

## ***Eternal Blue***

*Matthew L. Garrell*

**T**he first time I saw a tree I screamed in abject terror. Until I was 10 months old, I never went outside or felt the sun on my skin. Rather than breastfeeding or a bottle, I slurped prebiotic soup from a ladle. It was a rarity that I experienced the warmth of another person. Instead, I stared at an eternal blue sky with fluffy clouds. At fifteen I was shown the film of me sent out to prospective parents. It was a challenge to imagine myself at one time being that malnourished infant wailing from chronic ear infections. *That can't be me*, I remember thinking. My soon-to-be adoptive parents were begged by the director, Nina, to bring diapers and antibiotics upon arriving in the country. *He's so serious*, she told them upon introducing us, *he never smiles*. I'd partially lost my hearing by the time my mother first called my name. My sensory world had to be re-learned consciously as I grew up. While my hearing returned, my ability to process its information had been permanently augmented along with all my other senses.

While I recall the idealized reality, the calming mural on the ceiling of the orphanage, my inaugural experience with the natural world is only accessible through my mother's stories. Now I understand the fear she recounts as my body's response to its interaction and recognition of existing. Despite the emotional distance of the caretakers, they made every attempt to keep the children in a relative stasis until they

were adopted or succumbed to the conditions of their circumstances. On average, people begin forming memories around two or three, however, extreme stress may cause an individual to begin the process earlier. Regardless of the attempts at comfort, until I was carried against policy to my soon-to-be adoptive parents' hotel through the cold November wind at Nina's request, my body recognized the desperation of my position and grasped at everything it could for survival. The tranquil stillness of the painted sky was all I had for refuge. I was surprised at my reaction when I heard the story from my mother—my lack of reminiscence proved that I knew I was safe and that I would be all right. I like to believe my body was in such a state of shock that my awe at what lay beyond the walls I grew up in was simply misunderstood as dread.

When my parents brought me into the room and began to settle down, my mother noticed a change in my expression. A slight upward crinkle at the corner of my mouth—*That's when I decided to take you home with me*, she told me at an early age. I wouldn't stop crying unless she stood up and held me throughout the three-day journey back from Sochi, Russia to the U.S. *I was ready to throw you against the wall*, she said, lovingly, during a recent exchange. *I was exhausted*, she said, *but was so glad we got you and not one of the others there*. I hoped the static of our phone call would mask the awkwardness in my laugh.

Our hedged-off, gray suburban home in Sharon, Massachusetts was backed by a railroad and shaded by the lush canopy of towering oaks. When I was four, sitting outside with my mother, I realized I was particularly susceptible to changes in light, noise, and temperature. The sun's beams that would occasionally break through the flitting leaves were disorienting. Still, she tried to teach me the names of the birds that arrogantly challenged the trains for sonic dominance. We listened for hours as she noted the subtle nuances of each mating call, only for us to discover my inability to focus on a particular sound. The anonymous chirping only served to make my head ring and induce varying dizzy spells. After that, I decided to only go out in the winter. The frigid air pinched my skin and labored my breathing. Moreover, I was disappointed to find the temperate wisp of foliage to be replaced by the high-pitched howl of the New England wind through empty branches.

As a child, for several years my parents would host an annual party celebrating the families, made possible with the help of Maine Adoption Placement Services. Our

summer home in Cape Cod was filled with 200 families and friends. I imagine even my parents could hardly remember everyone's names. The kids would swim in the pool or play basketball. The parents would watch from the deck or the hot tub and gossip.

I always had a desire to fit in, especially with those that had gone through similar experiences. I envied the ease with which those with specific sensory limitations could bond and sympathize with one another. Those that had overlapping complications typically found themselves unable to communicate and explain their situation. I struggled to understand how to speak with strangers. Typically, I focused on their vocal inflections, which never seemed to coincide with their facial expressions, and got lost in imitating what I thought looked like a friendly demeanor. *Quit mocking me*, I got used to hearing. So, I hid in the air pocket of a capsized inflatable boat. I found it amusing to bump into different groups and listen to conversations skip across the water. For hours I practiced repeating the phrases I heard. Inside, the dull echoes felt distant and less human. The odd distortion of reality was comforting.

