonight;

I wish I may, I wish I might,

have the wish I wish tonight.

I inspect the rest of her body. Ten fingers, ten toes. An engorged vulva. She waits three minutes before she utters a sound.

She has a beautiful round mole on her left buttock.

--All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how)--

"That mole will make some man happy one day," I say, and my wife smiles.

His eyes try hard to focus on my face⁸ as I speak to him. I have talked to him many times in the past few months, as I nuzzled my wife's bulging belly. For seven months I have been calling him Katie, to help him become the girl I wanted first. But now I hold a boy in my arms and devise for him an impromptu vow as his eyes careen off crazily in different directions.

⁸ "This face is not a metaphor . . . How many faces to the face? More than one. Three, four, but always the only one, and the only one always more than one" (Cixous, as quoted in Phillips and Fewell:7).

“I know I will make many mistakes as a father,” I whisper in his tiny ear. “I’ve never been one before now. But I promise that I will always love you.”

I silently pray that it will be true, for I have never been a father, and I had not been expecting a boy.

I carry him to the Alta Bates Hospital nursery, wrapped in a warm towel, where a nurse washes him off and lays him under a heat lamp, as though he were an entree to be served up from a cafeteria steam table.

This is my son. Hear him cry. A bleating little lamb.

I return to my wife’s side, give her a kiss goodnight, and walk home alone to our two-room apartment on College Avenue in Berkeley. It is June 7, 1985. It is two o’clock in the morning. Even though I know that this will be my last chance in many months to get a good night’s sleep, I lie awake for hours.

I am the father of a son: Benjamin (named for my favorite uncle, who was named for Benjamin Lamb, my paternal grandfather’s maternal grandfather) Walter (named for my wife’s father). A family name. Also a playful inversion of Walter Benjamin, a famous Jewish philosopher and literary critic whose writings I have recently read. My son’s name is a subtle joke that no one in my family or my wife’s family will ever catch. The son’s left-handed father likes to pretend he is a famous New Testament literary critic. So the father gives his firstborn a famous name, turned upside down, just like the way he came into the world.

I have just finished writing a dissertation on the Gospel of John, and I will begin teaching that fall in a tenure-track position at the University of Portland, in Oregon. I have a wonderful wife, a new son, and a new career. I know I will be a good provider,

just like God was a good provider for his Son. I want to be like God. Tonight I feel like a god.

The world is a beautiful place. It is my place, my world. I have made it one person more beautiful than it was yesterday.

Fragment Six

“Moses gave you circumcision” (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs). . . . Jn 7:22

Okay. We’ve had some time to think about it.

Should we have our son circumcised? I am vacillating. Just a few hours ago he was a girl. I was sure of it. Now he is Benjamin, my son. And he has a foreskin.

My wife and I weigh the pros and cons of circumcision for seven days.

Finally, her brother calls. “Look, I had to be circumcised when I was twelve, because of an infection. It was pure hell. Junior high and all that. You should do it now, so he won’t be forced to have it done later.”

How do you clean a foreskin? I don’t know how to do it. If we don’t have him circumcised he will be different, and I will be unable to help him.

Suddenly I am eight years old again, standing in the new, cinder-block dormitory bathroom at Immanuel Mission School. A group of excited Navajo Indian boys, many of

them nearly twice my age, crowd around me as I edge up to the urinal and unzip my trousers. I am apprehensive. I don't know why they have followed me in here or what they are expecting to see. I pull out my little white thingamajigger and begin to urinate. The boys begin to laugh and point. "Ncho' d'íil! Ncho' d'íil!"

I don't know why they are laughing or what they are saying, but I recognize one word, ncho'. It is the Navajo word for the thing I have just exposed in their dormitory bathroom. They are all laughing at my thingamajigger for some reason. I am ashamed, and I don't know why. I want to run and hide, but I can't. I quickly finish what I have come in to do and rush out. For the rest of the day whenever other Navajo boys see me they try to poke me in my thingamajigger. They say "ncho' d'íil!" and grin wickedly.

When I am alone with my one Navajo friend I ask him what ncho' d'íil means. He is embarrassed, and tries hard to explain, but the English words won't come. "It means your thing is . . . is . . . is someway" (Geller:357, 373-374).

The next day when other Navajo boys are trading insults with my brothers and me, I shout at them "Ncho' d'íil!" Ncho' d'íil!" They gang tackle me and beat me up. Whatever it is I have said, I will never again say it to their faces.

