

Sound track:

Leonard Cohen, "The Future"

Johnny Cash, American III: Solitary Man  
108, Songs of Separation

Give and Take

by Doug Taylor

I was going to give it one more try.

"Family" wasn't the easiest word in my vocabulary. It came out hard in the mouth, an atrophied and malformed word from disuse. Perhaps never having said nor heard "I love you" enough during hard times. Distance was certainly felt because of failings I had such a hard time forgiving or forgetting. Especially my own. Too proud, too proud.

In California, I was far away from all the manic swings of disappointments and conviviality. Now, the hardest times were here again. I had less choice now. I was blown back across the desert by the storm that had uprooted me from wanderings, just like the prodigal tumbleweed, with not a petal from a desert flower left with me.

After the series of funerals for my friends, I promptly moved across town into a house filled with younger kids, the mighty punkhouse called The Cunningham House: Chris, Steve, Shane, Jeff, Deathkill. A cult of unloved castoffs. We were a family full of black sheep. On the other side of the city, the bloodkin family became a slow, rehearsed theme until it felt safe enough to engage with those familiar strangers. They suspended suspicion, and I tried to lose track of blame. Perhaps if enough time were shared, mutual understanding would soon follow.

But they knew that I only came back because I was so deeply wounded. I didn't come back because I was broke, although I was destitute. I had been broke for years; I barely

noticed now. I would have thought something was wrong if I had fifty dollars that wasn't already spent. Childhood poverty had trained me well for survival. Independence was the curse, family inheritance, and gift. I came back to Utah because I was broken-hearted.

I found salve with those who I need not ask how they felt. Not good. Not at all. We all mourned differently just as we all mourned the same: Jen, Ariel, Scott, Blake. The news was a pressure that took your breath; stunned, sobbing, silence. I held my breath the whole way home. How many days or months would it be until we could breathe again? I told the story so many times that I lost my voice. An accident you never saw coming, but something that you knew that could have happened to anyone, or to any of us, at least.

I found a job working construction through a few good words people put out for me. I got on a framing crew, a ragtag bunch of mercenary wood worker warriors. We were building homes for wealthy people out in the cold weather. I was paid a pittance, barely enough to feed myself and stay warm, a Utah winter imperative.

"You think you got it rough? Just be glad you don't smoke!" said my friend and co-worker Sarge. "You see my dog Dusty over there in my truck?" Dusty, a Mala-mutt, perked his ears at his name. "I'll let only one of us go hungry when we're skimming, and it ain't the son of a bitch with no thumbs. The useless little bastard!" Dusty wagged his tail in recognition.

In this way, loved ones kept each other going. Winter can be such a dark season, and feelings settle like a hearth flame until all that is left is little handfuls of ash.

It wasn't too long before my mother pulled me aside during my semi-monthly visits. I was the last to know: foreclosure. I asked her if she needed money.

"No, it's too late, now. Everything is done. They're taking everything." Here I am, spending all day building houses while I can't keep my family in their own. Kafka

laughed. My own family is waiting for the sheriff's eviction. I felt like I had failed them again.

"I just can't take this anymore," she said, as she choked on her tears. I held my mother next to me, and it felt like the first time we had been close since I was a little boy. It had started with the end of summer and shunted right into the cold despair of the end of the year. Now it was Christmastime, the winter of the season of taking. I had nothing else to give her but a shoulder to cry on. I felt like this year was taking everything it possibly could.

"Why did you all take so long?" asked Yosef, our friend and host away from home.

"We left late; it couldn't be helped" said Shaun.

"Dude, it was just such a long drive," said Grabbo.

"Was there snow?" asked Yosef.

"No, not in April," I said. "At least not on the roads so much."

"Only in the mountains," said Kelly. Clinton said nothing, but just nodded quietly.

"Well, whatever," said Yosef. "It's a long drive from Provo to Oakland. I'm just glad to see you here."

