

Immortal for Quite Some Time (an excerpt)

Scott Abbott

I

Greek autopsyia, a seeing for oneself: auto-, auto- + opsia, sight
—The American Heritage Dictionary

July 23, 1991
425 W. Jefferson
Boise, Idaho



I'm Lila, a heat-drugged woman announces, edging her weight out of an overstuffed room into the hall. How can I help you? I explain we are his family. She says she is sorry. He seemed like such a nice man.

We pick our way up two flights of wooden stairs. Lila's key opens #41.

The battered refrigerator complains of the heat. Slick white maggots unsettle a thin layer of garbage under the sink.

A double bed crowds the bedroom. Soiled latex gloves top a trash can. Under them a desperate spattering of vomit. Then cigarette butts. A peach can. An applesauce can. Six beer cans. Containers for aspirin, Amoxicillen, Alupent.

French doors open onto a tiny balcony dominated by a single kitchen chair. I sit down, stretch my legs across two milk crates, and try to imagine him gazing across Jefferson Street at the gardens and white dome of Idaho's state government.

Dark clouds bunch over mountains on the northern horizon. Torn cellophane vibrates on a broken windowpane.

A short piece of purple thread dangles from a needle thrust into the chair back. Under the chair stands a can of "turpentine replacement paint solvent." The words feel weighty. I repeat them to myself: Turpentine. Replacement. Paint. Solvent.

In the slope-roofed living room, Christy holds up a cardboard box, the shapes of feet cut out of one panel. Jill finds greasy work shoes lined with new cardboard.

A W-2 form tucked into a manila envelope reports his total wages for last year as \$13,235. A cash-register tape lists his groceries: a case of Doral cigarettes, a six-pack of Olympia beer, a bottle of Listerine, two bars of soap, a can of applesauce, and one of peaches.

We shove his things into plastic garbage bags, carry the bags down the stairs, stuff them into the van.

A bearded man and a pregnant woman approach from the sidewalk. Are you the family of the deceased? the woman asks. My husband was the one who went into the room and found him. The café called the managers here and asked them to check why he hadn't come to work. My husband helps take care of the place, so he went up. It's the second one he's found.

T & A CAFÉ
PEPSI
(Formerly Vic's Café.)
7 AM – 8 PM Mon Thru Fri, Sat 7 AM – 2 PM.
FREE MARRIAGE COUNSELING WITH COMPLETE MEAL.
YES . . . WE ARE **OPEN**. Please **SEAT YOURSELF**
Thank You. **HELP WANTED.**

A woman Mom's age—gray hair, white shirt, blue skirt, and apron—is putting salt and pepper shakers on tables. We tell her who we are. She bursts into tears. Ted, a big man in suspenders, sits us down at a table.

He worked for me regularly for two years. Sometimes he slept in Saturday mornings. We'd send a waitress to wake him up, and he always came right over. One night he asked me for a hundred-dollar advance on his wages. The next day he walked in with flowers for all the waitresses. That's the way he was.

We leave the café and drive to a mortuary. A mortician offers condolences. I say I would like to see him. He explains that most family members, especially after an autopsy, find it better to wait until the body has been worked on. I explain that I need to see for myself and follow him downstairs. The smell of pizza and the sound of laughter from a side door. Three bodies laid out on tables. The mortician points to a clear plastic bag on the center table. I pull open the folded plastic. Don't touch him, he warns.

His face is drawn. An open eye leers upward. A scraggly growth of beard and moustache. The sagging jaw reveals uneven teeth.

My teeth.

From shoulder to shoulder, down the chest to the hips, a surgical Y. The top of the skull has been sawn off, then replaced. Severed locks of hair litter the forehead.

I stand before the body. It is unspeakably present. His feet are livid.

II

Those who want to approach their own buried pasts must . . . not be afraid to return again and again to the same facts; to strew them about as one strews earth, to root around in them as one roots around in earth. . . . Broken loose from all earlier associations, the images stand as precious objects in . . . our later insight.

—Walter Benjamin¹

July 22, 1991

American Fork, Utah

John died early this morning. A Boise coroner called and asked Mom if she were related to John Herbert Abbott.

July 23, 1991

American Fork–Boise

Driving west across southern Idaho, Jill's husband, Mike, points to the Snake River Canyon between Twin Falls and Jerome. A long time ago, he says, some cataclysm split it apart. See how the sides fit perfectly. Some say it happened at the time of the crucifixion.

