

ALL THAT I HAVE IS YOURS

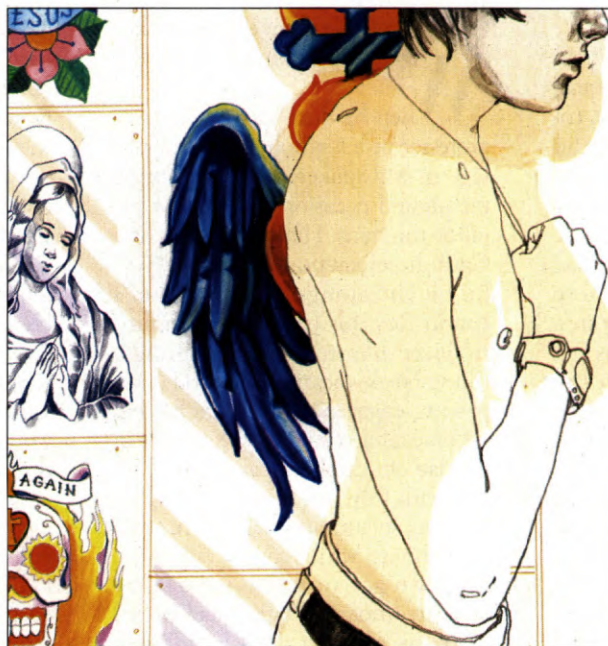
The scars of a Christian inheritance

By Scott Korb

It was a cool, overcast Wednesday in the spring. I had left work by midafternoon and stood under the awning at my office with the smokers, out of the drizzling rain, to confirm my appointment over the phone. I dropped the design off yesterday, I explained. It had taken me months to decide how the letters would connect and overlap. The guy on the phone assured me he would find it before I arrived. I had another copy, just in case, I said. I had been carrying the printout with me for weeks, taking the advice I had been given to wait, and then wait some more, before making it permanent. I'd donated blood the day before, in preparation, knowing I would not be able to give blood for a year after this (according to the rules of blood donation), and hoping that one session with one long needle could prepare me for the thousands of buzzing pricks I was about to face in taking this mark of my inheritance.

Scott Korb's book, *The Faith Between Us*, co-authored with Peter Bebergal, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury.

My track bike, with its single fixed gear, was chained, glistening, to a street sign; it would be a short ride. But



then again, I thought, so was home. I could still forget the whole thing. It would be painful, I was told. It would burn. Still, I unlocked the bike and put my feet in the pedal cages. I would decide on the way uptown. Riding clears my head.

Daredevil Tattoo is on Ludlow

Street, on the Lower East Side. The place came highly recommended as clean and professional, yet adequately

punk rock, with Fugazi and the Buzzcocks on heavy rotation. In my head, Daredevil would be "the two large cluttered rooms over a chiropodist's office on a back street," from Flannery O'Connor's story "Parker's Back," the shop where the sad hero, after narrowly escaping death in a fiery farm accident, has his back covered with a Byzantine Christ for his "plain, plain" pious wife, who sees his tattoo-covered body as a "heap of vanity." "She can't say she don't like the looks of God," Parker reasons. "She can't hep herself." Now, I don't have a wife to think about, and I can't say I was having this done for anyone else but me. Still, I thought, my mother would

hate it, but as much as she would cringe to see me permanently scarred, she would love the tattoo. She wouldn't be able to help herself.

Zane, the friend who recommended Daredevil, had gotten his tattoo there: *DOMINUS ABSTULIT* inked in bold letters in a ring around his

right forearm, and under that, MCM-LXXXII. I love his tattoo. Job 1:21, from the Latin Vulgate. *The Lord taketh away*—apparently, in 1982.

I admit that was a pretty terrible year.

In 1982 my parents, Frank and Virginia, were both teachers. They had their summers off, which is a big reason why my sister and brother are teachers, and why I've always been somehow at least loosely affiliated with a college, university, or, when I first came to New York, a seminary. We learn as children what is right, and what to expect, like families traveling together and summers off.

My sister was just a baby, too young for the long drive from Wisconsin to Florida, so my mother had arranged air travel for the three of us, while my father and my older brother drove. This was Memorial Day weekend. Mom took care of the little ones. Dad went on a road trip. We had different destinations for the first days of this vacation, visits planned with different relatives in different parts of the Sunshine State.

