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Dr. O'Donnell

Advanced Composition

Revision: Narrative

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The Mind and the Stomach: A Narrative about Health and What Makes Someone Who They Are

In this piece I discuss the consequences of finding out that I have several major food allergies. I look into how the changes that occurred in my body after avoiding those foods radically affected my mind and who I am as a person.

Author Information:

Kyle Norris, born in 2001, is a graduate of East Tennessee State University. He majored in English and minored in Philosophy. He has lived in the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee his whole life. He loves the works of William Butler Yeats, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Shakespeare. Kyle is an avid reader and walker. More than anything, his is a life spent trying to comprehend just what the hell is going on exactly!

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The Polack's Surprise:

The sickly fluorescent lighting of medical establishments saturates everything in the room, including the infection-orange walls and the faux-marble tiling. I am also enveloped in the sterile rays. It's early June of 2024; I am twenty-three years old, two hundred and sixty pounds, and I have been sick my entire life, though I do not yet know that. I'm a smidge under six feet tall and my long brown-hair looks greasy. I'm reading Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, sitting in an uncomfortable chair, and Dr. Pienkowski walks in. He's an immunologist and allergist with a hefty mind and a thick accent. He orders me onto the examining bench and starts spitting his jagged Polack English.

"hckhello, Kale, I am Docturr Pienkowski. It is pleasure to meet you." He turns to his stubby nurse, a quiet man with shy eyes, and points to my face. "Swelling on upper lip: immunological response." He lifts my shirt sleeve. "Keratosis Pilaris: immunological response." He lifts my shirt. "Discoloration on back from mast cell overproduction: immunological response." He goes back in front of me and leans forward. Mid-fifties, early-sixties, his brown hair going gray, he stares at me with lustrous turquoise eyes, beaming with intelligence and poise. "Inflammation in face: immunological response."

After discerning something is deeply wrong with my immune system by a few glances, he asks why I've come to the allergist. I tell him I feel a tickle in my throat when I have Reese's Cups. He is quizzical, already knowing I have more problems than a tickle. "Alright, we will give John-Hopkin's-style allergy test."

A few minutes later a kind nurse—a simple, middle-aged woman with a comforting smile—puts about fifty droplets containing allergens on my back and then pricks me about fifty times, one after the other, with a small needle to get the allergens just under my skin. I'm laying

down on that long, bedlike, papered-over contraption of a seat only found in doctor's offices. I'm reading my copy of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* while she performs her duties. She finishes, tells me there might be some itching, and says she'll be back in fifteen minutes. There is no smell in the room. The lights remain tyrannically white and bright and pervasive. I read... but only for a couple minutes.

My back starts to hurt a little. That's normal, I think. It's probably that I'm allergic to peanuts or something. A minute passes, and something strange happens. It feels like my entire back is on fire. It hurts so badly that I can no longer read. I think this is odd. How could my entire back be having a reaction? I couldn't be allergic to everything. Maybe I'm just being dramatic or weird. I close my eyes and wait in perturbation. Ten minutes later Dr. Pienkowski comes in.

"Oh, my God, Kale! You have big food allergy!" Dr. Pienkowski asks to see my phone, takes a picture of my back, and shows me. I look at a swollen battlefield bathed in the red of agitation. The Polack says he'll be back very soon. He's gone for about thirty seconds. When he comes back, he has me sit up. He gives me bitter Benadryl to drink and rubs a medical cream on my back. It's cold and has a sick, mass-produced, artificial-vanilla smell. "You are sick man, Kale? You feel very badly most days?"

"No, not really."

"I think so. It's okay. We'll make you better, but this will be very difficult. There will be many foods you cannot eat. We will need a blood test to rule out disease—Let me see tongue!"

I stick out my tongue and hear the Polack's favorite chorus, "immunological response!"

"Okay, Kale, your immune system is in shambles. You will be temporarily allergic to some foods for next three to six month. Some food you will always be allergic to. You will sit

here for thirty minute. You will start to feel better. You will get blood test. You will come back in three or four week, and you will feel better. Let's look at list. Okay, Kale, let's not be eating any gluten, soy, nuts, tree nuts, legumes, milk, strawberries, apples, garlic, pears, pork, shrimp, gourds, or lettuce. Some you may eat again in time, though."

