Mid-way through this quarter a man who once was a close friend of mine, but whom I hadn’t thought about for years, died of a brain aneurysm at 24. We were on the swim team together, and he went to a neighboring high school. He was literally twice my size and always much faster than me. Despite the fact that he would routinely qualify for finals at the first rung of meets at which college coaches begin to scout athletes, and that I struggled to qualify for the regional, age-group championships (misleadingly named the Junior Olympics), we became friends. He let me swim in his lane. Once, during the two weeks every winter our team had to swim close to 10 miles a day, I went to his house between each morning and afternoon practice. He refused to eat the fruits and vegetables his mother, a Latina woman more than a foot shorter than him, served him. We napped and played Guitar Hero. He introduced me to fake-deep, bro-y movies like *Fight Club* and pop-punk bands like Fall Out Boy. He told me that he had a crush on our friend Danny’s older sister, Kelly, who was four years older than me, two years older than him, and headed to UC Santa Barbara the following year. He said that when I walked to the car with them after evening practice and talked with them for 45 minutes, I was “cock-blocking” him. I remember being surprised at the deep shame I felt for having misread an interaction that had made me happy. I stopped walking Kelly to her car with him, but the next day I still went to his house and ate the same meat sandwiches his mother made for us, and the vegetables from his plate. He graduated two years before me, and as I went through my last two years of high school, my first phase of growth and accruing of self-understanding, he fell out of my life. He went to Cal-Poly SLO for undergrad, so it wouldn’t have been too difficult for me to track him down, get coffee with him as a college student, but I had outgrown him, or simply forgotten him, so I
didn’t. It wasn’t until he died that I remembered any of this, and it didn’t come all at once. I ignored the first text my mom sent, telling me of his death. But in the weeks that followed these images of him kept rising unbidden from the back of my mind: the thin, ropey stretch marks on his back, like the scars of a whip; his wispy, steel-colored hair, destroyed by chlorine; playing cards with him in the mucky grass as we waited to swim. I never met his father.

Grief makes us consider the other. Part of this may be physiological. The removal of a constant stimulus can be a powerful trigger of fight or flight. Let’s say the air conditioner’s whir, a constant annoyance you’ve learned to live with, suddenly stops at midnight. The silence wakes you up. (Something’s changed. Perhaps this signals a predator’s approach. Your survival depends on your ability to investigate this, to give meaning to this change.) Ignoring something, then, isn’t necessarily proof that thing is unknown. Rather, it can be a form of acknowledgement: “I know this exists. I don’t need to think about it.” Perhaps the questions that grief brings up are a generalization of this survival mechanism. “This person I forgot about was here, somewhere. Now he’s not. What does this mean? Why?” The questions I’m trained to ask as a writer, though, have more to do with narrative than with survival. “Who was Tyler O’Connor? What do the stories I can tell of him amount to?” Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle Book 1* seems to be a document of a writer asking these same questions about the narratives that grief calls forth.

“I had written the book for Dad. I hadn’t known, but that was how it was. I had written it for him. I put down the manuscript and got to my feet, walked to the window. Did he really mean so much to me? Oh, yes, he did. I wanted him to see me.” Knausgaard writes often of his father’s eyes in this text: their unusual brightness. He also often sees faces or bodies in objects. It seems as if he’s searching for an other at all times. *My Struggle Book 1* opens—that is, after the long philosophical meditation on death—with Karl Ove watching a rescue crew on television trowel
the ocean for a capsized ship. He sees a face in the waves, not the face of a dead passenger or
crewman, but, for a moment, the waves are a face to him. Karl Ove is excited by/open to this
face he sees where there is no face. He brings this up to his father and he is ignored or laughed
at. This is a crucial moment for Karl Ove. His father thwarts his desire to seek out the self in the
other.

We read each other’s internal states in each other’s faces. Our gaze describes what we are
looking at, or what occupies our mind—An unfocused gaze? What occupies them must be
internal. It’s not a stretch to say the face stands in metonymy for a self. Then to see a face where
one isn’t is to see a self where one isn’t.