On the eighth day we decide to have Benjamin circumcised. Just like a little Jewish boy.

He will look like me.

He will be like me.

I hold him down while the doctor straps his tiny arms and legs to a pad.

He will look like me.

He will be like me.

My son begins to cry.

He doesn't like being tied down, naked and spread-eagled, like the Greek letter

X.⁹

Caught in the surgeon's finely woven web,

he fights to free himself (Derrida:213; Doniger:60-64).

In just a few moments it will be over, my son. Trust me.

You will be free. Free indeed.

I hear the bleating of a lamb.¹⁰

Abraham is my father.

Abraham is my father.

"It won't really hurt, you know," the doctor says reassuringly. I've done hundreds of these before. He won't remember a thing. Trust me. I'm a father too."

"After properly cleansing the penis and pubis, the dorsal aspect of the prepuce is put on a stretch by grasping it on either side of the median line with a pair of hemostats" (Yellen:147).

This boy should have been named Isaac--Laughter--like his great, great, great,

⁹"According to the **X** (the chiasmus) (which can be considered a quick thematic diagram of dissemination), the preface, as semen, is just as likely to be left out, to well up and get lost as a seminal difference, as it is to be reappropriated into the sublimity of the father. As the preface to a book, it is the word of a father assisting and admiring his work, answering for his son, losing his breath in sustaining, retaining, idealizing, reinternalizing, and mastering his seed. The scene would be acted out, if such were possible, between father and son alone: autoinsemination, homoinsemination, reinsemination" (Derrida:44-45).

According to some scholars, the entire Gospel of John is built upon chiasmic patterns (Ellis, Mlakuzhyil, Howard-Brook). Indeed, the heart of its chiasmic preface focuses on "reinsemination" ("But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God." Jn 1:12-13).

¹⁰"Take our lamb and walk with me!" (Gosse:81).

great grandfather.

Isaac, my son, I want to hear you laugh.

Laugh, boy! Laugh!

The joke's on me. I have helped bind you to an altar of plastic and steel. You will be altered, and no divine voice will tell the doctor to put down his knife.

Expert textpert, choking smokers,

Don't you think the joker laughs at you?

You are my son, but you don't look like me.

I want you to look like me. I want you to be like me. I want you to fit in.

I don't want other American boys to laugh and stare at you in the gym or the bathroom when they see you naked, with a foreskin in your hands.

My eyes are on the doctor.

Steady, steady.

“A flat probe, anointed with vaseline, is then inserted between the prepuce and the glans to separate adherent mucous membrane. The prepuce is then gently drawn backwards exposing the entire glans penis. . . . In cases where the prepuce is drawn tightly over the glans, a partial dorsal slit will facilitate applying the cone of draw stud [the bell] over the glans. After anointing the inside of the cone, it is placed over the glans penis allowing enough of the mucous membrane to fit below the cone so that too much is not removed. The prepuce is then pulled through and above the bevel hole in the platform and clamped in place. In this way the prepuce is crushed against the cone causing hemostasis. We allow this pressure to remain five minutes, and in older children slightly longer. The excess of the prepuce is then cut with a sharp knife without any danger of

cutting the glans, which is always protected by the cone portion of the instrument, leaving a very fine 1/32 of an inch ribbon-like membrane formed between the new union of the skin and mucous membrane. The pressure is then released” (Yellen:147). No anesthesia is used.

Corporation T-shirt, stupid bloody Tuesday.

Man, you been a naughty boy, you let your face grow long.

It Is finished.

Ncho’ d’íil.

Fragment Seven

“The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.” Jn 3:35

Watch my son writhe.

He is purple with rage and pain.

“The application of two hemostats to the edges of the sensitive, unanesthetized prepuce, the application of a third crushing hemostat to the prepuce before cutting the dorsal slit, and the crushing of the entire circumference of the prepuce by turning a screw on the Gomco Clamp produces excruciating pain. Since Anand and Hickey's article in the New England Journal of Medicine . . . , it can no longer be denied that pain is felt by the male infant during circumcision. Although the Gomco Clamp may have been designed to reduce the risk of bleeding, it has produced excruciating pain in every infant on which it is used. Even if anesthesia is used, the post-operative pain originating in a pleasure center can be expected to have serious untoward consequences” (Denniston).

My son screams. He screams and he screams.

I cannot console him.

