



Found: A phrase created on the Notes App of my iPhone X, 9/18/20. Context Unknown. Served as inspiration for “You Cannot Eat Mercy”, a piece of creative nonfiction.

You Cannot Eat Mercy

High on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, resting at the bottom of a bowl formed by rocky hills, is Donner Lake. Located in Donner Pass, it stretches on for approximately two miles, covering an area of about 1.3 square miles. It is not the largest lake in the world, or even Northern California, for that matter, nor is it the deepest or even the highest. The fish there are the same fish that swim in all freshwater lakes, just as the tourists there are the same tourists that visit every other freshwater lake. In fact, apart from its history, there is nothing particularly remarkable about Donner Lake at all. For all intents and purposes, it is simply a mountain lake. Pretty to look at. Nice beaches. Expensive condos. Good swimming, if you don't mind getting cold. Make sure to bring extra snacks.

One hundred and seventy years ago, this place was known as Truckee Lake, located in Truckee Canyon. Apart from the luxury hotels and crowds of upper-middle class families wading

on the shore, Truckee Lake was indistinguishable from Donner Lake. Same mountains, same fish, same crystal waters. Yet when the Donner Party finally ground to a halt near the lake, the mountains are already covered in snow. The fish are hidden deep in the black depths. The water is frozen over. Everything is suffocated by the endless snowfall.

It is the quiet fear of every emigrant traveling to California that they will not beat the snow. Every step is hastened by the grim knowledge that time is running out.

The first snowflake falls on the Donner Party on October 30th, as they bury William Pyke in Truckee Canyon. Within an hour, snow is falling steadily from the darkening sky. It melts on grim and terrified faces alike. Laughing children throw back their heads and catch snowflakes on their tongues.

“We push on,” Charles Stanton mutters. He is convinced that the pass will stay open for another month. The snowfall will not keep them from reaching Sutter’s Fort, only 150 miles away.

By the time the emigrants arrive at Truckee Lake, they are exhausted. Despite their desperation to keep moving, they cannot go any further. The snow swallows them whole.

Hypothermia is a gentle death. You grow warm towards the end, the body unable to recognize the cold as nerves slowly die. Death disguises as sleep calls to you. You rest your head in the snow and close your eyes. Peace settles over you as the cold drinks the life from your body.

When the Donner Party decides to set up camp for the winter, they did so as someone slowly freezing to death might do. Curling up in abandoned cabins and makeshift tents, resigning themselves to winter in Truckee Pass, they settle in to die.

James Breen opens his journal and does the only thing he can do: he writes.

*We pushed on as fast as our failing cattle could haul our almost empty wagons. At last we reached the foot of the main ridge near Truckee [now Donner] Lake. It was sundown. The weather was clear, but a large **circle around the moon** indicated an approaching storm.*

“We have now killed most part of our cattle, have to stay here until next spring, and live on poor beef without bread or salt. It snowed during the space of eight days with little intermission after our arrival here”

Months pass. James writes. His entries are short and concise. The weather. Prayers. A count of provisions. More prayers. Animals. Illnesses. Deaths. Prayers. He writes for no one. Only God watches him scrawl his dwindling life out on the page.

For over a month, the Donner Party live off of their oxen and cattle, dogs, deer, shoes, jackets, bark. Anything. The slow chill of death is creeping closer and closer. Desperation is shining in sunken eyes and hollow cheeks.

On December 16, a band of snowshoers strike out to find help. The mountains toss them to the wind. As they float through skeletal trees, their figures shrink and their teeth grow long. They turn on the injured and dying, tears mixing with saliva and blood. Their cries are eaten along with their flesh. You cannot eat mercy.

Seven deaths and one month later, the snowshoers find an Indian village. In exchange for a pack of tobacco, the leader of what will be known as the Forlorn Hope party is carried to a ranch. While recovering, he writes to the state of California, begging for help.

Those they left behind are fading. Slowly and painfully. There is nothing left to eat but bones and bark. Hypothermia is a kinder death than starvation and both are taking their sweet time to claim their victims. The race is won by The First Relief: the first wave of rescuers commissioned by Fort Sutter. They arrive at Truckee Lake on February 19. A woman emerges

from the snow to welcome them. She is a walking corpse, her eyes peering out blankly from her skull. Her cracked lips move as she stumbles towards them. “Are you men from California?” she whispers. Her voice is like wind through dead leaves. Black fingers clutch her sleeves as though she is trying to shake herself from a dream. “Or are you from heaven?”

The rescue party can only take a few at a time. Over the next fifty days, three rescue parties travel to and from the lake, gradually carrying the survivors out. The Third Relief leaves only five people, one of them a young boy, with a promise to return.

On April 17, the promise is fulfilled when the Fourth Relief arrives at the lake.

A man gets to his feet as the group of men breaks through the trees. He sways where he stands. He is gaunt and haggard, more a skeleton than a man, and his beard is crusted with dirt, ice, and blood. Beneath the matted tangle, his lips draw back in a grim smile..

“You’ve come,” he whispers. He begins to laugh; a horrible, choking noise crawls from his throat and over his lips. A few feet away, a man lies face down, his head split open to reveal an empty cavern long frozen over. The snow has soaked up everything that hasn’t been drained into buckets. Scattered about the clearing is human flesh carved into pieces, cracked bones, and organs. Their owners are nowhere to be seen. Near the fire, untouched, are ox legs. The man kicks them over.

