

I AM A HUMAN

A memoir on grief, identity, and hope

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*For my dad, whose passing was a baptism. And for Christina,
who has walked faithfully next to me in my grief.*

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“These are our few live seasons. Let us live them as purely as
we can, in the present.”

— Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Introduction

I awoke this morning and had a conversation with the God of the universe. It was the rumble of the throat-clearing garbage truck that stirred me, following its meek headlights in the dark, the way a tired owner follows his dog.

“Thank you . . . for the garbage collectors. They’re up before all of us, clearing away the filth of the world, as you do.” God responds with the silence that nods to truth. I pour my coffee and sit down on the couch, already drifting dazed on the soft current of time, the ever-running river.

Why can’t we go back?

Why can’t we forge ahead?

Why do we have to stay where we are?

Is there anything beyond it?

These questions, like apple skin, wrap tightly around me, housing the life-soaked and wondrous confusion underneath. And somewhere deep at the center, the apple seeds are sleeping in brown-black patience, comfortable in their own potential to make

apple groves where we see grass.

What does it mean to be human? This is what I want to know. And how much meaning does one life have after it's gone?

Transience.

Limitation.

Perception.

Hope.

These are the four words I hold in my hands, the ones I was given in the morning dark. I'm going to set them free on the pages now. You watch with me. At the end, tell me if you know what it means to be human.

Transience

One of my earliest memories is dim but potent. It draws me to the depths of identity, need, behavior, shame, and sadness.

I was five. In the gold-orange twilight, I stood on the grassy hill in our back yard. We lived in a small, suburban neighborhood resting on the rolling landscape of eastern Pennsylvania. I'd asked my mom to make me a paper airplane. My dad wasn't home from work yet. She didn't know how, but she gave no indication. She pretended. She handed me a floppy, roughly folded sheet of paper and turned to go inside, walking quickly as I tossed the paper into the air, planning on flight. The paper rolled before me for a second and tumbled to the grass at my feet.

And then there was this moment, a Mona Lisa, this fraction of a second when I picked my head up and saw my mom rushing through the screen door with her head down. I felt something sink in the pith of my soul. I didn't know why. But I had never felt that way before, as if I were a robin about to jump into flight before realizing my plumage never came

in, that I couldn't caress the wind with my feathered bones, the way I'd seen the other birds do.

Have you ever been grounded like that?

The world is a fragile place with so many birds robbed of flight. But we do fly eventually. And then we don't. And then we do.

* * *

Just before bed, I put down my book and picked up my journal.

Are you ready to stop believing that you're immortal?" Not really. I've never been. It started when I remember breathing, and the sunset light pouring through the gold dust of summer, warming the brick on the house, painting the present with the aura of eternity. How could this ever come to an end? How could I part from the sound and the light? How could I leave when I only know how to arrive?

We keep believing that we'll live forever, but it's a secret buried deep under the sediment of experience. Cancer can wash away that sediment, or Leukemia,

or a thousand other calls of death. But given enough time, the sediment settles again. The blinding truth of our transience is covered by tiny bits of rock . . . until it's dark. We can't stand in the light of our mortality very long. It starts to burn us. That's why we bury it. We bury the truth to avoid being burned by it; we cover over to carry on.

What if we didn't?

* * *

How much longer are you going to do this—drink a glass of water? Bite into bread? Push your muscles into the earth at a regular rhythm? Make love with your wife? How much longer?

And don't do that thing where you say, "Not forever," and then go back to forgetting about it, feigning eternity with regularity. You know better. You watched him die, remember? You watched him die in your living room.

But what else are you supposed to do? Treasure your moments like final drops of rain before a drought that never seems to come? Cry every time you bite into a sandwich? Write a sonnet for every step of your three-mile run? Of course not. Still,

there's something here. What is it?

We're afraid of our transience. Ernest Becker said that we're always chasing heroism because we want to stand out and be remembered; we want to protest our death, to believe that somehow we'll live forever, and people will see us for the heroes we are.¹ There's some truth to this, but only some. Do you know why? Because all of it, in the end, is futile. We can't control how people perceive or remember us. We can't. But we're stubborn. We keep trying. At least, I do.

We want to believe that our transience is a bad dream, that we'll wake from it somehow, that we'll see our father didn't really disappear after the cancer. It was all a grand illusion. And then God opens his mouth: "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14). That's transience. That's your life and mine: mist.