His eyes are tightly shut. He doesn't know that I am here beside him, holding his hand. I will not let him go.

The Father is in me and I am in the Father.

I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.

The father loves the son and has placed all things in his hands.

In his hands.

In his tiny pink hands.

I am the father.

The son of far too many Abrahams.

But I am worse than them.

I pay someone else to take knife in hand and do what I cannot do.

“During the biblical period (c. 1700 BCE - 140 CE), the operator, or mohel placed a metal shield with a slit in it near the tip of the foreskin, so only the tip was removed. Often the mohel . . . pulled up on the outside of the foreskin before placing the shield. The result was that virtually all of the inner lining of the prepuce was preserved. This was known as Bris Milah.

“The wonderful statue of David by Michelangelo appears intact but is in fact correctly represented because the future King David has been circumcised by the accepted procedure of the biblical era. Only the tip of his foreskin has been removed, fulfilling the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17)” (Denniston. Cf. Gairdner:1433; Hall:74).

Hours later I am still clasping my son's doll-like fingers.

Benjamin!

Benjamin!

I will always love you.

Jesus!

Sweet, sweet Jesus!

I'm sorry.

I am sorry.

Look at me! I'm wet with your sweat and tears.

You look like me.

You will be like me.

You will like me.

For I am the eggman.¹¹

Fragment Eight

“Put your sword back in its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the

Father has given me?” Jn 18:11

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” My doctor asks as he enters the room where I lie, half-naked, on an examining table.

My legs are spread apart, and my feet are in webbed stirrups, as though I am about to give birth. A white sheet covers the lower part of my body.

A nurse comes in and cleanses my crotch with some orange, purifying liquid. Does she find my penis tiny? How does it compare with other penises she has seen?

Does she ever take notes? I watch her eyes. She gives nothing away.

Do I want to go through with this?

Of course I do. I have two healthy children, one girl and one boy. And I have to

¹¹“The world came out of an egg. More precisely, the living creator of the life of the world came out of an egg: the sun, then, was at first carried in an eggshell” (Derrida:87).

put them through college someday. I can't afford to have any more children.

Through with this.

Hmmm. . . . Dia with the genitaliave? Expression of agency? (With a note of urgency.) Or is it an ablative of accompaniment? Perhaps it should be eis with the accusative. The idea of limit, extent, direction toward, is important in this case.

"Yes, I want to go through with it.

"Ouch!"

The doctor's needle pricks my skin at a very sensitive point.

"Did you feel that?"

"Yeah, whaddyya think?"

The doctor removes the sheet covering the triangular lower half of my body, my "triplicity of death" as Jacques Derrida might say (Derrida:24-26), and I lean forward, propping myself up on my elbows. I watch as the doctor makes an incision in my scrotum and pulls out two tiny threads that connect my testicles to their ejaculatory ducts.

Ah, the vas deferens.

Truly, I am the vine, and my Doktorvater is the vinedresser. He is removing every living branch in me that bears fruit.

I am still thinking of Derrida and one of his many books--was it in Dissemination that he talked about the vastness of différance? I can't remember. I'm having problems concentrating on Derrida. I have a weird sensation in my anus, my derrière--

da . . . yes, right there--

as though someone is pulling an enormously long stringnified from it.

The doctor explains the surgery's aftereffects in response to my unvoiced

anxieties.

“You’ll be sore for a few days.

“Don’t do any lifting.

“Take pain pills.

“Oh, and be sure to wear an athletic cup--you know, a Jacqustrap--for at least forty-eight hours.”

I am the vine.

I am the eggman.

Clip.¹²

I will never be the same. I am forever different.

Clip.

The penis . . . is . . . is . . . mightier than the sword.

Fragment Nine

“Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.” Jn 4:14

I imagine a milky white, life-giving liquid seeping out onto the doctor’s fingers.

From my side are flowing rivers of living water.¹³

For ages, fathers and sons have drunk from wells like this. Jacob and his sons, for example. This liquid is a man’s identity, the proof of his virility, masculinity, power. I

¹²“Clip out an example, since you cannot and should not undertake the infinite commentary that at every moment seems necessarily to engage and immediately to annul itself, letting itself be read in turn by the apparatus itself.

“So make some incision, some violent arbitrary cut. . . .” (Derrida:300-301).