I'm baffled and confused. I pass out during my blood test an hour later because I haven't eaten anything and I'm nervous. How could I be allergic to so many foods and not know it? What will become of me?

Sommerbildungsroman:

The serendipity that I was reading perhaps *the bildungsroman* by *the* German author while getting my allergy test isn't lost on me. I am, in fact, rather grateful that I could see young Wilhelm change so very much. It made my terrific summer easier to comprehend. Sometimes people just dramatically change. Sometimes you become who you are meant to be

Because I am allergic to so many foods, it is likely that I was eating something I was allergic to at every meal. For instance, products derived from legumes—such as gum arabic, guar gum, and carob bean gum—and products derived from soy—such as soy lecithin and monodiglycerides—are replete in ultra-processed food, and therefore difficult to avoid. Research and additional visits with Dr. Pienkowski revealed that accidentally consuming allergens all the time had destroyed my immune system, suppressed my metabolism, and drained me of energy. I simply never noticed the deleterious effects because my whole life was a deleterious effect. When I was sixteen, I had a stomachache that lasted for six months and felt like a dozen hunting knives rooting around in my guts. I barely noticed. That was just my life. Nowadays people ask how I could've been so sick and never noticed. I immediately wondered so as well after my test

results came back, and I figured out why I went so long without noticing being sick—but only after having a transformational summer.

The Body...

It's June, just three days after my appointment with Dr. Pienkowski. The southern summer of the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee is nasty, overbearing, and sweaty—like an alcoholic, blue-collar husband. I wake up woozy because I haven't been eating enough since the allergist visit. I, like a lot of young adults, know very little about preparing food and yet have been forced into eating a diet consisting of a heavily restricted selection of whole foods prepared by myself. The food isn't great, and it takes a while before my culinary skills improve enough to where I can eat a proper amount of food.

I go to the bathroom. On the way out I briefly look into the mirror and turn away. Then my fight or flight response kicks in; nervous energy courses through my flesh, and I whip my head back towards the mirror. My face has changed so much as to register something primal in my mind's perception: the fear of the stranger. I seem almost like an unknown to myself. My cheekbones and jawline are sharper. My chronic inflammation has left my body, and I look like my grandmother. I look like my grandmother's favorite son, my father. But, most strangely, I look like myself for the first time in my life.

The changes to my face are only the start. By early July I have more energy than I have ever had in my life. Once upon a time my days were bleary-eyed affairs. My body, constantly being punished with food it couldn't digest, never rested properly. Apocalyptic visions haunted my dreams almost nightly for two decades. I could sleep for fourteen hours and wake up feeling as if I'd just worked a graveyard shift in a coalmine. Now, I can't sleep. I just pace and pace around in my living room at night, filled with energy and thinking about all the hours of my life

that were wasted in sickness. My mother tells me I should pick up walking to work some of my energy out. I do.

I'm allergic to everything outside as well, another test with Dr. Pienkowski revealed. No wonder I'd never been very outdoorsy. But I feel so much better from not poisoning myself everyday by eating foods that I'm allergic to, that I've become sturdy enough to enjoy the outdoors. I finally get what Goethe, Percy Shelley, and William Wordsworth are talking about. Nature, when you don't feel like you get the flu every time you go outside, is the most wonderful of gifts, and a gift that gives limitlessly. The flowers of the trees bloom beautifully and vulgarly, backgrounded by electric green verdure. The creeks whistle out the vitality of my heart. The birds sing an ode to my becoming alive. I am finally able to notice how lively and beautiful the world is when I become livelier myself.

I take up jogging as a hobby halfway through July so I can be tired enough to go to sleep at night. By the time I get to November, I am running three and a half miles at six o'clock every morning, just for fun, just to see if I can. Over that time my body changes in two dramatic ways. The muscles in my legs—stretching and tearing and growing—get much larger, and I start to shed fat.