We eat breakfast at Mountain Home's Gear Jammer Restaurant. Suddenly the thought of John lying on a coroner's table. The autopsy was scheduled for nine.

425 W. Jefferson

Boise

In John's apartment we find two pink "Patient Copies" from the Physicians Immediate Care Center. The first is dated July 9, 1991, 9:23 A.M., the second July 18, 8:32 P.M. They both list the following information: Sex: M. Date of Birth: 06/03/51. Age: 40. Home Phone: 345-4604 (message #). Address: 425 W. Jefferson #41. Employer: T&A Café.

On July 9, the attendant reports a productive cough (yellow-gray), post-nasal draining, chest tightness, very weak, S.O.B. X 2 wks. Arms and legs go numb, onset 1 month; last time he had pneumonia one side of body was numb. Exam: Ht: 6'2"; Wt: 150; B.P. 116/74; Pulse: 104; Temp: 100.4; Resp: 32 Current Medications: ASA; Allergies: NKM; Other Observations: smokes 2 pack[s] per day, pneumonia 3 X in last 3 or 4 years.

The physician states that John's arm goes asleep if he lies on it. Legs will go numb if he sits too long in one position. Lasts for a few minutes until he shakes it out. Patient denies wheezing or asthma. Coarse breath sounds and prolonged expiratory phase. Given 2 puffs Alupent and clearing of coarse breath sounds. Bronchitis with possible bronchospasm. Amoxicillin 300 mg. Alupent Inhale 2 puffs. Recheck if any problem. Don't smoke. \$37. Payment by the 19th.

The second report, nine days later, says that John lost 20 lbs in 12 wks, no energy, short of breath, headache, lost appetite, chills. B.P. 118/84; Pulse: 80; Temp: 98.9; Resp: 28. Now current medications are aspirin, Amoxicillin, and Alupent. Seen last Tues, given the Dx of Bronchitis, started on Amox. States he forgot to

eat and lost 20 lbs. Hx heavy ETOH and heavy tobacco 2 ppd. Denies homosexual activity, 0 BRBPR.

The cost this time is \$149: \$45 for the exam, \$104 for tests and a chest x-ray. Nearly two weeks' salary. John wouldn't go to the doctor, Ted said, until one of the waitresses insisted and went with him.

We find John's car a few blocks from his apartment. His keys open the door. I try to start the car.

A young man in a knit shirt and shorts comes out of the house. We explain. I know Jay, he says. I've been watching the car for him. I'm sorry to hear about him. Would you like to sell the car? I could come up with maybe \$500. He goes to get another car and jumper cables. By the time he returns, he has decided maybe \$450 would be a better offer. The car starts right up. We agree to meet in an hour, when he will bring us \$425 in cash. We buy cold sodas at a convenience store to combat the heat, and an hour later we add the \$425 to the \$210.12 in John's wallet. And John had a \$5,000 life-insurance policy Grandpa Hilton gave him when he was born. Aren't we blessed? Mom says.

Used-car dealers in the face of death.

Decisions of style, syntax, vocabulary. Does this literate mourning draw me nearer to John or distance me from my brother?

I look back at "Autopsy," at my first attempt to tell this story. When I described the visit to the T&A Café where John worked, I said that "we" went in, that "we" spoke with the owner. But the truth is: I remained in the car while Christy and Mom went inside. I didn't want to talk with anyone about John. I didn't want to talk period. Still, I wrote "we" and reported what my mother and sister told me. *Caveat lector.*

July 25, 1991

American Fork, Utah

For John, for a man who put cardboard inserts in his shoes and borrowed money to buy flowers for waitresses, we bought a beautifully crafted casket of Carolina poplar.

I drove to a clothing store to buy underwear and socks for John, then dropped them off at the mortuary along with a beautiful leather belt I inherited from Grandpa Hilton. The mortician

added them to the shoes, checked pants, starched chef's jacket, and toque that were John's most formal clothes.

How are you feeling?

Angry.

Angry at what?

At the world, at everything.

Because people like John have such a hard time living in it?

Yes. I guess. And I'm worried about my inability to cry.

JOHN HERBERT ABBOTT
JUNE 3, 1951 – JULY 21, 1991

That much is easy. I wander around the American Fork Cemetery where John will be buried, looking at other stones, especially those from the nineteenth century. In the southeast corner next to three cedar trees stands a delicate sandstone obelisk. Cut into it is a half-sun, below which, holding one another with a curious grip, are two hands. I'll borrow this Freemasonic symbol adopted by Mormons to symbolize my fraternal hand of fellowship gripping John's as we lend one another the only kind of immortality we can count on.