¹³“If one looks at the Fourth Gospel for signs of conception, one is initially disappointed. From Jesus’ side comes not blood and a thick, white, frothy substance, but blood and water. If one realizes however, that in the first century the male semen was thought to be thick, white and foam-like because it was composed of water mixed with breath/spirit, the tool through which the male principle worked, then the situation changes” (Fehribach:130).

have been cut off from the land of the living.

Come, all you who are thirsty. Drink of me before I disappear.

A final drink.

To death, then.

Bottoms up. Derrière--da.

I go home and my wife makes a careful inspection of my body.

“Oh, my goodness, it has shrunk!”

She is worried.

“Is it supposed to look like that?”

I look down. It’s true. My scrotum is black-and-blue and my penis is no larger than that of my four year-old son.

Within a few days, however, I’m a little kid, playing with myself again. Every few weeks I masturbate and ejaculate into a little plastic cup.¹⁴

Yellow matter custard, dripping from a dead dog’s eye.

I put the top on the cup and take it to the hospital.

See what I can do? I am still the eggman, yes I am.

“Am I dead yet?”

“No, not yet.”

This well is deeper than I thought.

Four months later the harvest comes, and I finally hear the response I have been waiting for.

“It is finished. You are dead.

¹⁴“Dissemination produces (itself in) that: a cut/cup of pleasure” (Derrida:57).

“Now you can go out and live again.”

Fragment Ten

“Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Jn 20:17

Ascending is a particularly male problem. Every pubescent male lives in mortal fear of the spontaneous, uncontrollable ascension.¹⁵ Public showers and public beaches raise especially embarrassing problems for the adolescent male who is unfamiliar with the phenomenon. And every junior high schoolboy has to figure out on his own how to handle these tissues when they arise. After all, no guys ever give other guys lessons on its many possible disguises. When you’re at the beach, for example, you have to learn on your own the importance of turning over on to your stomach every time a pretty girl walks by. And you often have to learn the hard way, not to get up until everything has calmed down. In gymnasium locker rooms, you have to learn the art of meditation; how to be the master of your wandering imagination. When you are naked and in the shower with twenty other boys, think about baseball or what you’re going to eat for dinner, not about the girl you’re going to meet in a few minutes in study hall.

As a graduate teaching assistant, I learned to use the classroom podium as a defensive weapon. When there were cute coeds in cutoffs sitting in the front row, I found that I could protect myself by not moving too far from the comfort of the podium’s shadow.¹⁶

But now I am nearly forty. I have two children, and I have just been cut off from

¹⁵“To be presented, that is, to stand upright. Uprightness always announces that a single murder is in progress” (Derrida:302).

¹⁶“You are beginning to follow the relation between a certain brandished erection and a certain head or speech that is cut off, the brand or the pole rising up in the manifestation of the scission, unable to present themselves otherwise than in the play, or even the laughter--the display of sharply pointed teeth--of the cut. To be presented, that is, to stand upright” (Derrida:302).

the land of the living. So I worry. Do ascensions still happen this side of the resurrection, two thousand years after the spearthrust in Jesus' side? Will my ascensions be visible to the naked eye, or will they be only spiritual in nature?

My doctor says not to worry. The ascensions will be corporeal.

I forget to worry, and nothing out of the ordinary happens.

I have a theory as to why men can't find things in refrigerators. My wife says it's genetic. It has something to do with a male's defective Y chromosome. But I don't think that's the origin of the problem. No, man's inability to find things in refrigerators has its roots in male physiology. Think about it for a moment. Everyone knows that the male body is made in such a way that its most precious commodity is right up front, in plain sight. So we males are not used to looking behind other things to find what we're looking for. What's not up front and obvious must not exist--like the "hypothetical," feminine hokmah or sophia behind the logos of John 1:1. Women, on the other hand, are built differently. They learn at a very early age that the most important things are stuck back behind other things. So women keep looking, and they don't give up until they find what it is they're looking for.¹⁷

Fragment Eleven

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time

¹⁷"[S]uspicion exposes the androcentrism of the text itself which often--though not always!--undergirds androcentric exegesis" (Lee:141 [my emphasis]; cf. Derrida:212-215).

into

the mother's womb and be born?" Jn 3:4

My father was my grammar school teacher for four years, in the two-room mission school on the Navajo Indian Reservation. He was my Nicodemus, a genuine Nick at Nite, long before there was cable TV or Nickelodeon. Poor old Saint Nick, leader of the Pharisees. He never did quite get things right.

Nicodemus tries to teach Jesus the meaning of Greek words in the same way that I try to teach my children the etymologies of English words.