During the school year, I would run into walls or crawl on the ground in a sensory haze. I remember never knowing exactly *where* or *when* I was. Hitting physical barriers was the only way I could consciously engage with the real world. Many of our family friends and teachers that didn't know the specifics of my situation believed I had a form of autism. While there are various points of overlap between them, I was diagnosed around the age of five with a comorbidity of a sensory processing disorder and emotional dysregulation. The interplay between the two resulted in my internal and external environments exacerbating one another. My inability to correctly perceive my surroundings prevented me from learning appropriate emotional responses and interactions. To alleviate the daily anxiety, I spent most afternoons and evenings in the bath with my ears below the surface, trying to recreate the experience in the pool. When that wasn't an option, I would wear noise-canceling headphones which quickly became an integral part of my daily routine.

Learning to somewhat ground myself, despite a lack of understanding of my situation, had the unintended effect of being admired at our parties by the chorus of parents sipping mimosas and champagne. They would joke, between congratulating the success stories of the few, about the majority still struggling—*Wandering around*

*like zombies*, I recall one mother exclaiming. With how few were truly able to improve their conditions, I began to realize the event was more for the benefit of the parents.

In the late nineties and early aughts, the effects of severe child neglect were unknown. The lack of clinical knowledge, let alone general awareness on the part of the potential adoptive parents, tragically led to the deaths of numerous children worldwide. Many of whom struggled with similar issues that I, and other children in attendance at my family's parties, experienced and continue to contend with. I was extremely fortunate to have parents with the means to send me to every form of specialist in the field. For over ten years I spent most of my free time attending various sessions in which my physiology and psychology were deconstructed and tracked for progress.

One of the many therapies they recommended was a sensory gym which my parents and I always just called the "playroom." The idea was to develop my ability to interact with the external world. Every aspect was created with a specific purpose; the lighting was perfectly calibrated to not overstimulate my vision, the floors were built to accommodate the reverb of the room, flowers and incense were kept in every corner to soothe my sense of smell and taste, and the space was filled with vestibular movement simulations consisting of trampolines, swings, and ziplines. All these tools helped dramatically. I no longer had to rely on intentionally dulling my perception as a coping mechanism. However, as I got older and began to understand myself and my condition, after many years in therapy, any self-revelation was seemingly always known or expected by those around me. For example, upon realizing that I feel most comfortable by myself throughout the day, one of the specialists had ready a list of healthy approaches for leading a solitary life, such as acknowledging my human need for socialization and incorporating basic levels of interaction to satisfy that necessity. Consequently, I felt like my life had been lived in an operating theater with every intimate part of me explored and dissected. At fourteen I stopped seeing the specialists. Eager to discover something about myself that over a decade of research and testing couldn't identify, I decided to focus on writing with my therapist.

Gaining complete control over a medium allowed me to introduce and explore stimuli individually. Initially, it was a relief. I found that I could express the emotions that had thus far fluctuated in tandem with my sensory issues. By writing personal essays I discovered that my inadvertent isolation had resulted in desperation for

connection. When this desire was unable to be meaningfully fulfilled, it developed into a depression that lasted several years. I feared my experiences as an infant had irrevocably damaged my mental health and my future. When I mentioned this to my therapist, he gave me a nod and a prepared look of assurance.

