



# PEGASUS

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# PEGASUS

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Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology, was born from the blood of Medusa's severed head after the hero Perseus slew her. Legend has it, that it was Pegasus' stomping on Mt. Olympus that caused the springs of water to form that eventually birthed Muses. Thus, Pegasus has gone down in history as a symbol of creative genius.

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## Guest Author • Robert Finegan

### Author Biography

**Robert Finegan** holds a B.A. in English and History from the University of Delaware and an M.F.A. in Fiction Writing from the University of Pittsburgh. His short stories have appeared in *The Greensboro Review*, *The Antietam Review*, *The Sun*, *River Styx*, *The Other Side*, and *Caesura*. His story "Help Me with This" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In 2001 he received a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowship in Literature. He has taught fiction writing at The University of Pittsburgh and Drexel University. Currently he teaches in the creative writing program at Rosemont College.

### Advice for Writers

Some advice for writers: Work hard, and don't be impatient. Don't be in a rush to send something out just because it's a third draft, or because you can't think of ways to improve it right at the moment. Put the work away for awhile and let it ripen or ferment in your subconscious for a few weeks or a few months. What you read and what you experience in your life in the meantime may provide new perspectives on the story also. When you return to it, chances are you'll see it in very fresh ways, and you'll notice possibilities for enriching it that you hadn't seen before. Revise it, then put it away again for a little while and come back to it. At least experiment with a cycle like this. It's less important that you publish something by the end of this year than that you produce the best fiction of which you're capable. Of course, this sort of patience can be carried too far, and then you're posting your stories from a nursing home.

## Help Me With This • Robert Finegan

It's been almost two years since I shot and killed a ten-year-old boy. It was an overcast day in early December, and I was hunting from the deer stand I'd built where my property meets the woods. The boy, David Rosen, was wearing drab colors, and I mistook his flitting movements through a filigree of winter-gray woods for those of a buck I had seen and missed the day before. The boy knew that I had a deer stand there and that I hunted in those woods. I had even shown him my rifle a few days before this.

When I saw him go down, I knew it was no buck I had shot. All I remember about my run through seventy or eighty yards of woods is that twice I stumbled and fell. I don't remember the way David Rosen looked when I saw him lying there – only the dark, slick blood from his head on the winter leaves, mixing with patches of snow.

At the hospital, his parents stared at me for a moment with frozen expressions before David's father, a rabbi, steered his wife in the opposite direction. I wanted to apologize, but I couldn't approach them.

Early the next morning Mrs. Rosen banged on my back door. Though a light snow was falling, she wasn't wearing a coat. Her hand squeezed the porch post for support as she let fly her lacerating questions: *Why couldn't you see that it was David? Why couldn't you see it was my boy?*

I felt as though anything I said to her right then would have been offensive, especially an apology or a plea for forgiveness. How is it possible to apologize for such a thing? What right did I have to ask forgiveness? But I said, "I'm sorry" anyway, the words coming out in a choking whisper. She stared at me with the frozen horror of the day before, then turned and walked away, shivering, snow dusting her hair and the thin turtleneck she wore. But she didn't walk around the house, toward the street. She walked across my backyard, to the deer stand. She climbed the steps and went to the rail and faced the woods, the direction I'd been aiming when I shot her son.

My wife, Alice, who had heard the screaming from upstairs, came to the door where I was standing. She said, "My God, Richard, is that Karen Rosen?" Then Alice opened the door, and pulling the sweater closed across her chest, started across the yard. When Mrs. Rosen turned and saw Alice coming, she climbed down the steps and headed into the woods, practically running. Alice yelled, "Mrs. Rosen, please." But Mrs. Rosen turned halfway round and thrust her hand in the air, her open palm rigid with refusal, and cried "No!" Alice stopped and watched her for a moment before turning and coming back in the house. My eyes followed Mrs. Rosen's progress through the woods after Alice shut the door, but I turned from the window before she reached the place where my bullet had reached her son.

I attended the boy's funeral with Alice and our daughter Holly. As I sat between the two of them, holding their hands, I thought about the blame Holly might be fixing upon me. Among my daughter's causes animal rights and gun control were prominent, and some of our debates on these subjects had reached the point of hostility, unkind words and hard feelings on both sides. It had been only a few years since Holly had come out to us as a lesbian, and after struggling to accept it, Alice and I had reached a plateau of peace if not happiness with that issue, an accord all three of us did not want to see threatened. But when I helped Holly with her taxes and saw the record of her contributions to organizations that wanted to ban guns and criminalize animal testing, I felt a flaring in my

gut that led to more fiery arguments. Not only did I oppose these causes, but Holly, who was still living a graduate student's spartan existence at the time, didn't have enough money to be giving it away.