"From the Greek," I say, with a dramatic, professorial swirl of my hands. And my kids groan, "Oh Dad, not again!"

It's a ritual game we play, like Jesus and Nicodemus playing with the meanings of anochen and pneuma. It is the father's task to teach his children about origins, about the arche of the logos.¹⁸ I do it because I hope my children will remember their dad's silliness one day when they are taking their SATs and college entrance exams.

"Oh yeah! Remember when Dad used to say, "From the Greek?" "Heuristic"-- from the Greek word heurisko, 'I find': hence, 'helping to find an answer.'"

Harvard and Yale will be calling, thanks to my crazy little word games.

My father taught me grammar and entomology, but not etymologies. From him I learned how to chloroform insects and pin them to cardboard. I learned how to put things together in order, with appropriate nouns and adjectives, in order to make sense. I

learned how to cut apart sentences and insects and diagram them. Just like Nicodemus

¹⁸"Logos is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very presence without the present attendance of his father. His father who answers. His father who speaks and answers for him. Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing. At least that is what is said by the one who says: it is the father's thesis" (Derrida:77).

tries to open up Jesus and draw him out. But ano and pneuma don't fit the proper grammatical constrictions. They scramble out of the egg of the mother language before the father has a chance to catch them and push them back inside where they belong.

Seize the word! Neutralize it, cauterize it, sterilize it. Pin it to wood before it disseminates and degenerates into syntactical jibberish.

Semolina pilchard, climbing up the Eiffel Tower.

Elementary penguin, singing Hare Krishna.

Man, you should have seen them kicking Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁹

Fragment Twelve

“You search the writings because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.” Jn 5:39

My son has decided to read my book, Reading with a Passion, for his sixth-grade book report. The class assignment is to read an autobiography, and since part of my book is autobiographical, he wants to write about me. I am not crazy about his idea, since it is difficult reading and he won't understand much of anything he reads. But I am pleased that he wants to read the book. After all, I gave him and my daughter Allison autographed copies when it first came out. I was hoping he would read the book sometime before I died. I just didn't expect him to try it when he was eleven.

Ben Staley

3/5/97

¹⁹“Edgar Allan Poe: Mallarmé called him the ‘absolute literary case’” (Derrida:229).

Reading

Book Report

Reading With A Passion

I. Introduction. Have you ever dreamed of doing an autobiography book report on your own father? Well, I did. My father's name is Jeffrey L. Staley. He comes from an immense family that consists of one father, Robert, two mothers Betty, and the step-mother is Esther. My dad also has two sisters, Brenda and Beth, and three brothers, Rob, David, and Greg. Some of his famous ancestors are: George Johnson, who rode horse-back in "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show." William Brewster is another famous ancestor of his, William was the founder of the Plymouth colony.

On December 22, 1951, my dad's body met the world. Surprisingly, December 22 is the same day that the Mayflower unloaded its cargo at Plymouth Rock. When my dad was born, doctors found nothing wrong with him. But when his older, stronger brothers found out he was born without peripheral vision in his right eye, they would constantly try to coax him into playing baseball. My dad has lived in many places in his life, these places are: Ramona, Kansas, Immanuel Mission, Arizona, and Berkeley, California. Jeff is currently living in Bothell, Washington. Before coming to Bothell, he was living in Portland, Oregon.

II. Can an ordinary dad be famous? Although my dad is not really famous, he is to me. Famous to me is not always being the fastest in the world, or being the best known in the world. My dad is famous to me because he is responsible, loving, and caring to his family members. He is also cooperative. You would have to be if you had two older brothers. My dad has become "famous" by accomplishing what he has done. He has

taught at over four different colleges, been a father, a younger brother, an older brother, a McDonald's employee, and a son! If you ask me, that's a lot to be respected for. My dad has also been through peer pressure, and pressure in general. Just those two are some of the big things people have to overcome in a lifetime. Jeff has also come over many hardships too. His brother has given him drugs before, and he did not know what to do with them. So, being the good companion he was, he passed them out after school.

III. Although Jeff's accomplishments do not affect us today (us not being the world or country), they have affected many. For example, his accomplishment of becoming a teacher has affected his students. They are probably now more "equipped" to go out in the world to teach others about Jesus Christ. Also, he has experienced being a younger and older sibling. This accomplishment lets him be a better father in a way. That experience helped him because it let him appreciate both sides of an argument. It also let him be a younger child with his younger brother and sisters, but I also think it let him be an older child with his more mature brothers. That is why I think my dad has made a difference to some people, but not necessarily everyone.