Returning one rainy afternoon from a scallop-fishing junket, towing a small boat, my father and my brother, together with my aunt and uncle, were hit head-on by a drunk driver on a slick road. A photograph from the Gainesville newspaper shows the hood of the car crushed from above; the boat had fallen from the sky. Another photo shows the drunken man sitting in a squad car with the door open, his feet swung around and resting on the ground. He looks confused but unhurt. A police officer bends low in front of him, shining a flashlight into his eyes. Another cop stands coolly against the squad car, staring down the photographer. Everyone in my aunt's car suffered some injury that afternoon—my brother, a fractured skull; my uncle, a broken knee, elbow, and jaw. My father died instantly in the front passenger's seat. He was thirty-nine.

We did not stay long in Florida; he would be buried in Wisconsin. I have two clear memories of the wake. First, I did not cry. I was too busy fooling around with my little cousins most of the afternoon, slowing down only long enough to peer in at the open casket,

where I found my dad's pasty face and his well-groomed beard. Second, the Knights of Columbus, a quasi-secret Catholic fraternal organization and familial mainstay, stood at either end of my father's casket, still as the bouquets of flowers, holding swords and wearing regal capes. Had my dad stood guard over a dead knight before? What could they possibly be defending that they would need swords?

I was confused. Where did he go? I was devastated. *Where did he GO! WHERE!* And in the summer of 1982, a small seed was planted. I began to expect that men in my life would die young. At this point, I had no sense of my inheritance—of what was inescapably mine. I would not learn what it was or how to express it for more than twenty years. All I knew was what had been explained to me: My dad was in Heaven with God. And in almost no time at all, to my imagination, this man became faultless: "On earth as it is in Heaven," says the Lord's Prayer. No one could be more worthy of Heaven than he was, I reasoned.

He'd been honored, like a king, or a saint.

When he died, my father was a professor at a Catholic women's college in Milwaukee. He would bring me around occasionally to show me off to the nuns. His first job was at a Catholic elementary school, where he taught alongside my mother's cousin Roy, his best friend, who introduced him to my mom during a spring-break vacation in Florida. My parents' engagement the next fall has become a bit of family lore, a story of my dad out drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon with Roy one Friday evening after work, planning a party at his parents' house while they were away. The two got to talking about my mother, whom my father had wooed over the summer with bundles of love letters that my mom still has safely tucked away. Out of the blue, he asked Roy to drive him to the airport. Roy threw the party. Frank went to Florida. Virginia said yes.

The family my parents started in suburban Milwaukee was a religious one, their children all cradle-Catholics just as they had been.

There was weekly mass, the observance of Lent with fish fries and giving things up, prayer before meals, and the sacraments. Faith was not complicated. This much I knew: I would learn my catechism. I would be an altar boy. And this all had something to do with Heaven.

If St. Paul was right about anything—and I think now he was right about a lot of things, especially about love being neither insistent nor rude—it was that when we are children we see as children. We take things literally. When I was five, God was in Heaven. He had a white beard and a robe and a great big throne. If we behaved we would go to Heaven when we died. And did I ever behave. I sang my choruses of *Yes, Mothers* and went to bed when I was told. I played nice, and I never spoke out of turn. No way would I run with scissors.

We went to church every week, no matter what. At St. Thomas we learned that Jesus Christ was born in a manger, one time fed lots of people with fishes and loaves, prayed the Lord's Prayer (and not just said it, but *invented* it), ate a last meal with his friends, then was killed so he could be buried and rise again. That was the Resurrection, and the Resurrection was, it seemed, the point of it all. Jesus died for us because we were sinners. When he rose again, that made it possible for us to go to Heaven someday, to be saved. So, he was the Savior, somehow God and man all in one. He saved my dad.

With my belief in the story of the Resurrection came my preoccupation with Revelation and the end of the world; Jesus would come again, and all the dead people would rise up from the ground. I imagined all the cemeteries emptied, everywhere. A fairly frightening image for a chronically nervous kid, but understandable, perhaps, given my recent familiarity with graves. Driving by a cemetery any time after dark, especially after my dad died, I would duck my head beneath the car window so I could not see out, asking my mom to tell me when we had passed it. Any time the sky took on a sort of ominous reddish color, usually during electrical storms, I would panic that the end of the world was at hand and, clinging to life, would hide in the base-

ment, under a table, or behind the couch, my fear of God—or death, basically—taking hold in an unnatural fear of tornadoes.