This speaks of a great loneliness, and Karl Ove is lonely. He writes of the difficulty he
has in relating to others, that he keeps people at arm’s length because he is always analyzing the
interaction. The only time he can lose himself socially is with alcohol. An object does not
warrant anxious analysis. There is no motivation, no internal world, to dissect or uncover.
Perhaps before an object, Karl Ove is able to let his guard down enough to feel comfortable
seeking the other. He anthropomorphizes the object, creates a self to seek. But the self he creates
can only be a part of his self. The object becomes a mirror. The only self he feels comfortable
meeting is his own.

He writes of his father, “I wanted him to see me.” To be seen while seeing the other is to
meet each other’s gaze. Being held in another’s gaze is being held in mind; it implies being
considered by that other. It is to ask, if only for a moment, “Who is this self I see?”

You can’t be looked in the eyes without also looking back. Does Karl Ove want to look
back? “The first time I had realized what I was writing really was something, not just me
wanting to be someone, or pretending to be, was when I wrote a passage about Dad and started
crying while I was writing…. Of the existence of the grief inside me that had been released at that moment, I had known nothing; I had not had an inkling. My father was an idiot, I wanted nothing to do with him, and it cost me nothing to keep well away from him. It wasn’t a question of keeping away from something, it was a question of the something not existing; nothing about him touched me. That was how it had been, but then I had sat down to write, and the tears poured forth” (Knausgaard 433). Knausgaard feels something for his father that goes beyond hatred and into indifference. It’s not true indifference, since he does start crying when he considers his relationship with his father critically in writing it. Karl Ove “had not an inkling” of this emotion built up inside him. His tears, his “grief,” catch him by surprise, which makes sense: Karl Ove wanted “nothing to do with [his father].” That he didn’t know he felt this much about his father suggests that he hadn’t thought much as an adult about his father until writing his first manuscript. This, then, tells us that Karl Ove didn’t want to think about his father. In the language of the earlier metaphor, he didn’t want to look back at his father. This is Karl Ove’s dilemma. He wants to be considered fully by the other without doing the same in return. Grief is the mechanism that allows him to grow past this.

Three Karl Oves live in this text. The first is the young Karl Ove, who smokes cigarettes in school and who lives to get drunk. The second is the adult Karl Ove, who must clean his recently dead father’s house, who must come to terms with death, his father’s life, and their relationship. The third is Karl Ove as he writes My Struggle. The most direct image of his voice comes in the opening passage of the book, the meditation on death. Here he writes of a father and child “killed as the father attempts to pull the child out of the line of fire in a town somewhere in the middle east,” (Knausgaard 7) of “a skier who falls and severs an artery in her thigh,” (Knausgaard 7) “an elderly man who dies during a cinema performance,” (Knausgaard
4), and of many other deaths. Each of these deaths takes up no more than a few lines, but they all feel real. They each contain the improbable detail that gives writing an air of the real. Each of these moments that fills the first seven pages of My Struggle Book 1 is an exercise in the writerly imagination. In other words, each of these illuminated deaths is an exercise in empathy, in considering the other. Grief is the mechanism that allowed Knausgaard to move past his dilemma, his desire to be considered without considering in return. The first time he realized his writing, “really was something, not just [him] wanting to be someone, or pretending to be, was when [he] wrote a passage about [his] Dad and started crying while [he] was writing.” In other words, he feels he became a real writer when he began to consider his father and their relationship in earnest.

This moment of realization, of coming of age, occurs at the end of the novel. We receive the product of this maturation at the beginning. This is an interesting structural choice in that we observe the product before we observe the process that made it. This narrative choice reveals more of Knausgaard’s writerly voice. He frames the narrative with its outcome, without signaling to us that it is an outcome. We receive it without context. The novel builds the context within the frame he creates: Part I gives us the details of his relationship with his father; Part II tells us how he struggled with his father’s death. The ending provides no resolution. There are studies that demonstrate knowing the outcome of a narrative before experiencing it increases the enjoyment of it. One idea is that it mitigates the stress of trying to “guess the ending” and instead leaves the reader free to admire the artistry of the construction. That can’t be at play here, because we can’t know the beginning is really a concluding statement until we’ve finished the book. Instead, the “frame with no picture” Knausgaard provides engenders a sense of loss in the reader mirrored by the literal loss of death the novel fixates on. This loss makes us seek
something to fill its void, and we are left asking the questions Karl Ove must have asked upon
his father’s death: “What does this story add up to?”
Works Cited