“Don’t taste as good as human.” Louis Keseberg wipes his mouth on his hand, still grinning. “Figured I’d save ‘em for last. Get the good stuff while it’s fresh.”

One of the rescue party members, a younger man, turns and retches. The other men avoid their gaze as he empties what little he had into the snow. Louis Keseberg just stands before them, staring with unblinking eyes. His lips begin to tremble under the accursing stares of his fellow man.

“They were already dead,” he insists, shaking. “They were already dead when I done it. I swear it.” A few men draw forward and Louis falls to his knees, crawling away from their eyes, their damned, penetrating, prying eyes. “They were dead,” he sobs. “They were dead, they were dead, they were dead.”

He rides back with them, the last member of the Donner Party. In his nightmares he sees them. The young men and the little boy. Their mouths open, and their shrunken lips scream for mercy. Warm blood and black masses bubble over their teeth and stain the snow beneath them. The rock falls over and over, cracking open their skulls even as they try to drag themselves away. The littlest one didn’t cry, because what would that give him? He understood better than any of the others, Louis and James and the Forlorn Hope party and everyone else, the lesson all creatures born with sharp teeth and a sharper hunger learn: you cannot eat mercy.

Myself

I wrote a thing

Can I read it?

Yeah

There I shared it with you

Okay got it

It's about the Donner Party

Creative nonfiction

It's based on a note I found on my phone

Oh wait I know this! Scrap writing

Yeah exactly!

Yeah like when someone finds an old
piece of writing and gets inspired to
make something new out of it

Yeah

It's not that good

But it's something

I wish I could write a story like this.
Like I always read this stuff and I
never make anything.

Nah that's okay.

Interpretation is generative

What?

Like even when you read a story you
are creating your interpretation of it

So the act of interpretation is also
an act of creation

That's comforting to know
So there is a pattern

Of course

Circle of life

Inspiration?

Creation

And then distribution?
Like these messages?

So far so good

This might be more significant
If it wasn't all in your head

What a lame plot twist

Cycles

A spark of inspiration
Struck from two stones
Is this instinct?
Generation to generation
Stories passed down

A biological need
And a divine inspiration
A fire of creation
Given from two lips
Breathing light into the dark

Huddled by warmth
Comfort in stark
Contrast to visions
Of unholy provisions
Driving us forward

And suddenly, illumination
Electric reanimation
Of human interpretation
Our proclamation
Of silent messages
Relayed between
Holy vessels in the night
Caught in Repetition
Reigniting inspiration
Through interpretation
Act of creation
Blind implication

Life Beyond Words

I have always hated throwing things away. It isn't the act of waste that was upsetting to me. It is the act of discarding a thought, a memory, a moment frozen in time. I clung to pieces of my life and drew them close to my heart although physical distance was all that separated the past, present, and future, but it is always swept to the side and thrown away, taking with them the physical connection with the past.

The linear nature of loss is unbearable.

I realize, of course, how that must make me sound. I promise that I am not a hoarder. I am only trying to solve a puzzle. I collect my pieces, I fit them together, and I send them on their way. That is what I try to do. The picture doesn't always make sense, the pieces don't always fit.

Writing gives each piece a purpose. It brings everything together, connecting the ends of a finite timeline of life into a cycle.

The pieces preceding this final explanation are all part of this cycle of writing.

Firstly, the scrap writing. This is the first stage in the life cycle of writing. Inspiration. A spark. Something that was created with an unknown purpose. This doesn't have to be specifically a note left on an iPhone app. This scrap is representative of that first idea; it is a glimpse into new possibilities generated by an internal or external catalyst. That is the foundation of all writing.

Secondly, the creative nonfiction, based on that initial idea of the scrap writing. This is creation. The initial assumption that many writers make is that their writing comprises only on this stage. It is easy to fall into this trap. Creation is the very flesh and blood of writing, afterall, but it must be sustained.

Thus the third stage of the life cycle: interpretation. Interpretation necessitates distribution on the creation. Afterall, how can anyone interpret a piece of writing without first having access to it? Even if the only interpreter is the writer themselves, there must be a way to communicate the worldview presented in the writing. Once that occurs, then interpretation can begin. Interpretation, as discussed in the text messages representing an inner monologue of a writer, is inherently an act of creation. Just as a remix of a song is an act of creative invention, so is the interpretive act of consuming writing. If interpretation is generative, then it creates once again that spark of inspiration. The cycle repeats again. Over and over again.

That is the purpose of the poem “Cycles.” It encapsulates the stages of writing and how they feed into one another. To describe it even as a cycle would simplify the complex relationship between inspiration, creation, and interpretation to a two-dimensional form. It is a network of thousands of connections between these spheres of influence.

So what does this mean? There are several conclusions I have drawn about writing. Firstly, writing consists of three main stages: inspiration, creation, and interpretation. Secondly, these stages are intertwined and writing neither begins nor ends with any of them. Thirdly, writing exists in a four-dimensional space.

The final and most important conclusion is that writing lives on beyond the writer. That is why I hesitated so often to throw pieces of writing away; it was as though I was discarding a memory. That is why James Breen’s journal is still passed around, inspiring new writings long after the cannibalized members of the Donner Party were buried in the snow. That is why we share writing with each other and with ourselves, spreading it as far as we can. The life cycle of writing never ends. It is immortal, and unending. And it is inspiring.