Just as my own religious focus was narrow (i.e., death, Dad, Heaven, a red-sky apocalypse, Resurrection), the world of religion was small in my suburban town. One narrow understanding supported the other. My neighbors were mostly Catholics, families I would see at church. All of them would someday crawl out of their graves for sure. My best friend's family was Lutheran, still Christians, and they would certainly all be resurrected. There was the small Methodist church on Main Street, where in high school I played drums with the youth group before heading to Catholic mass at St. Thomas; the two black kids in town had been adopted by Methodist families, and my tennis coach played bass with me in that church band. As for Judaism, although I had heard stories from my grandfather about the "dirty Jews," I didn't actually meet a Jew until I was almost nineteen. And of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, etc., I heard nothing, ever. For all I knew, the whole world might have been Christian in one way or another—and good, because Jesus saved.

In the wake of my father's funeral and for years after, I conceived of God as something like a telephone-switchboard operator, connecting people on earth with their loved ones in Heaven. Catholic priests, I would learn, played a similar role, connecting their congregants and confessors with Jesus. In my nightly prayers, I would dial up Heaven and ask God to please connect me with my dad, please. And he would. Then God would leave us alone to talk. I believed less in God than in St. Frank James Korb. In the years to come, however, any hope I had in coming to a deeper, more adult faith in God would depend on trying to let go of the "saint" part of my father's name. To this day, I still carry with me some relics: a small pipe he used to smoke, a pin he wore.

Three years after my father died, his sister introduced my mom to a man from her church named Paul

Boglitsch. He and my mother were married after a short courting period and an even shorter engagement. The whole thing left no cache of love letters. He was forty, never married before. He had lived with his mother in the years since his father died, in great pain, of pancreatic cancer.

After the wedding, Paul moved in with us, and we immediately took to calling him "Dad." From that day forward, Paul raised us as his own children and, at my mother's insistence, had a vasectomy to prevent more of us. He was a manager of several retail stores over the years, and a Catholic with a penchant for charitable work, the general manager of a diocese of St. Vincent de Paul thrift shops. There were times in the first years of his marriage to my mother that I experienced a lingering sadness and emptiness. I like to think it was a nascent compassion that he had stirred in me simply through his humility and his example—never insistent, never rude. I doubt I really understood that he would be missing something in never having children of his own, and that by never adopting us he would always be aware of his place outside the seemingly impenetrable quartet my mother had formed with her brood. She was the disciplinarian, the comforter, the parent. If ever forced to choose, she would choose us over him. And Paul accepted his role as long as he lived, only disciplining us when we hurt his wife. My stepfather, by all accounts more of a "saint" than my father ever was, a true Christian who believed in all that I would come to deny, was as humble as could be.

In October 2000, Paul was diagnosed with inoperable cholangiocarcinoma, cancer of the bile duct. I was called home from New York. I manned the phone, explaining to all the relatives—out of my mother's earshot—that he was very sick.

I spent my days with him at the hospital, alternating between reading David Foster Wallace, listening to a Neutral Milk Hotel bootleg, and watching the National League Championship Series with him, which pit my New York Mets against

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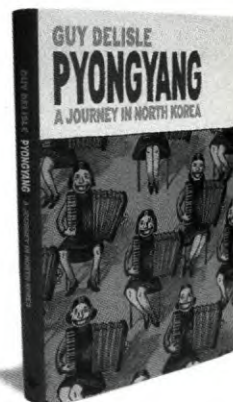
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the St. Louis Cardinals. My dad was rooting for the Cardinals, apparently forgetting the World Series in 1982, when the Cardinals beat our Milwaukee Brewers, making that summer *even worse*. He seemed resentful of me for, as he saw it, giving up my Midwestern roots for big-city flash. The Mets would win the NLCS but would lose the World Series to the Yankees. I spent most of that fall in Wisconsin, missing the hoopla surrounding the Subway Series while Paul settled into nearly two years of chemotherapy, fifty-seven treatments, one for every year of his life. Over that time he and I came to terms with death, which, for a Catholic raised on it, meant giving up a whole lot.

And I started big, as only God would have it. I had never had a closer friend than Matt. Yet Matt was the first I let go.

One night, weeks after my dad's diagnosis, I sat in the basement bedroom of the duplex I rented in Brooklyn, my feet propped on the low shelves of a bookcase that stood next to another bookcase, literature on the left and theology on the right, LPs, seven-inches, and CD box sets lining the top shelf above me. Matt had finally called from Chicago, where he and his wife had made a home. They were young newlyweds; I'd been among the six people at their wedding, his best man. Not even his siblings had been invited. His father-in-law presided over the ceremony.

