

An excerpt from

# CLOSING THE BOOK

Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature



by  
**JOELLE RENSTROM**

AN EXCERPT FROM THE  
ESSAY “HOW I SPENT MY  
FREE WILL”

*from*

CLOSING  
THE BOOK

TRAVELS IN LIFE, LOSS,  
AND LITERATURE

JOELLE RENSTROM



I write on the board:

either you get what you hope for

or

you don't

It occurs to me that I've never articulated hope quite this simply before, reduced to two possible outcomes.

"Everything's fifty-fifty. Either something will happen or it won't," Camus says, flipping a franc on his knee. "This is why hoping is at best a pointless waste of time and at worst a guarantee of unhappiness. Either way, it separates us from the moment."

*Not in front of the kids*, I think. Standing under fluorescent lights in front of twenty teenagers isn't the ideal setting for an imaginary conversation with two famous writers.

In my periphery, I catch sight of Sam Connell; the deep weariness in his eyes reminds me of a lost and hungry puppy. Week after week, he describes in his reader response journal a web of connections between the book and the darkness of his own life. I'm glad

that he's connecting to the book, though I'm worried that its weight will tug him under, that he'll have trouble kicking to the surface with it. Sam watches me intently. I think he wants me to argue for hope; I think he wants to be convinced. And I want desperately to convince him.

The problem is, I'm thinking about my dad and what it was like to believe, for moments here and there, that he would make it, that everything would be okay. I'm thinking about what it was like to be wrong.

Camus pokes my earlobe with the filter of his cigarette. "Move on with the lesson! Talk about how sappy ol' Ishi here is or something. Wade about in your sentimental drivel on your own time."

"The death of a parent—a favorite subject of yours, no?" Ishiguro says.

"When treated with a...certain touch, perhaps."

"Teacher second, human being first," Ishiguro says, running his hand through the part in his hair.

"Were you always this touchy-feely?" Camus loosens his tie.

"*Mono no aware*," Ishiguro says. "Pathos. Empathy. It's what separates us from animals. You should try it sometime."

I feel Camus shrug. “Whatever you say, monsieur.” He leans back and props his feet on my collarbone.

\* \* \*

There wasn't one specific moment when we lost hope in Dad's recovery, at least not that I can identify. The sense of urgency in his care evaporated, replaced by a somber but firm efficiency that, in retrospect, made it clear that the doctors lost hope before we did. The oncologist withdrew Dad from the clinical trial. The surgeon told us that even removal of the entire colon wouldn't work, that the cancer had spread too far. The internist reviewed the latest CAT scan and quietly canceled all subsequent ones. The hospitalist had a new vocabulary: pain management, hospice, palliative care. I don't remember which of these moments was the one. I do remember that, like a cooling ember met suddenly with fierce breath, our hope would for an instant be reignited by a new treatment option, a firm hand on the shoulder, a twinkle shooting like a star across Dad's eyes.

At some point we all knew there was no hope. He was going to die, and soon. There was nothing to be done. There was no tiny scrap of paper. And we had to live with that, breathe it, make room for it in all the conversations we had with one another, with the nurses, and with whatever gods we might have suppli-

cated to in the moments when it made sense to try divinity one more time. All the food we choked down, all the times we brushed our teeth, all the funny movies we pretended to watch—all of it with a crushing absence of hope.

What's left if you renounce hope?

"Everything," says Camus.

"Nothing," says Ishiguro.

Absence of hope takes many shapes. It's not the quiet and muted scarcity of something wonderful and luxurious, like chocolates or soft sheets. The absence of hope is the absence of something utterly essential. The absence of hope crumples your chest like cellophane. How ugly the world becomes when the clouds hang hopeless, how suffocating and stagnant. Nothing will ever move or change again. The clouds sag lower and lower until they bind you up like a beetle in a spider's web, unable even to contemplate the possibility of escape. You walk through days as though you're in a CGI movie; some grey shadow has filled your soul, digitally grafted over your image so that you look and feel sooty, dirty, damaged.

"Could you be any more maudlin?" Camus asks. "With your storm clouds and your poor excised

heart.” He cracks his knuckles one by one, saving his thumbs for last. “Your dad died. I died. You’ll die. Sooner, later, with or without all your angst. So much useless angst. What are the angsty kids called these days?”

“Emo,” says Ishiguro from around the back of my head, his breath skeeting my neck.

“Ah, yes. Emo.” Camus chuckles. “I like that. There’s nothing wrong with wearing all black—I’ve been known to slink about at parties in a black cat suit—but the whole black soul thing? I suppose it’s vaguely silly, but all that pointless wallowing makes me want to *degorge*.” He sticks a finger into his mouth and gags.

“You’re a real piece of work,” Ishiguro says.

Camus smiles. “*D’accord*, Emo.”

“I will say this, though—the way we die is as important as the way we live.”

“And then some.” Camus lights another cigarette. “Death is what defines us. It’s the most genuine experience we have. Besides this, of course.” He takes a long drag and exhales theatrically.

“So we almost agree on something,” Ishiguro says, wiping his hand across his forehead. “Except I don’t think we actually need to die in order to experience

something real. Mortality provides a lifelong and life-shaping invitation to examination and contemplation. It's a state of being—not just an event.”

Camus sighs. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in a game of chess, would you?”

\* \* \*



CLOSING THE BOOK: Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature  
by Joelle Renstrom

ISBN: 978-1-938349-24-9

eISBN: 978-1-938349-26-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015936091

Copyright © 2015 Joelle Renstrom

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.

“A Sort of Homecoming” was published in *Barely South Review* (Sept 2012)

“Letters to Ray Bradbury” was published in *Konundrum Magazine* (2009)

“Making Luck” was published in the *Paradigm Journal* (Sept 2010)

“Fighting the Sunday Blues with Albert Camus” was published in *Briarpatch* (Sept 2009) under the name “Freedom and Absurdity in the Classroom.”

“How I Spent My Free Will” was published in the *Minnetonka Review* (Winter 2011)

“Finding Fathers” was published in *Ducts Magazine* (Dec 2010)

Layout and Book Design by Mark Givens

First Pelekinesis Printing 2015

For information:

Pelekinesis, 112 Harvard Ave #65, Claremont, CA 91711 USA



Excerpt(s) from WHITE NOISE by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1984, 1985 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of the Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

Excerpt(s) from ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING by Ray Bradbury  
Reprinted by permission of Don Congdon Associates, Inc.  
© 1990 by Ray Bradbury Enterprises

Excerpt(s) from SIRENS OF TITAN by Kurt Vonnegut, copyright © 1988 by Kurt Vonnegut. Used by permission of Dell Publishing, an imprint of Random House, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from THE STRANGER by Albert Camus, copyright © 1988 by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from NEVER LET ME GO by Kazuo Ishiguro, copyright © 2005 by Kazuo Ishiguro. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, translation copyright © 1988 by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt(s) from CHILDHOOD'S END by Arthur C. Clarke  
© 1953, 1981, 1990, 2001 by Arthur C. Clarke  
Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scovil Galen Ghosh Literary Agency, Inc.