IV. Now you may think that just because a dad looks old, he is old. Well, my dad is an old guy, but not too old. At heart he is still twelve years old. Now, at the age of about nine and ten, my dad liked two weird things. He liked his brothers "girlfriends" and he liked butter, ketchup, and bologna sandwiches. Pretty strange, don't you think? By now you probably think my dad is pretty crazy. Well, he did some unusual things too, like in the summer, he liked to burn up ants with a magnifying glass. He also liked to pull the legs off of crickets or grasshoppers, then he would feed them to a nearby black widow

spider, and watch it slowly devour them.²⁰ In the dark of night though, he and his brothers would pull the “flashlights” off of harmless little fireflies, stick the lights on their fingers, and wiggle their fingers around!

Jeff tells the story of his most embarrassing moment when his family was not so very wealthy. In fact, they couldn’t even afford to buy jelly for their toast. When they finally could buy a jar, they did. The next morning my dad was having a “ceremony” in celebration of having jam. He was holding the jar above his head, then, he dropped it!

V. What I really admire about my dad is how, as long as he has lived, he really only remembers the good times and not his bad times. I hope one day I will be like him, in some ways. I also admire how he has stuck to teaching, even though he has been turned down, and been “fired” by many colleges. Someday, I hope my dream will come true. My dad’s accomplishments have changed my life because they have made me a better person. They have made me a better person because I have someone I can look to when I have problems, someone with experience.

Benjamin asked me to proofread his essay when he was done, and I did. I wrote at the top, “Good work! You’ve done an excellent job!” in big round letters.

Now he is at my side, trying to get my attention.

“Dad, do you have any clothes I can borrow?”

“Why do you want my clothes?” I ask suspiciously.

“Well, tomorrow I have to do a class presentation about the autobiography I read, so I thought I would dress up like you.”

²⁰“A spider emerging ‘from the depths of its nest,’ a headstrong dot that transcribes no dictated exclamation but rather intransitively performs its own writing (later on, you will read in this the inverted figure of castration), the text comes out of its hole and lays its menace bare: it passes, in one fell swoop, to the ‘real’ text and to the ‘extratextual’ reality” (Derrida:42; cf. Doniger:63).

I go upstairs and rummage through my closet, finding a hat and shirt that he can wear. I discover an old transistor radio that I bought when I was twelve years old, and show that to him, too.

“I used to listen to ‘Yours truly, KOMA, Oklahoma City!’ on this little radio.” I pat it and sing their signature ditty from 1964.

“That’s where I heard the Beatles for the first time, you know. Out there on the reservation, thirty miles from the closest post office, Navajo girls used to come running over to listen to my Montgomery Ward radio whenever I yelled, ‘It’s the Beatles!’

“KOMA was the only rock ‘n roll station we could pick up there in northern Arizona. I would fall asleep with the earphone stuck in my ear, and wake up in the morning to static.”

“Cool, Dad. Does it still work?”

“I don’t know, let’s try it. I haven’t used it in about twenty years.”

We find a nine-volt battery, put it in the radio, and turn it on.

Static.

I turn the dial.

Music. Maybe it’s KOMA.

“She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah!”

“Come on, Dad! That’s not the Beatles! It’s a song by Alice in Chains!”

“Oh.”

“Hey, can I take this radio to school too?”

“Sure! Just don’t lose it. It’s one of the only things I have left from my childhood.”

“I’ll take good care of it. Thanks, Dad!”

And he gives me a kiss.

Fragment Thirteen

“Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for what the Father does, the Son does likewise.” Jn 5:19

A poem for my son, at five years old.

Jigsaw Puzzles

So like the father is the son,²¹

matching color to color,

shape to shape,

with quickness and precision;

with flashes of intuition.

Surprises are interlocked

with carefully crafted solutions:

Sometimes he follows shadows to light,

or bright hues to near whites;

at other times, the slippery

ferocity of gravity

pulls pairs together.

But, curiously, he does not begin with borders.

He leaves

without speaking,

²¹“Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing” (Derrida:77; cf. Lee:146).

those straight edges
that protect the slow-forming picture
from the chaos creeping
across the dining room table,
for another to shape and fit.

Fragment Fourteen

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.

