

Excerpts from *When Breathe Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi (Random House 2016)

At age thirty-six, I had reached the mountaintop: I could see the Promised Land, from Gilead to Jericho to the Mediterranean Sea. I could see a nice catamaran on that sea that Lucy, our hypothetical children, and I would take out on the weekends. I could see the tension in my back unwinding as my work schedule eased and my life became more manageable. I could see myself finally becoming the husband I'd promised to be.

Then, a few weeks later, I began having bouts of severe chest pain. Had I bumped into something at work? Cracked a rib somehow? Some nights, I'd wake up on soaked sheets, dripping sweat. My weight began dropping again, more rapidly now, from 175 to 145 pounds. I developed a persistent cough. Little doubt remained... (7)

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But Lucy had another plan. "I'm not coming to New York with you," she announced a few days before the trip. She was going to move out for a week she wanted time to consider the state of our marriage. She spoke in even tones, which only heightened the vertigo I felt...

Were things really so bad? Neurosurgical training, among the most rigorous and demanding of all medical specialties, had surely put a strain on our marriage. There were so many nights when I came home late from work, after Lucy had gone to bed, and collapsed on the living room floor, exhausted, and so many mornings when I left for work in the early dark, before she'd awoken. But our careers were peaking now — most universities wanted both of us: me in neurosurgery, Lucy in internal medicine. We'd survived the most difficult part of our journey. Hadn't we discussed this a dozen times? (9)

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I slipped out of the trauma bay just as the family was brought in to view the body. Then I remembered: my Diet Coke, my ice cream sandwich...and the sweltering heat of the trauma bay. With one of the ER residents covering for me, I slipped back in, ghostlike, to save the ice cream sandwich in front of the corpse of the son I could not.

Thirty minutes in the freezer resuscitated the sandwich. *Pretty tasty*, I thought, picking chocolate chips out of my teeth as the family said its last good byes. I wondered if, in my brief time as a physician, I had made more moral slides than strides. (83-84)

Although I had been raised in a devout Christian family, where prayer and Scripture readings were a nightly ritual, I, like most scientific types, came to believe in the possibility of a material conception of reality, an ultimately scientific worldview that would grant a complete metaphysics, minus outmoded concepts like souls, God and bearded white men in robes. I spent a good chunk of my twenties trying to build a frame for such an endeavor. The problem, however, eventually became evident: to make science the arbiter of metaphysics is to banish not only God from the world but also love, hate, meaning—to consider a world that is self-evidently not the world we live in...Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue. (169-170)