I knew my roommate very little at the time, apartment shares being fairly common among recent suburban transplants. When I had returned from Wisconsin with the final word that my stepfather was dying of cancer, this roommate made some requisite yet earnest inquiries as to how I was holding up. Did I need anything? Matt's call from Chicago had simply taken too long.

But his tardiness was only half the trouble, I figured. Matt was an honest-to-God, God-fearing, born-again Christian. He had been baptized in a swimming pool. His mission at the time was evangelism. If only we could all be as happy as he was, having "found Jesus," then all

would be well. And it's true, he had never been happier in his life.

He knew his Bible as well as I did, yet we knew it so differently. That night he argued from the Gospels. Matt shouted: *Jesus gave sight to the blind! Healed the lepers! Raised Lazarus!* So I shouted back: *I don't believe those things!* And in that moment, facing the certain death of another father, I really did stop believing in all the biblical miracles: the loaves and fishes, walking on the water, Jesus' curse on the fig tree. Neither of us was able to explain why we found the other's belief so frightening and dangerous. All he could say was that if only I'd seen this woman at his church, bent over, her spine filled with tumors one day, and then the miracle of prayer: the next day her doctors could not find a thing. He insisted that if only I'd love him enough—and by *him* Matt meant God and my dad, both—cancer was fully treatable with prayer, or better, by a minister's laying on of hands. Through prayer and loving God, he repeated. What happened, I asked him, to love's being patient, kind, not rude, not insisting on its own way?

What happened to love fucking calling a few weeks earlier?

Our conversation went on for hours. I was fighting a little cross-country holy war from my basement in Brooklyn, and by the end, trading biblical advances and parries, I was wrecked. Matt had no sense of me as a Christian. Though how could he? I'd just denied the basis of his newfound faith—miracles. He must have sensed that in denying the little miracles, I'd someday soon have to jettison the big one: Jesus' Resurrection. I tried to explain that my faith was more and more about the compassion of Jesus, the utter worldliness of his preaching, most notable in Luke's Sermon on the Plain and in Jesus' encounters with the poor and the lowly. You know, *blessed are the poor*, I said. My faith could not bear Matt's faith in the literalness of the Bible, the claims of belief in miracles. I could not bear the thought that my dad would be healed if only I loved enough. God could not work that way. And then I hung up, my

entire faith turning on the hope that Luke's Jesus was right: *Blessed are you who weep.*

Two weeks before he died, some eighteen months after the diagnosis, my dad's kidneys began to fail, leaving him lethargic and confused. I had been home again for a month, taking care of him, acting as his nurse. The morning his kidneys shut down, he feigned an interest in a sports-fishing program on television; he didn't *want* to get up yet. Still he couldn't sit up in his own bed. Getting him dressed was nearly impossible. We took him to the hospital, where, after hours of waiting, the doctor gave him the choice of staying in the hospital, supported by machines, and living for a month or more, or going home to die within the week. My dad chose to go home. And that day we talked:

—You have to take care of your mother.

—We know. We will.

—You have to take care of your mother when I'm gone. She's already been through this once.

—Yes, we know. Don't worry.

And that was the charge of faith, of humility, and of selfless compassion. He spoke to all of his children. Seemingly not concerned with his own salvation, nor fearful of death, not presuming a thing about God in the afterlife, Paul knew only his obligation to my mother, to his faith in the things of this world. He acted out that faith in awarding us our inheritance. Take care of all that I have loved after I'm gone. Inheritance is not possession alone but assuming responsibility. All that is mine is yours, he seemed to say, echoing the father from Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

The parable, found only in the Gospel of Luke, is one of the best known in the New Testament. It was one of my dad's favorites. A man has two sons. The younger son requests his inheritance, the share of his father's property that will belong to him. So the father divides the property between the sons, and the younger departs for a distant country and squanders his portion in "dissolute living." When a famine strikes

the land, the prodigal son finds himself in desperate need and so takes the low work of feeding pigs: "He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything." Faced with this squalor and destitution, he "came to himself" and decided to return to his father, beg forgiveness for sinning against him and against Heaven, and request that his father put him to work. Upon the son's return, however, his father celebrates the homecoming, kills the fatted calf, and organizes a party of singing and dancing. Returning from the field and hearing the hubbub, the elder son complains against the father: "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" The father corrects the elder son, reminding him of his real inheritance: "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