Due to my being forced to eat a very clean, whole-foods-based diet, due to my raised level of activity and to the rebalancing of my metabolism, I lose an incredible amount of weight very quickly. I go from two sixty in June to one seventy in December. Five pounds of that were extra mast cells my body produced from thinking I was sick all the time. I've had no problems keeping the weight off either. In April of 2025, I still weigh one seventy. The only difference is I've been regularly strength-training, lifting weights four-to-five times a week, with an old buddy of mine. So, although I weigh the same, my body has recomposited itself to have a higher

percentage of muscle and a lower percentage of fat. I know that losing that much weight that quickly sounds crazy, and it was bewildering to experience. What's more bewildering is how easily it happened after I stopped feeling like I was the incarnation of death. What's more bewildering is the changes in my mind.



Kyle Norris, July 2nd, 2024.

Kyle Norris, October 27th, 2024.

Kyle Norris, March 1st, 2025.

... And the Mind...

Over the summer and fall, I notice I am simply not the man I used to be. I had been so melancholic as to border on the parodic. I used to see the world through an anxious veil. My whole life I had felt like a small, fragile, ever-under-attack mind peeking out of a shapeless frame and into a cold, hostile world. I believe this is why I never figured out I had been so sick my entire life. It's basically impossible to feel as badly as I used to physically and not feel terrible mentally. But it is also a fact that when you're mentally obliterated, you never question physical pain and discomfort. It just made sense to me that I felt bad all the time. Life was terrible and I was terrible. Why wouldn't I feel awful?

But... over the summer I start feeling good for once in my life. Oceans of anxiety and melancholy drain from my soul. It feels like I'm on permanent vacation. I've left behind the

frame of mind that dominated my life. I no longer care what the people around me think of me; I no longer feel like I need to apologize for existing, but what does all that mean? When you're on permanent vacation, you're not home. I've left my home; I've left behind the man I was and become a stranger in my own mind and body. How strange.

My whole life I've been a book worm, an intellectual. As time passes and my summer turns to fall and winter and spring, I notice that although I still read quite a bit, I'm drawn to different kinds of works.

Between August and December, I fall in and out of love with John Milton as his *Paradise Lost* switches back and forth between portraying the human heart with luminous and vibrant grandiosity, and showing off the meaningless gymnastic feats of a creative genius who wastes his and his reader's time with endless catalogues, theological explanation, and angelology. What matters is the pain of the fallen. What matters is the life in *Paradise Lost*. When Milton goes on a theological rant or interrupts his beautiful thoughts with a superabundance of references to Greek and Roman mythology, it reminds me of being sick and spending every day in my room. It reminds me of myself, with a swollen face and sharp pains in my stomach, having such low self-esteem that speaking to anyone made me feel like I was being skinned with a dull, rusty blade. Why does it remind me of that? Because neither angelology or being so sick that you don't want to leave your room is real life. They're both just shams of the human experience.

When Wilhelm is acting out the role of Hamlet or trekking across Germany in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, I'm overjoyed. The descriptions of nature and art that Goethe writes grow my soul and teach me how to appreciate life. In Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, I am in perfect sympathy with the character Ryuji when he talks about wanting adventure and purpose and overwhelming force in his life. And I am broken hearted

when he describes the mundane, useless aspects of existence. I'm so tired of what is dead and without purpose. I know that I probably judge works too harshly now, but when John Milton defends the heroes of the heart rather than the body, I can only cringe. I've always had a heart full of passion, a mind hungry for knowledge and experience, but until I felt good physically, I was never able to be anything more than a ghost in a bedroom. So, I stay away from fantasy and sci-fi. Such stuff is too anemic for me. I want unbridled passion and life in art. I try only to interact with books, music, and films that represent, enhance, and teach about life, real life. I've spent too long in the kind of monastic seclusion John Milton spent much of his life in, and I'm in no mood to continue my cloistering.