No one will snatch them out of my hand.” Jn 10:28

Cape Kiwanda juts two hundred feet high and two and a half miles out into the Pacific Ocean, just south of Tillamook Bay, Oregon. It is a hazy, blue-green Memorial Day weekend, and my wife and children and I are hiking with friends out to a point on the cape where the sea meets the sky. It is the end of the migration season for gray whales, and my son, who wants to be a marine biologist when he grows up, hopes to see at least one today. We make it to the end of the trail and sit on the edge of the rocky cliff, eating our lunch, and scanning the ocean with binoculars. No whales.

My wife, my daughter Allison, and our friends decide to head back to the campground. But Benjamin and I stay behind for a few minutes. We want one last look.

I notice a faint trail heading over the side of the cliff, beyond the guard rail, and out of sight below us. Forgetting about whales for the moment, and remembering my childhood on the Navajo Reservation, I hop over the guard rail and beckon for my son to follow. We will explore where few men have dared to tread. Deep sea caves, with fierce, fire-breathing dragons. Emerald-eyed sirens and frolicking dolphins. My son hesitates, but after a few words of fatherly encouragement he decides to join me. We quickly

disappear from view of the hikers gaping at us from above, and scramble down the steep, boulder-strewn path. Suddenly we are alone on the cape, with nothing but a fuzzy blue sky above us and deep purple waves crashing in the distance below.

We round a sharp switchback and find a twenty-foot cliff in front of us. I pause. Shall we go further? My son has never climbed before. He is a city boy, unlike me. But I grew up in the wilderness of the Navajo Reservation. I spent my summers dancing on cliffs ten times this height. My son is nearly ten years old. It is time for me to teach him the ways of a serpent on a rock.

I edge out ahead of him on the cliff and show him the moves I know by heart: hand hold, foot hold; hand hold, foot hold. Like line dancing.

My son follows, but he trembles.

“Dad, I’m scared.”

“Good! It’s a good thing to be a little scared. It’s when you get over-confident that you have problems.”

The cliff is only twenty feet high, but the ridge drops off steeply below us. A person could tumble a hundred feet or more before coming to a stop in a tangle of prickly Oregon grape and wizened Douglas fir. I catch my son gazing at the slope below.

“Don’t look down. Just keep your eyes on me.”

He does.

Right foot. Right hand.²²

Left foot. Left hand . . .²³

²²“Now, on the one hand . . .” (Derrida:97, his emphasis).

²³“On the other hand . . .” (Derrida:97, his emphasis).

His hand misses the outcropping of rock.

He loses his balance.

He begins to fall backward.

“Dad!”

I am here. No more than two feet from him.

On the ledge in front of him.

My left arm grabs his shoulder and forces him up against the cliff.

I am here. Now. Called alongside him, to help him. Like a pair of cleats clamped into the cliffside. A solitary paraclete.

We pause and catch our breath. We exhale slowly, then inch our way down.

Right foot. Right hand.

Left foot. Left hand.

We make it to a more level spot and relax for a while, alone on the cliffside, with the late afternoon sun, warm on our backs.

“We should probably head back. Mom will be wondering what happened to us.”

“Yeah. But Dad, don’t tell her about me on that cliff, okay? She would have a cow.”

We scamper up to join the main trail, and scan the horizon one last time for a glimpse of migrating whales.

“Look, Ben! A giant gray!”

And so it is. The behemoth lazily turns and flashes its immense side at us before it dives beneath a shimmering wave.

We head back to the campground in silence.

Only once he looks up and grins. “Dad, you saved my life today.”

“I know. You know I’d never leave you.”

“I know. Thanks, Dad.”

I take his hand and squeeze it tightly.

My son must lead now, and I will follow.

My eyes are watery. My vision blurs.

I am blinded by a speck of dust suddenly caught in my eye.

Fragment Fifteen

**“... protect them in your name ... so that they may be one,
as we are one.” Jn 17:11**

He is my son. I am his father. I am in him and he is in me.

But my daughter is different. She is the intruder, the one that upsets the natural equilibrium. I am in her too, and she in me. But it cannot be the same. Even though we occasionally still sleep together, it cannot be the same as with my son. And I worry about that. I am hot and I sleep in boxer shorts. It’s the niacin. I take it to control my cholesterol. But it gives me hot flashes, and I have felt overly warm ever since I started taking it more than two years ago. So I sleep half naked.

My wife is out of town, and my daughter sneaks into our bed at two o’clock in the morning.