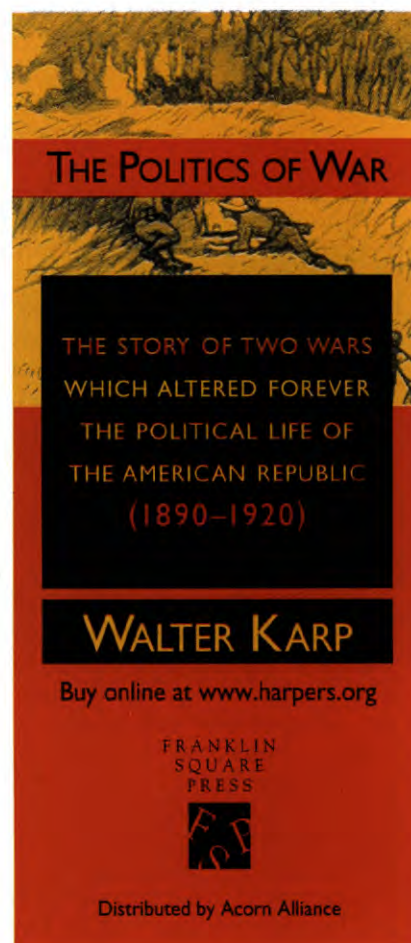
This parable is widely taught for what it has to say about compassion and forgiveness, about the promise of homecoming, that it's never too late to repent, and for its final line—which I have so far left out—"we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." And, alternately, we are taught never to respond with the ugly jealousy of the elder brother. Love is not resentful. Both sons are sinners, and in such different ways.

Yet, what if the sons are actually more similar than different, both blind to the only real inheritance promised in the parable—a worldly one. What if this parable has as much to say about our earthly inheritance—creation itself—as it does about radical compassion and the pitfalls of jealousy and resentment? What if we linger over the father's words "all that is mine is yours" and understand this to be the better inheritance, the best lesson we could ever learn, and our greatest desire? And what if we, like the sons, only

need to be reminded—as I believe Jesus tries to do with this parable—that we have all already received our inheritances, by our births and not our baptisms (where we're told we "die with Christ"), and so in our lives and not our deaths? Christian faith would become radically different. Once we accept that our inheritance is the here and now, and it's all that we've ever had, all that Jesus had—all that we'll ever have—then the things of this world can begin to be understood as holy, as the real presence of God.

Focusing on confession and love of the here and now may be just the right way to stomach this Christian legacy I'm living under. I can let go of both the ancient miracle of the Resurrection and the modern miracle Catholics experience when priests change bread and wine into the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. In fact, I must let go of these most basic elements of Catholicism that point to the afterlife, salvation, and personal, eternal reward. But why? Karen Armstrong, a former nun turned religious scholar, who is also not interested in the afterlife, has answered this question well: the afterlife is about preserving your ego "eternally in optimum conditions." It's that sort of egotism that God would have us let go of, and that builds walls between people. Armstrong is right: "A lot of people see God as a sacred seal of approval on some of their worst fantasies about other people." And if faith obliges us to do the will of God, we can do nothing but lovingly strive, through humility and selfless compassion, to belong here, pay attention, and take care of one another.

If God is nothing but the demand that we live well here, compassion is the way, and compassion, by definition, demands humility and the end of egotism. This may mean finding the real presence of God not in any cup on any altar, where my tradition has forever said it is and where I've always looked, but rather in the mess of blood, ink, and petroleum jelly that would soon scar my right shoulder, compelling me never to forget my inheritance, or in the blood donated to a local hospital and entered into the



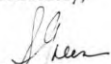
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Sincerely,


Shawn Green
VP Circulation

National Bone-Marrow Registry, while a friend with leukemia waits on a transplant list.

This friend, Linsay, is thirty, and her hair has fallen out and grown back twice. With soft curls. The summer after my dad died, she was placed on a list for a bone-marrow transplant. So she asked that I donate blood and join the registry, just to replenish a stock she was sure to rely on while hospitalized. It was the least I could do.