...And Others

Although bookish, I've never been quiet. In fact, I'm quite eccentric. My whole life I've been joking around and saying the strangest things I can think of. Though, as my immune system got worse, and untreated allergies will cause one to get progressively sicker, I stopped being as jovial. Nevertheless, I've always been borderline garrulous, but I've never exactly been *popular* with other people—whatever that means. People have always found me funny, but I also attract descriptors such as weird, eccentric, strange, and intellectual. I've spent most of my life being viewed as a kind of philosopher-clown—and that's by the folks that like me. Lots of people, in general, don't have a very high tolerance for an intellectual. When you try and talk about art or philosophy with most people, their eyes glaze over and they treat you like an asshole. Maybe that wasn't the case in every generation, but everyone my age has what is colloquially called *brainrot*. *Brainrot* is what happens when you spend your life with a screen glued to your face. Most people my age don't read books or even watch movies. They're just on Tiktok or Instagram all day, and when you try to talk with them about something deeper than puddle, they just aren't

up to the task and resent you for asking them to be. It's difficult to have abnormal interests. It makes people treat you differently. It's hard to be weird, but... you know what? It's way fucking harder to be fat.

I am treated very differently now. I may hold different philosophical beliefs now, be a little more chipper, have different tastes in art, but while my relationship to myself has changed, the way I act towards other people has changed very little. My whole life I have just tried to be nice and funny and talk about interesting things with others. Yet, for some reason, people have started acting completely differently towards me. I really don't have time to fully illustrate my point. That'd take page upon page. Let it suffice to simply talk about the human smile. People smile at me all the time now, and they very much didn't when I was sick. Over the summer I notice that everyone smiles at me now as I walk down the street, get a coffee, sit on a bench. This disappoints me so much.

I haven't had the easiest life. My childhood was dreadfully unhappy, and I spent my teenage years very bitter and angry. All the while, my body was being annihilated by allergies. Can you imagine how much it would have meant to me to have people smile at me every day? How much it would have meant to get even a bit of encouragement? Maybe that sounds silly to you, but maybe it only sounds silly because you don't know how terrible it is to be treated like you don't exist, to have so few people acknowledge that you're even there. That was probably the worst side-effect of my undiagnosed allergies. My corpulence, brought about by my ruined metabolism and low capabilities for activity, probably hurt worse than the demonic stomach pains I used to get. It's a real bummer when people won't even smile at you just because you're not attractive.

I guess most people simply cannot bring themselves to judge people by any other way than physically. As such, I can't really enjoy the smiles I get now, can't enjoy how differently people treat me. It reminds me of how nasty humanity can be. Even if it's what's on the inside that counts, it's what's on the outside that matters to most. This realization has made me hyperconscious of how the people around me treat others. The friends and family I have that treat me the same now as they always have are a treasure to me, and I keep people that act very differently towards me at arm's length. When I met new people, I study their behavior carefully. I try to discern if they would've treated me the same a year ago as they do now. Most often the answer is no. This is disappointing, but it's useful and true. Plus, it makes me really appreciate the few genuinely nice people I meet. You know, I never even thought it was strange that people treated me so poorly before. I guess I always felt so badly about myself that it just made sense that others treated me like nothing at all.

A Beginning, Not an End:

I've reworked this piece about half a dozen times, and the ending always has me so strung out that it feels like I accidentally ate beans. In the past I've tried to give the ending to this story a philosophical bent, explaining that the body is just as important as the mind, that mind-body dualism is a kind of lie and humanity is a unified being. That ending worked to some degree, but it didn't say what I wanted to.

I've tried to end the piece with aesthetic power, to pull the language and tone of writers like Goethe, Shelley, Emerson, and Nietzsche to convey the romantic joy for the world I feel because of my transformation, but this too feels empty. Why can't I end this story? Why can't I put a cap on my tale of great change?

One reason is because my story isn't over. I've had a really hard year. It's hard to change completely, to feel differently, to be treated differently. Even once you stop being depressed, there is still the shock and scars of being defeated for so many years. I'm having to relearn how to think of myself, to repaint my self-portrait. In many ways my discovery of having undiagnosed allergies and the transformations that followed are a tale not of rebirth but just birth. I didn't do very much living beforehand. I was a miserable person, who ached all the time physically and spiritually. A good way to understand my situation is to realize that for about half a year before I found out about my allergies, I was having strange episodes that several doctors thought were partial seizures: my throat would start to close, I'd become delirious, and my body would shake. I was told that I was likely developing epilepsy, but it was just allergies. The delirium and throat-closing were from allergies, and the shaking was a nervous response to almost dying. My body was so shattered by undiagnosed allergies that medical professionals thought I had epilepsy. My body was so shattered that I looked like an entirely different person. You can't recover from that physically overnight, and you can't recover from its mental effects overnight either.