“Daddy, I hear scary noises.”

I mumble some incoherent words and turn over.

Crabalocker fishwife, pornographic priestess,

Boy, you’ve been a naughty girl you let your knickers down.

Will she remember this night and other nights like it when she is twenty, and will she accuse me of unspeakable acts?

I have never touched her that way. But there were times before she was born that I thought I might. And I was afraid. And so God gave me a son first.

I will not hold you, daughter of Abraham, for I might ascend. Even though I am old and you are my daughter, I might ascend. So I turn my back to you and hide the shame of my nocturnal ascensions. I feel safe with my back to you, my daughter.²⁴ And so I will show you only my backside, fleetingly, as I glide by in the night. Only our toes will touch. For no one has ever seen the father. But the son, who is close on the father's other side has made him known.

Fragment Sixteen

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jn 12:24-25

My daughter is eight years old when we move to Seattle. We have to find new doctors for our children, and now we are in the process of interviewing pediatricians for Allison. This is one my wife likes, and she wants me to meet her.

My wife and I are also somewhat concerned about the mole on Allison's bottom, the one that she was born with. It is no longer round and smooth as it was when she was a baby. It has grown larger. Now it is bumpy and asymmetrical.

“Allison is forty-nine inches tall, and weighs forty-eight pounds. Her blood pressure is ninety-eight over sixty-eight. She's a healthy girl!” The pediatrician smiles

²⁴“He had written: ‘The text is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the Political Father’ (Pleasure of the Text)” (Barthes:79).

reassuringly. “Now, where’s that mole?”

“Right--or is it her left buttock?” My wife looks at me with a question in her eyes.
“I can’t remember.”

“It’s on her left buttock,” I say without thinking. I know where it is. It has been mine for eight years.

--All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how).--

The new pediatrician does a careful inspection. “We should really have it removed. The sooner the better, just to be on the safe side. Strange things can happen to moles like this when girls hit puberty.”

The doctor doesn’t know that I have been saving this mark, this grain of wheat, and it is not time to give it up.²⁵

“Will it hurt to take it off?” Allison asks. A worried frown crosses her face.

“Just a little. But not for long.”

I want to tell the doctor, “You can’t have it. It’s not yours to take.” But the seed is not dead, and I want my girl to live forever.

Fragment Seventeen

“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will also live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Jn 14:19-20

He still kisses me on the lips occasionally, this son of mine who is eleven years

²⁵“More precisely, there were two of us, now: the one whose intact skin could be shown to everyone, the one whose outer envelope did not immediately provoke horror, and the other riddled with gashes and holes, the flesh cut to the quick, crimson and purple, skinned like a steer. . .” (Philippe Sollers, Numbers 1:29 [as quoted in Derrida:301]).

old. I thought the ritual would have ended long ago.

More and more often he just kisses me on the cheek. But there are times when only a kiss on the lips will do.

He started kissing me on the lips when he was about a year old. He would watch my wife and me kiss. Then he would mimic us, and we would laugh. Now I wonder when it will stop, when he will kiss me like this for the last time. He has no idea where and when the kissing began. And when it stops, he will probably forget that he ever did it. But I am his father, and I will not forget.

I don't want this kissing to stop, but I am afraid. What if someone sees us kissing like this, at our ages? What will they think?

He still sleeps with a night light on. Wrapped in San Francisco 49er blankets, he prays passionately each evening that God will keep him from bad dreams, and that God will keep his parents safe and alive until they are both one hundred.

When I am one hundred and praying on my deathbed, I want my son at my side. I want to hold his head on my chest. I want to feel his warm lips on mine. I want to smell his sweet breath tickling my mustache.

I want my daughter to slip into the room and ask, "Dad, can I crawl into bed with you?"

And I will say "Yes, you may--just this once."

I will not turn away from her, and she will hold me as close as I held her when we were both young. Then she will sing to me softly--

swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim:

"I am she as you are he as you are me and we are all together.

See how we fly like Lucy in the sky, see how we run.

We're crying."

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change. . . .

"Sitting on a cornflake, waiting for the van to come. . . ."

I smile and drift off to sleep with no fear of bad dreams.

Even as the night light dims, I fear no evil, for thou art with me my daughter, my
only begotten son.²⁶

²⁶“What has become of the present here? the past present? the future present? ‘You’? ‘Me’? ‘Us’ will have been in the imperfect of that echo” (Derrida:232).

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