Linsay had been an early co-conspirator in the design. She'd weighed in on multiple drafts. But, she explained, you cannot give blood for a year after getting a tattoo. Giving blood now when she needed it, when she asked, would be a symbolic act, meaningful for both how it reveals my obligation to her and for its potential literal end of saving a life, even if it's not hers. Waiting on this tattoo was the small sacrifice I could make for her, to communicate that I love her, that I would do anything I could to make this easier, to help her think she is not nearly as alone as her cancer makes her feel. And I would do whatever I could to make myself useful.

Of course I would postpone the tattoo until I could build up the nerve to donate a pint of blood. That the donation and the tattoo were linked in my mind drew out the process of nerve-building, which amounted to several weeks of procrastinating, locating the blood bank in downtown Brooklyn and the tattoo shop on the Lower East Side, and deciding that I could handle the needles two days in a row, that I could handle a permanent mark, that I could, in fact, handle, if necessary, some doctor digging deep into my hip with a boring tool to extract my marrow. Friends who saw me in the days prior had no idea I was getting a tattoo, but they may never forget how big of a baby I was about donating a simple pint of blood.

Pedaling to Daredevil, heading north on Water Street, the whole of downtown lived and raced behind me. I was in Chinatown at Canal

Street, with swarms of people on foot swinging their grocery bags filled with the produce that lines the streets, tourists walking against the lights. The fuckers, I muttered. I balanced upright at a stoplight. Behind me were the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges, the financial district, the ferry ports; ahead was the rest of the city, going on for miles and miles. And I was alone, traveling and watching. Praying. I found myself praying. It's true, I can now admit it: the solitary pedaler prays just by seeing the world as God's creation and our inheritance. This is where God is.

On a bike, I'm always in it; with a fixed gear, I never stop pedaling. There are no brakes. I often feel I'm best on a bike, safe, in tune with the city. It's where I've learned to pay better attention to my everyday life, which demands discipline. During my early years in New York, I was endlessly impressed and dazed by the broad city strokes visible from a cab on the West Side Highway. It was my favorite ride. I've come to find the confusion and fragility, total exposure and independence of being in traffic more my speed, more fit for me as a believer, a reflection of the very nature of my belief. There is a serious dose of asceticism in this approach. And I am, in fact, a vegan no-frills bike rider. My bike gives me a way to assert my belongingness here more completely, a way to be closer to the city, more a part of its fleeting miracles.

Admittedly, it is not perfect and not entirely safe, but that is so much the point. This sort of travel, a mix of reflection and prayer, vulnerability and mad aggression, the miracle of surviving the commute—right in the middle of it all—is a pilgrimage of sorts, and one quite different from the old-fashioned, desperate hunt for some other place where God is because he certainly isn't here. I imagine the harrowing and pious journeys of the religious of a long-lost time, and probably through craggy Russian mountains, the hair shirts and bloody knees from all that crawling, uphill, both ways. That is not the way of a city pilgrim like me—the religious Bicycle Boy. My knees and

elbows may be equally bloodied, sure—I've had my share of crashes—but I've gotten to the point where my desperate longing for God or faith or both can be based only on the hope that the search, as disciplined in its way as those ancient journeys, must be a worldly one we make up as we go along, yet one that at each moment seeks a consistent commitment to the ethical life we've chosen by living here among so many others, all under so much pressure. We must nurse our fathers when they are dying. We must donate blood when a friend asks. We must believe, as my dad did, that we serve God in serving the poor. We must love our mothers, our neighbors, our enemies.

All that I have is yours, my stepfather had said. You have your mother. Take care of her, all of you. You have your siblings; take care of one another. And by his life of charity and compassion, no doubt inspired by Jesus, he continually says to me: You have the world I lived in, that Jesus lived in. You have your commandments—love God and love your neighbor. Take care of them. All that I have is yours.

And I never forget that all this came from a man whose body was ravaged by cancer, from a man whose father's body had also been ravaged by cancer. I saw the pain of it all on his face. Part of what we shared with each other then, and with Jesus in our humanity, was his body, this body—in health, vibrant yet balding, robust yet scarred; and in sickness, jaundiced and frail, leaking bile from a hole in his gut, yet with hands capable of holding mine even on his last day, both of us exhausted from keeping him alive.

In the end, learning my inheritance through the early deaths of my fathers makes the life of faith all the more urgent. So I've gotten my tattoo, a sign not of permanence but of vulnerability, the softness of our skin, the thin line between the quick and the dead. I have my fathers' initials—FJK and PAB—set in sharp, black ink on my right shoulder. I have burned a visible mark of my inheritance into my body, into my skin, in remembrance of them. ■