Now having killed a boy with the sort of weapon she wanted to see banned – even hunting rifles were on her list – I watched her closely for any trace of “I told you so” satisfaction. I saw none, thought at times her angelic support and empathy seemed merely a different brand of reproach. In a sense, she had won. The killing had proved her point about guns, and she could be magnanimous by acknowledging her victory.

We sat in the last row of the synagogue, careful to keep our distance from the Rosens, thinking that was what they would want. The accusing stares I received from some of the mourners brought me an odd mixture of shame, defensive anger, and the relief of having allies in my self-condemnation. Later that week Alice, who was expert at repairing my rifts with Holly, helped me write a letter to the Rosens apologizing for what I had done. Even a letter to them seemed an audacious, provocative gesture. But two weeks after I mailed it, the detective who had interviewed me the day of the accident called and said the Rosens would not be pressing charges, and neither would the county district attorney's office.

Less than a year after this, Alice died of brain cancer in the same hospital where David Rosen had died. Within five weeks of her diagnosis she was gone.

I am not a religious man. I have not gone to church, except for weddings and funerals, in the thirty-one years since I married Alice. But in my work as a civil engineer, designing safety improvements for intersections and highway interchanges, I have come to a deep understanding of the concepts of symmetry and counterpoise, and the coincidence was too striking – the tumor's dark groping inside her skull, working its devastation in the same area where my bullet had torn that boy's soul from his body, and this a scant ten months later. In taking life from Alice, taking her from me, the equalizing hand of some ultimate power seemed as unmistakable, as exact in purpose as Karen Rosen's hand had refusing Alice's comfort that frigid dawn.

A month after Alice died, and just a week before the anniversary of their son's death, the Rosens sent me a card. The front showed a snowy copse of evergreens where a lamb curled next to a lion, a soft gold moon hanging watchfully above them. Inside was a quotation from Isaiah:

*The wolf . . . shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them . . .*

*They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.*

Beneath the card's holiday message – May this season of peace and love bring you many joys – one of the Rosens had written, We forgive you. It did not look like a woman's handwriting; it was more likely the Rabbi's script. A clergyman under professional obligation to forgive. I have doubted the inclusiveness, the sincerity of that we. The woman who appeared at my door that morning was not one to forgive such a thing so soon, if ever.

But it's possible they had heard about Alice's death and interpreted it as I had. And perhaps because accounts had been set aright, the Rabbi, with the added weight of his vocation tugging him in this direction, felt able, or even compelled, to forgive me.

Soon after Alice died, I retired and sold the house in Pennsylvania where we had raised Holly and where at dusk on the final day of deer season I shouldered my Remington 30.06 caliber and walked out and killed a fifth-grade kid who had just learned to play “Zorba the Greek” on his trumpet. I now live year-round on Waverly Island, New Jersey, where Alice and I bought a house twelve years ago to spend our summers. There are no woods on this island and the terrain is quite flat compared to the mountainous area of Pennsylvania. I read somewhere that travelers in medieval times, when coming in sight of mountain ranges, would shield their eyes – this alpine asymmetry of the earth was, to them, an indication of some divine error and hence a cosmic scandal. But divine agency in my life shows only precise balance, like a cantilevered bridge. I don't close my eyes to it.

It's after midnight and I'm standing at the living room window, watching the revolving light atop the



Farmingtons' house across the street. Illuminated by spotlights anchored in the pebbly front yard, the house is a lurid pink, two-story stucco cottage. In the front, tapering up from the ground, is a chimney that the Farmingtons have painted with slanted black and white stripes and capped with a roofed glass cylinder. Every night at dusk they turn on the rotating light inside the glass.

The past few months, to help myself sleep at night, I stand here in my pajamas, my feet flat on the parquet floor as a melatonin tablet dissolves under my tongue, and I count aloud one hundred revolutions of that wheeling lamp. Tonight, under the rote counting, I'm thinking of Holly and her new lover, who are coming tomorrow from Philadelphia to stay with me for the weekend. I wonder what Holly, the psychologist, would say about this sleep-inducing ritual of mine.