I still remember standing—eighteen years old—in a vacant hospital room just after learning that my father would die of cancer. I stared out the third-story window at the pipes that vented steam from mechanical systems on lower floors. The steam was

1. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), Part I: The Depth Psychology of Heroism, Kindle edition.

white and full-bodied and real . . . until it wasn't. It appeared only to disappear. Transparency came with elevation. That's me, isn't it?

I don't fully believe that I will die one day. Perhaps you don't either. Psychologists would say we have to constantly repress our fear of death in order to live. We disbelieve in our own death viscerally, even though we know conceptually that it's inevitable. That disbelief began to battle within me after I watched my father die. This book is a footnote to what I've learned about being human after the rock of that moment struck the glass surface of my young life.

But despite all I've learned and seen and experienced, part of me wishes I wasn't there that night in early June. (God, why did I have to be there? Why did I have to watch life trickle into silence like water slipping down into a cavern beneath the rock?) Something tells me I had to be there because the experience would be one of my greatest teachers. And here I am marking paper with my pen seventeen years later. It's still teaching—mostly the same lessons that I refuse to soak in.

What's it teaching? Transience. I have to keep writing that word just as you have to keep reading

it. It's part of what it means to exist in this world. And yet it may be the part we most repress. I once heard in a movie that being young means secretly believing that you will be the one person who lives forever. But couldn't that also be a definition for being human? We know it's not true. The longer we live, the more acquainted we grow with exits. The subtle songs of life in persons go quiet. New songs cry into being. Everything overlaps. It's a symphony of going and coming, death and birth, silence and sound. We stand amidst the symphony in disbelief. Could our song really ever run quiet? Could it ever stop?

Two years after my father died, I had a mental and spiritual breakdown. I developed an anxiety disorder.² The world felt like one giant wet piece of paper, ripping into fuzzy seams all around me. Nothing held. I didn't understand death, and then I didn't understand life. I became a cripple in a functioning body. Even the simplest task required a spiritual cane. I couldn't hold myself up walking from the living room to the kitchen.

The truth of transience had pressed the air out of me. I was having to live in a new atmosphere all the sudden, with oxygen heavy as lead. I couldn't

2. I write about this in the context of my faith in *Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety* (Independently published, 2020).

get enough in. How could I find my footing if I was always moving? How does steam stand up?

* * *

In the early weeks and months of anxiety, I saw the whole world moving. They say the world spins 1,000 miles per hour. It's just so big that we can't feel it. But when you're shattered by anxiety, it's like you can feel it—the constant spinning. I was caught up in motion that was always faster than my feet. Leaves went through their color journey—the green of vigor, the yellow of maturity, the gold of fading glory, and the brown of bowing out. I used to gather them in my hands and crunch them into tiny pieces—little skeletons that once held sunlight. But then I was skeletal, a pressed and ossified memory of light. That was me now, wasn't it?

The 35-mph speed limit sign just down the street—bold, white, and shimmering in the summer—would gather dirt and rain residue as the days fell into autumn. In winter, it would darken even more with the shorter days, gray as the lonely clouds that loomed above. The summer-white glory was fading. That was me, wasn't it?

My clothes would be clean cotton, pressed and neat. And then the fabric would gather into tabs and let a forest of tiny threads stretch into the atmosphere. Eventually, my clothes would get donated to Good Will. That was me, wasn't it?

Transience. I was surrounded by it. I always had been, but I didn't notice until my father's respiratory system shut down in front of me, like an old train engine with no more coal in the furnace. Final breaths came counted.

Three. The exhalation was slow and settled.

Two. Wait. What's happening here? Life can't fully stop like this. We stared at his face as a collapsing star. Where does light go?

One. Hold on. Please.

And then the haunting realization that one soul had just been subtracted from the room. The star of his life had actually collapsed. His face rested like a stone on a riverbed. Decades of smiles and lifted cheeks, of furrowed brows and listening stares—all of it now behind closed doors of stillness.

Transience transforms us from one thing into another.

* * *

That night revealed one thing—and it kept revealing it through the years: we cannot stop the movement. The river will run. The leaves will turn. The flowers will fade. The sun will rise. What's new is always standing on the broad shoulders of what's old. Things. Keep. Changing. You know this. They put it in Hallmark cards.