It was a road trip we would have been happy to have taken with Blake, if he had been with us. 108 was playing for the first time since only Krishna knew when, and who knew if they were ever going to do it again. Although I loved their music, I was never interested in Krishna philosophy. Growing up queer and Mormon meant an intensely damaging inward self-hatred that I hope no one else understands personally. Once bitten, twice angry. I wasn't about to get fooled again.

I had been back to Utah for many months by now. The Cunningham House had become the focal point again. New bands were formed, new songs were written, and new and

familiar faces started coming through again, playing their heart out in our living room. It had been only eight months since.... the day. The taking season had given way to a new spring, and we awaited it eagerly.

The official memorial service for Blake had been the best I had ever been to. I looked back on it fondly, if that makes any sense. To honor other departed, I had gone to bars, to living rooms, to parks, churches, cemeteries, and even railroad stations. But I had never gone to a library before or since. Blake's mother Laura had been so earnest. She came to a memorial we held at a show soon after with dozens of little plastic baggies full of his ashes. This was her way of burying her only son, by giving him away to the world. As she had done.

Perhaps the most popular way that people buried Blake was in their skin. New railspike tattoos appeared by scores in Provo; many testified that they had mixed his ashes into the black ink. Iconographic of both our hometown scene, which we referred to as "Goldenspike Hardcore" and also of hobo graffiti which became inseparably associated with Blake and his band Parallax. He had no gravesite, no tombstone. He was us, and we were now literally parts of him. I considered what I would do, and I hadn't made up my mind. Until 108 came along.

We caught wind that 108 was playing 924 Gilman in Berkeley only about a month before. They were a band that had gained some notoriety in the straight edge hardcore scene because of their unflinching devotion to Hare Krishna, as well as straight edge and veganism.

So much of being a misfit in Utah revolves around losing faith and apostasy. They lose faith in you, you lose faith in them, you lose faith in anything that's left, and not always in that order. God is such a large part of life in Utah, that removing religion from your heart and mind requires an almost immediate life-sustaining transplant. The zeal of the convert is an attempt of certification of self, an attempt reassure one's self of their survival. At a young age, Blake's

search for spirituality and meaning took him through a hazy vision of drugs before leading him to the path of committed sobriety, and a life as Krishna devotee, which he walked for many years. In his early adulthood, he finally broke off from religion altogether, although it remained a referent for him at times. "Welcome!" I wrote to him. "We atheists have been waiting for you for a while."

With friends in private, we speculated: did Blake perform ante nārāyaṇa-smṛtiḥ? A remembering, or chanting of the name of Krishna at the moment of death. Obviously, we couldn't know.

"It doesn't matter!" I scoffed. "Praying doesn't do any goddamn good!"

"Yes, but it's not about us, is it? It's about our friend."

Regardless, a 108 show would have been welcomed as a homecoming, of sorts. If familiarity breeds contempt, nostalgia could summon desire. But should a devotee, serial apostate or not, desire to see a Krishnacore band? The paradox is a problem for someone else; I just wanted to see an awesome show. And.... I had a plan to pay my respects to my friend.

Burial. By mosh. I got your ante nārāyaṇa-smṛtiḥ right here. Yes, let's up the ante, all right? I'll show you Hari bol, assholes.

I had been holding on to his ashes for months. It seemed a shame to dump him in the Provo river, or to scatter him at places he had already been scattered, like rail yards or popular mountain tops in Utah. I saw my job as to take him places that no one else was going to be able to. I was going to be able to give Blake his last time at a 108 show.

The opening bands were great. If I had been in any other sort of headspace, I would have loved it. But as it was, I was tense and sweating. I silently begged them off the stage between heartbeats that came way too slowly. I felt the plastic bag full of ash in my pocket as if it were still hot, leaden and burning a hole in my pocket. I kept checking to see that it was still there. Eventually, I grabbed it and held tight.

