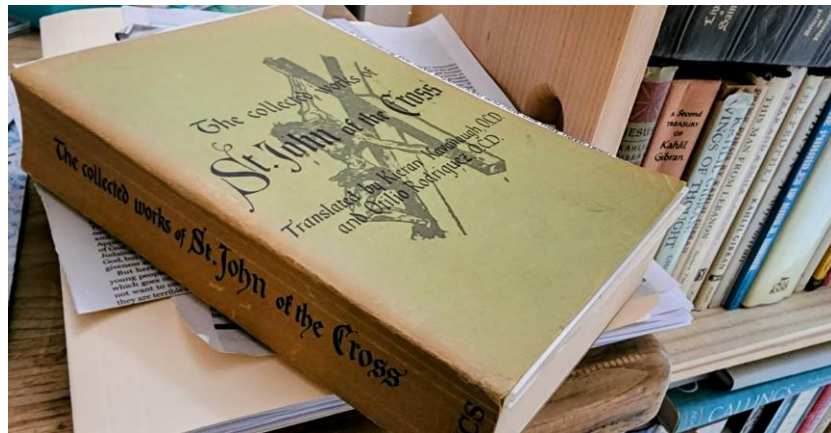


August 26, 2022

Car Blues, Car Dreams

Yesterday I had to bring my car to the Hyundai dealer for a over-due scheduled routine maintenance, including changing the oil. This is something I never have time to do. It is also some I loathe doing. In anticipation of sitting in the waiting room for at least an hour I was tempted to bring the big, fat, 740-page book of the collected works of St. John of the Cross.



I opted instead to bring a book I picked-up in Haiti, *When Breath Becomes Air*. A few weeks ago when I took Steph to a bookstore in Petionville to get books for the kids, I spotted a small display of books in English. There was nothing that initially caught me attention. Then I spotted a book by an author I knew about. I skipped through the book and put it back. Next to it on the shelf was the book I just mentioned. I read enough to be intrigued enough to buy it. The book was written by a neurosurgeon and a writer. At the age of thirty-six, on the verge of completing a decade's worth of training as a neurosurgeon, Paul Kalanithi, was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. One day he was a doctor treating the dying, and the next he was a patient struggling to live. In the book, he explored what makes life worth living in the face of death. Here is the opening paragraph of the prologue.

I flipped through the CT scan images, the diagnosis obvious: the lungs were matted with innumerable tumors, the spine deformed, a full lobe of the liver obliterated. I was a neurosurgeon resident entering my final year of training. Over the last six years, I'd examined scores of such scans, on the off chance that some procedure might benefit the patient. But this scan was different: it was my own.

Before shifting to neurosurgery, Paul Kalanithi earned Masters Degree in English Literature. He dreamed of being a writer. He was a brilliant writer. He also had degrees in human biology, and the philosophy of science and medicine. Then he graduated cum laude from the Yale School of Medicine.

I was reading for about an hour and they still hadn't started to work on my car. I wondered what the point of an appointed me was. I shrugged and returned to reading the exquisitely observed memoir. About 15 minutes later, the service manager stood next to me. Looking down at me, he

dished out the bad news. My car is nine years old and only has 54,000 miles on it. I've never had even one maintenance issue. I simply change the oil and filters on a regular basis. I was hoping this time all I needed was an oil change because Dennis's back surgery will sideline him until October and so in the meantime, I must drive an extra 210 miles a month. The one "issue" I had was the none of the controls on the steering wheel—the trip odometer and cruise control— did not work. The guy said that to repair it would cost \$385 for the part, plus labor. Ugh. He said the part had to be special ordered. So, it could be fixed at this time. But then he said was some problem with carbon buildup in the cooling system. It needed to be flushed and refilled. He said the coolant system is #1 cause of engine breakdown. This and some other things would cost over \$300, not including the regular service and rotating the tires. I told him I needed the windshield wipers replaced. To do all this, he said, would take another 90 minutes. The final bill came to \$447.

After a little while, I put the book down, got up, and took a stroll to the showroom for a free small bottle of water. I was surprised to see a classic Chevy Corvette on display.



I wanted to buy it, get in it, and drive to upstate New York, Vermont, and the Berkshires in Massachusetts. I love that part of the country. Or I would drive cross country to California and hang out in Carmel-by-the-Sea, where I once lived and dreamed of becoming a writer.



I went back to my seat in the waiting room and continued reading the book.