I hated it then, and sometimes I still hate it. So much is lost, isn't it? It's like the whole world is dammed by a barricade too low and too weak. Everything is pouring over the top and falling down to an unsearchable bottom. And we're running around with buckets trying to scoop something up—anything—to save it. But our buckets are bottomless.

Still, that doesn't keep us from trying to fill them, to hold on to what's already over the edge of the cliff. Why do you think we value pictures so much? They're attempts to capture what's just about to pass over the lip of the dam.

God help us. What are we doing? Fighting with transience. Fighting with time.

* * *

This is the darker side of transience. But there is a brighter side, too. Doesn't there have to be?

Transience can be a river running over a cliff edge, where we slap the water and rage against loss. But it can also be a song. And songs would be nothing without beginnings and endings.

* * *

My father was a song. The first notes struck the world in October of 1955. First-born baby boy—dark hair, dark eyebrows, dark eyes, with a frown mirroring his mother's. Then those first months of being carried through the living room and kitchen like a gold feather . . . light, precious, fragile, and worthy of arms. Open eyes like doors to every color—the blue carpet, the tan linoleum floor, the gray-brown bark of the one tree in the front yard.

And sounds: vibrations from his mother's vocal chords calming his settled breaths; the robins and cardinals singing their God-given refrains as they danced around the garden, with its monstrous, red tomatoes; the occasional swish of a car calling out

movement in the wider world.

The next notes came married to the previous ones—the bold notes of toddlerhood, when his feet found their footing on that blue carpet, on the patchwork of grass and tree roots on the front lawn, on the cement sidewalk with its commanding straight lines. Day after day in a world of giants and trees that disappeared into the sky. And the sunlight on the walls, painting branches that seemed to wave in water, the shadow and the light . . . the dancing.

His song changed with the strange and painful entrance of otherness: brother first, then sister. He was not the only one. New songs played alongside his own, bringing that classic frown to the foreground. Light and color and sound—by that point—had moved from “wild” to “world.”

A string of high notes comes with the thrill of jumping, of running, of falling. The world has hard edges. Gravity doesn't compromise. His knees have taught him this.

How the song of boyhood must have seemed eternal, the sounds and smells and sights—vibrant and ageless. The familiar rhythm of the train that brought their father to and from work, with its defiant horn announcing his steel-tracked presence.

But the eternality of boyhood fades, sometimes sharply with shame, but mostly with softness, in little movements of independence: opening the fridge door, walking to the basement without the handrails, getting hit with a baseball in the thigh.

The song keeps playing as his breath holds the baseline, readying his body for movement and his mind for thoughts. Some are little: Why does his mother play the piano? Others are Everest-like: Who is God? Is he behind the sun? How did I get here?

Oh, the song, bound to his name: Donald Ray Hibbs. The song through awkward, big-clothed adolescence and trim-fitting teens, the song that was his identity, the song that played without his effort or attention.

How the melody deepened when he held his firstborn, the child turned father. And the song through his fatherly years, woven with black hair, hammer swings, and raw, split wood. His deep and weathered voice, booming from the pulpit in passion and praise for Jesus Christ and the beautifully true dream of redemption, a hope warring through and behind all he could see.

How the song turned quiet in the days when his sons had to turn his body in the hospital bed—all

those fine black hairs dusting the white pillow case and bedding. The song moving toward silence on that warm June evening.

What a song . . . to drop your jaw and draw out your tears with its richly colored, sound-swollen beauty.

* * *

Transience is the song of every life. And you can't get angry at songs for having a beginning and an end. That is what makes them.

Of course, I want to hear his song again, to soak in every sound, every second, every grin and grimace, every handshake and hammer swing. But what makes the song so beautiful is the simple truth that it only plays once.

* * *

Here I am at my kitchen table, made of old barn wood that I sanded down in the chill of October, because my father taught me how. His life and time have been poured into me. I carry his blood, his memory, as I live out my own song, which started

while his was still playing. The harmony of life, generation to generation, carries the sound forward. Here I sing, with his hand-me-down notes. I am part of him as he is part of me. His transience is now my transience. His fading became my flourishing, just as my fading will be my son's and daughters' flourishing. Transience is not just one song; it's many songs woven together.

* * *

Dad, do you see me? I'm still at the kitchen table, pinning my thoughts to paper, trying to make a map of the past for my future. Am I getting the lines right? Will anyone be able to follow this?

What do I do with transience, with song, with my metered days? Three paths, I think: grief, greed, and gratitude. I've taken each in turn, haven't I?