Your use of the religious symbol is idiosyncratic, don't you think? Your fellow Mormons would see the hand of God reaching out to welcome your brother into the Celestial Kingdom.

Yes. But it works for me as well. It's precisely the kind of multivalence that allows me to function in a Church made up of members whose views I share only in part.



July 27, 1991
9 P.M., Orem



Sitting alone in the window seat in Maren's room, feeling, for no specific reason, grateful to be a father.

Darkness gathers. A canyon breeze blows through the window.

I'm a pinchy-assed anarchist, torn by contradictory desires. I shun disorder and invite chaos. I want to put on John's limp clothing, step into his cracked shoes. I washed his clothes as soon as possible.

A gentle bishop conducted John's funeral.

I loathed him.

The prayers in the language of an orthodoxy that would damn John twisted in my gut. Saw-toothed abstractions. I remembered the statement of a gay man after a priest told the story of the prodigal son at his friend's funeral: I'm tired of being welcome in the Catholic Church after I'm dead.

We told family stories about John. We laughed. We were brave. Some of us sobbed. I said there was no reason to pity him. He had chosen his life. He lived it. I pictured him relaxed on his balcony as the hot July day began to cool and the mountains to the north lost their color. I described the disparity between his salary and his medical bills and asked bitterly: What kind of country is this?

John's puffy cheeks and the mortician's smeared makeup were worse than the marks of the coroner's brutality.

Benjamin, six years old, walked straight up to the casket and pulled at one of the knotted buttons on John's coat. The white uniform represented John's skill, his creative ability, his discipline. It also bore an unsettling resemblance to the ritual robe and hat that accompany temple-going Mormons into the grave.

Unlike the bishop's earnest promises of a reunion in an after-life, my Sicilian-American friend Alex's "Funerary Instructions" give me something physical to chew on:

1. I came in naked, let me go naked
2. Wash me like a baby
3. It should be a simple rectangular box
4. Leave the eyes alone
5. Breathe on the face so I can hold fast to the wind
6. Imagine the beating of earth upon wood is yet another heart

In another poem, Alex writes that he enjoys "reading the biographies of suicides. I start at the last page and read back to before the thought ever came up; back to the child with the big eyes who can't tell the difference between the cloud and his own head."



In the grass by Grandma Abbott's back steps, neither John nor I has yet identified himself as the image in a photo or as the other in the mirror. The thought of suicide is still impossible for us. Leave the eyes alone.

July 28, 1991
Orem

The tiny khaki-colored can of Emergency Drinking Water among John's things was for that horrible moment, perhaps, when there was nothing stronger in the house. During telephone conversations with Mom, John routinely promised he would quit drinking and get more education. His calls to me were often fortified by alcohol.

I don't get drunk. Nor did I call him.

John phoned Mom while he was still in Houston where he most likely contracted AIDS. He said he was in trouble, that he needed \$400 or he would go to jail. She sent him a check immediately. Then she got a call from a man who said she had filled out the check improperly and that it couldn't be cashed. Would she send a new one? She did. And someone cashed both checks.

How much I don't know about my brother.

July 31, 1991
Orem

In the afternoon sunshine, John's death certificate glows bright green on my desk.

Never married.

Sex: Male.

Not a veteran.

Autopsy, yes.

The sun transforms the books on the north wall into an ordered riot of colors.

The coroner told us John had never tested positive for AIDS. Otherwise his name would have been in a national database?

I remember squatting next to a Colorado wheat field with my father and grandfather. There had been a drought. Between my little hands, I separated wheat from the prickly chaff. A puff of breath left only underdeveloped, wizened grains on my palm. We stared across the fields, and my grandfather said: Needed rain the first week of June. Dad nodded and chewed morosely on a wheat stalk. A month later, after a meager harvest, I played happily in the warehouse, jumping from unbelievable heights into what seemed to me unending hills of grain.

Small thunderstorms sweep discreetly through the valley. Benjamin struts by, swinging a plastic bucket filled with beetles. The horizon to the north is high and close, spectacularly drawn by the sharp, sure peaks and ridges of Mount Timpanogos.

On the radio this afternoon there was an interview with a Utah AIDS patient, surprised but philosophical about the drastic changes in his life. We all, he said, feel immortal for quite some time.

* * *

Spurred by John's death to gather these fragments, bits of photographic and syntactical memory marshaled like Maxwell's imaginary demon against entropy, my pen is drawn, I am drawn, into incalculable territory.

Note

1. Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 26.