Once 108 took the stage, I felt immense release. They started grinding through their songs, and then they started playing "Deathbed". I shouted and paced back and forth in the back. By the middle of the song, I ripped open the bag. I took a handful of ash. I squeezed it in my hands and held it close to my chest.

".....YOUR BODY'S HERE! BUT YOU'RE NOT!" I let out a loud, animal wail, and I started swinging my arm in large, violent circles. Slowly, my fist loosened up, and ashes sifted out from my fingers, flying in all directions. I leaned back my head and howled. Ashes floated up into the rafters, to be bonded to the sweat and paint. I took another handful and repeated the process.

"That thing that screamed with me  
And dreamed with me  
That thing that laughed with me  
And cried with me  
That same thing lies before me.  
But where are YOU?"

Ashes floated above my head, landing lightly on the shoulders and clothing of other people standing nearby. They fell on my tear-streaked face, and I wiped away, gritty, sweaty.

"You're not on your deathbed."

Afterwards, I went on a walk. Coincidentally, the very last place I had seen Blake alive was at 924 Gilman. Parallax had played there for the first time, and it was a bucket list item for Blake to perform on that stage, and probably for a few of the others, too. I couldn't have missed a chance to see them in that kind of action. I rode the Greyhound hundreds of miles just for the opportunity. It felt like fate or destiny, or

maybe just outstanding creeper skills, because I hit the ground running in Oakland and I was absolutely certain that I was going to find all the Parallax members before the show. I went to Telegraph in Berkeley and looked for them at the record stores. I must have just barely missed them. I just so happened to walk down the correct road, and then I found them westbound on Durant, headed back to the tour van parked on Shattuck. As impossible as that was, I felt like I knew I was meant to find them.

I spent the next couple hours with Blake, talking about how things were going, and how we felt about our lives. Blake was a little worn out from the road, so he struggled for positive things to say. On the other hand, I was bubbling with excitement. I had moved away from Utah only a few years prior. I told him how I had taken his words to heart, and I had been sober for two years and vegan for over a year. He already knew this from our letters, but I had to say it again in person. I felt like I owed him quite a lot of thanks. Even if he hadn't been side by side with me every step of the way, he was there when it counted most, when I was "torn between suicide and revolution", as he succinctly wrote in his lyrics. We kept in contact by way of writing letters, keeping what had started as a somewhat antagonistic relationship way back in Canyon View Junior High 1996 and turning it into a much more intimate and closer kind of friendship by 2005.

Our last words we shared were: "I love you, brother. I'm so excited to see you again. I can't wait to meet again. Back home."

While we both meant Provo, the concept of home had become a myth. A place you couldn't keep, even if you tried. Or a town that you heaped unrequited love upon. Blake mailed me a CD of a band called "Defiance, Ohio". On one of the last songs, the lyrics were: "Home is when we do meet again." So when would that be?

I stood alone on the corner of Gilman and San Pablo, the site of what neither of us knew were our last goodbye in the summer of 2005. I reached into my pocket, and held the rest of the ash.

"Blake, I know you're gone. You can't hear anything. But I need to speak anyways. You have given me so much. So much. Your example deeply touched my life. You convinced me I could quit drinking and drugs, and I have. It saved my life! You remember how I was.... how bad it got. We had a deep bond, and that's how so many others felt, too. You convinced me that I should seek out what inspired me, to touch upon my anger, to channel it towards the fight against injustice. I am trying. I am trying so hard. I wish it was me and not you. But I promise I won't forget. I will earn it. I swear. I have taken everything you had to give me. I won't waste it.

"I love you so much. It hurts so bad that this is how I have to say goodbye. But your legacy to me will always be hope. I will live as proudly as if we together. You are in my heart always. I have to give you away now, brother."

I poured the rest of his ash into my hand, and made a fist. I clenched it tightly, and kissed my knuckles. I bent my knees and threw my friend's ashes straight up into the heavens, and nothing came down.