Grief: the dull throb of wanting the lost. Greed: the insatiable appetite for things that don't last, a grand plan of self-centered distraction. Gratitude: seeing a million gifts in a million places. Your father was one of them. He was given. Just like your mother, your brothers, your bones, skin, and breath. You woke up to abundant Christmas morning. Will you really

choose sorrow and anger over joy and worship? Find the one who gave all this to you. And spend the rest of your days staring at him.

* * *

Transience is part of what it means to be a human, to be mist, to be one winter morning, one season, one flower fading, bound to bow back to the ground. God, I spend most of my moments trying to ignore transience, and the rest sulking at its seniority. Transience will always rule over me . . . except in one way. I almost can't wait to say it. But I will wait.

* * *

Oh, never mind. I'm terrible at waiting. You always knew that, dad, didn't you?

The poet Christian Wiman wrote that “Christ is contingency.”³ What he meant was that believing in Christ is believing in and through uncertainty—not to treat faith as a rock that destroys anything in its path but as a current constantly carrying us to

3. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 16.

new places. Jesus Christ, the two-thousand-year-old dead and raised Nazarene, is with us in that current, through the white rapids that throw us into the air, through the bends and sways of our bodies. Christ is there in the change, not despite it.

This is another way of saying that God himself—how could this be?—is present in our transience. And if that's true, then transience isn't accidental. It's not an uncontrollable decay or a disease that spreads, something we have to vaccinate ourselves against. Transience is a means of travel.

* * *

I think on this at the kitchen table, still mourning the death of my father seventeen years later. Why? If I mourn his leaving, then I mourn my own. If I weep for his transience, then I weep for mine. True—I miss him fiercely. God, how I wish he could just show up for a second to say, “I’m proud of you. Keep walking.” All these years I’ve mourned his passing, his transience, because I want to take something back. I want to hear his song again. I want transience to go on coffee break.

But the longer I mourn that, the more deeply I will mourn my own life, that I am a season, a song, one

glorious dawn.

You want hope? Here it is: Transience happens with eternity in your midst. The God of seasons, of song, the maker of moments, is in your chest. The marvel of life, even of the loss of it, is continuance beyond conclusion. Transience is preparing us for the next great change. It's not stealing from us. God owns time, and no one can steal from him. Transience is a teacher. The lessons sting. They make us weep—as I did in that church so many years ago, with my father's casket resting on the carpet like a stick on the stones. But that day was one, in a month, in a season, in a year, in a decade. You get the idea: Transience doesn't just mean ending; it means continuing; it means traveling.

* * *

Who I am right now is not who I was then—with my fears and dreams and insecurities. Nor is it who I will be tomorrow, or in five minutes. Transience is always teaching. The God of eternity entered into transience for us, with us, through us. We can't see him, which is a beauty in itself. For if we saw him, he would change. That's what the visible world does.

The eternal must be invisible . . . for now. Transience cannot touch the inward parts of God, as time cannot touch the inner parts of eternity. And so we won't see God on the river of time with us. But that's because he's buried himself in our being, in our becoming. Transience carries us forward. Time shapes us. Age alters us. But everything is not lost. In fact, nothing that matters is ever lost. Not me. Not my father. Transience is in the hands of eternity, the hands of a God with perfect and incalculable memory. God knows every note in my father's song, every knee scrape and hair follicle and daydream. What transience seemed to take is forever in God's pockets.

* * *

Do you see the hope? What does it mean to be a human? It means living in transience—as the mist, the season, the wildflower—with eternity in your chest.

I will have to keep learning this. Maybe every day. I'm still confused. I still grasp at things—feelings, ambitions, joys, persons—as if transience could be overcome, as if I could vaccinate myself against it or at least pretend it wasn't running beneath me as a river

all the time. I want my father back.

But I know now that to say this would be to ask for his transience to be reversed, for his change to be revoked, for his eternity to return to time. And that would be a terrible thing. I don't want my dad back here. I want to be where and when he is. And I will be. I will be . . . when transience finishes my song.

* * *

If being a human means being in transience, then what am I to do?

Bind myself to the present. Weep with those who weep. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Drink a glass of water. Bite into bread (good bread). Feel your feet touch the carpet. Make love with your wife. Laugh with wildness when your daughter comes up with a new dance to the melody of "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas." Bind yourself to the present.

But know that, in faith, you're married to eternity. God is in your chest.