At fifteen, my therapist made me aware of what psychologists call an “Internal Narrative.” He explained it to me as *that voice in your head*. While discussing how I process information, we discovered that I lacked this ability unless I actively tried to create it. He asked me how I write if it wasn’t through internal dialogue. I couldn’t answer him. It was never something that I considered. The best way I can explain it now is that I understand syntax and grammar and use those to generate a “flow” which become sentences. The next question he asked was one I still struggle with today: *How do you think?*

The question offered me an immediate answer to what I had been searching for. At the same time, it revealed to me how little I understood myself. My entire life up to this point had been dedicated to reaching a form of normality. Once I achieved that from a physiological perspective, there was little attention given to anything psychological that didn’t have to do with maintaining the milestones I had reached. My belief that connection was impossible and my predisposition towards therapy prevented me from reaching that form of connection with my therapist. At seventeen, I decided to ignore the potential benefits of a professional and deal with the emotional components of my condition alone.

I’ve yet to form a coherent answer to his question. From that moment on I’ve dedicated myself to writing as a way of uncovering how my mind works. However, as the years passed, I’ve realized that no matter how personal a story is, it will always feel foreign. The reasoning for this, I believe, is the most accurate depiction I can give of my thought process.

For those that do have an “Internal Narrative,” the act of writing can be understood as a form of transcription. For me, writing is an act of translation. There will always be a loss of meaning. Due to having had to consciously learn how each of my senses operate my thoughts often exist in the form of these senses which are connected by their similarities to generate an “idea.” For example, using a metaphor that displays two senses—sight and touch—a transition from one subject to another may occur in the same way two puzzle pieces intuitively fit together. There must be a

physical connection (the pieces must join flush), and there must be a visual connection (the image must continue unbroken). Much is the same when two “ideas” connect. However, the explanation becomes muddled when three or more senses are necessary for connection, which in turn leads to a currently unavoidable loss of information when writing. Therefore, upon reviewing my work, I find that it’s usually only thirty to fifty percent true to what was in my head.

Despite this approach, my writing process has led me to develop a substitute for an “Internal Narrative.” Often when I write, I consciously choose to speak. By translating my thoughts into words that I can hear I am better able to orient myself within a given piece. This alternative was only made possible because my parents understood the severity of my hearing condition and promptly provided me with the necessary treatment. Not long after I left Sochi, the building was sold, and the lot was cleared. The eternal blue sky cracked, then crumbled into the lattice of cribs.

Before my adoption, due to the rising cases of infants and children dying in households ill-equipped to meet their conditions, Russia was extremely against foreign families taking in their orphans. In the court documents permitting my parents to bring me back to America, it was written: *We submit that the information data regarding the adoption of the child number 23000423... [revealed] it was not possible to find a Russian family for this child... neither mother, nor father is interested in the child's fate... the court also took into account that the boy's parents had never visited the Baby home although they were called many times.* The Dima Yakovlev Act, or the Law of Scoundrels, came into effect in 2012, with the claimed intention of preserving the lives of Russia’s youth by restricting adoptions from Russia to the U.S. However, coated with a sympathetic veneer, the true purpose of the act was to silence the global attention on Russia’s poor care facilities for abandoned infants and children.

When I found out that the orphanage had been destroyed, it reminded me of the story my mother told me about the tree. I had always wondered about returning to Russia—to try and locate my birth parents—to attempt to find some form of closure or meaning for having been forced to struggle with the consequences of their decision. It was the opinion of every specialist I encountered that the effects of the conditions I endured would be permanent in some form. I was relieved, in a way, to discover that the building had been demolished, and any documents disclosing the

names or location of my birth parents had been permanently erased. I could never return to the comfort of that fantasy of the sky and the clouds. Once I accepted that, I realized how prepared my birth parents had inadvertently made me for the questions that I will always have by putting me up for adoption. The closest I can achieve to closure now is by bettering myself as much as I am able—to adapt to the conditions they unknowingly imparted to me. Although I've lived nearly my entire life in the natural world, in the evening I still notice my gaze rise beyond the tree line. Watching the sunset, the clouds darken, I consider how fortunate I am to be here—that with patience my eyes will adjust, and the stars will emerge.