I love to read and write. I love to put on my litterateur cap and play the maximalist, to dance across a page, flitting with my Latinate adjectives. I like to try and thunder out my words, to paint sublime pictures in a rhythmic mode. I want to do that for you. I want to tell you that I feel like newborn star, boiling and raging, burning against a void. I want to write that I am as the ocean, turning, moving, gathering into itself for a typhoon, but that's not what kind of piece this is. This piece isn't a literary show, a theatrical performance. This piece is about me, the real me.

It isn't just that my story isn't over; I've had a hard time writing this ending because I often times have a hard time speaking about myself. When you're sick your entire life, you kind

of feel like an open wound, a great vulnerability. You have to protect yourself, especially when people have treated you poorly your entire life as well. But I've worked up the courage and I'll just be as honest and plain as I can. Your body, your physicality, really is important. Your health affects your mind and your soul. As I've healed, my mind has changed a lot. I'm happier now. I think more clearly, and I think differently. I've become a different person, but I still have a lot of change left in me. I'm still becoming who I am. I try to be happier, to think better about myself and the world. I try to be productive and to take advantage of my new lease on life. All this is very difficult, but I just put one foot in front of the other and keep going, keep becoming myself. That's all any of us can do. The point is that you can't do that when you're sick. All you can do is lay down, exhausted and aching. I'm glad I don't have to lay down anymore, that I can be.

I planned on going to graduate school, and I think that can be nice for some people, but I was doing it for the wrong reasons. I was planning on cloistering myself away. Becoming a college professor seemed like a good way to bury myself in books and hide away from the world that always frightened me. Now that I feel so much stronger—and am literally much stronger—I want to try and go to law school. I think it'll be tough. Being a lawyer could be very meaningful, and it would push me out of my comfort zone. I don't really know who I am. I've been a shadow of my sickness my whole life, and I owe it to myself to step into the world, to take a chance on getting terribly wounded by life so that I may say that I at least lived.

I've learned so much. I've found out that girls will pretend to think it's interesting when you talk about Martin Heidegger if your jawline is square enough. I've found out that allergies can ruin your gut-health, your immune system, your entire life. I learned the pleasure of pushing yourself to do difficult things physically. I have a new relationship with books and art. I no longer think art is meant to be for the sake of itself. Poetry is beautiful when it captures the world

in a way that normal language cannot. If the language is beautiful but not related to the world, like John Milton's theology sections in *Paradise Lost*, it simply isn't meaningful, at least to me. More than anything, I've learned that being alive is confusing and strange. How could I have been so sick? How can people treat me so differently? How can I be so much the same and yet so very changed? I could never put it perfectly into words; such is the *je ne sais quoi* of life.

Alright, I've got one more go for you, one more stab at the ending, one more try to catch the wonderful energy and hope I feel, exiting from the darkness of sickness. I am as the prophet Jonah. I am called to life. Like all men I am called to life, but a morbid veil covers over all my dreams and hopes. I am swallowed by a whale and live in the deep. Alone, forsaken, absent from light, I grow into a man, and when I erupt from the deep, wretched onto the shore, mine eyes are weak. The light of the sky burns my eyes and pale flesh. My muscles ache, all atrophied. I need not chant the same prayers now, for a man in the world has different things to discuss than a man in a whale. I stumble around and burn and grow. I work my unused flesh, my unused heart. My ravenous mind is given over to a different diet. Once I was called to life and did not answer, but in the belly of the beast was I taken and did I live. Now, at the second calling, I arise—though weak, untested, untrained—and stir myself and gird my loins and shake my shanks. I arise and bear the weight of prophecy, accept the call to life. This is how I feel. This is my story, the pain and joy of rebirth.