This time, my ritual doesn't work; when I get into bed, sleep eludes me. Instead I see David Rosen, who comes to me on many nights. I see him walking across my back yard a few days before his death, standing at the foot of the stairs leading up the deer stand. He looks up and says, "Can I see your gun, Mr. Delaney?" I nod, and he climbs the steps as I release the bolt and unload the cartridge. I drop the bullet in the pocket of my field coat and rest the rifle barrel on the rail, my hand on the stock. When he takes the gun it dips suddenly in his arms; he's surprised by its weight. But he raises it to his eye and, squinting, trains his gaze along the sight blade.

I see the instrument case strapped to the back of his bike by the curb. "What do you play, son?"

"Trumpet. I just learned Zorba the Greek." He squeezes the trigger and makes a small explosion sound with his mouth. "Blown away any deer lately?"

"Haven't got one yet. But I've been scouting this buck for a month now. I know his habits, and there are three days left in the season. Hopefully I'll get him."

"You've seen him out there? Where, exactly?"

I start to point, then I think of something. "Listen, son, you know not to go into those woods, right? I'm not the only one hunting around here. And you should be wearing fluorescent orange if you're even close to them."

"Okay, Mr. Delaney," he says.

Some nights when I dream of him, he doesn't walk across the lawn and ask to see my rifle. He lays his bike on the curb, takes the trumpet from its case, and, aiming his eyes at me along with the horn, starts to play taps. I point the rifle at him, and the thunderous report when I squeeze the trigger echoes in the dark bedroom where I awake trembling and sweaty.

When Alice was still alive, she'd awake with me, and she'd stroke my neck and my back until I calmed down. She found so many small, skillful ways to guide me through the ordeal. On really bad days when I felt most like a condemned murderer, she would talk about how many lives my engineering designs had saved on the highways, or how good a husband and father I was. She'd make my favorite meal, London broil marinated in burgundy and olive oil and vinegar, slathered with red onions. When all else failed she would just sit next to me in silence and hold my hand or run her fingers lightly along my forearm.

One night a few weeks after the accident, when Alice had gone to her card club, I walked barefoot over the freezing grass and out into the woods with my rifle. Holding onto a pin oak with one hand, I set the butt on the mulchy ground, held the barrel upright, and lowered my head to rest on the muzzle. Three times I raised my foot and rested my big toe on the trigger; my hand wouldn't reach unless I put the barrel in my mouth, which I had some aversion to doing. The cold, greasy steel on my forehead, I thought of the 6000 feet-per-second muzzle velocity sending my brains and all my angry guilt past the leafless branches overhead and off into blackness.

But I kept thinking of Alice, too. And when I saw her car's headlights sweep across the lawn as she pulled into the driveway, I dropped the gun and ran to the back door and was sitting at the kitchen table when she came in.

Two or three mornings a week I drive to the Ganesha Car Wash on Bay Avenue. I sit inside my Buick as it's carried on steel tracks through a forest of soapy sprays, whirling brushes and strips of foamy cloth that snake and jerk over the windshield as the car lurches forward.



The owner of the car wash is an Indian man who calls himself Yogi Shanti Singh. He also runs a health food store on Asbury, where he teaches meditation classes in a back room. The sign on the roof of his car wash reads, THE GANESHA BATH: AUTOMOTIVE ABLUTIONS. A large elephant's head is mounted atop the sign, the mouth fixed in a sly smile, its trunk swinging on hinges and spewing a fine spray of water onto the pavement below.

The coastal skies are gray this morning except for the errant white fleck of a gull over the bay. A light mist leaves a film over the car as quickly as the Yogi can dry it with his chamois cloth. I like this little man in the red slicker, rubbing his cloth in swift circles around my hood and fender, understanding futility yet defying it. When I roll down the window to pay him, the Yogi says, "Maybe tonight you will come to my meditation class, Mr. Delaney? The heart needs ablutions too. Why keep clutching your sadness, Mr. Delaney?"

I hand him a ten dollar bill. "Thanks again for your concern, but it's not for me."

The Yogi frowns as rivulets slide down the hood of his slicker. "For you, the class is free."

More futility. "I'll see you later, Yogi." I push the button and the window rolls up. The Yogi has been talking to me for months about coming to his class, offering me a reduced price, exhorting me to "let go" of my pain. Yet I have told him nothing of my life. Is my face, my presence, as transparent as the windshield he wipes clean of beaded water?

I've been getting this "let go" psychobabble from Holly as well, but I am clutching nothing. The events I've described are fastened on me like a second skin. You might as well tell me to let go of my own hands – these hands that held the rifle, that held my wife's dying body.

I don't know why a woman as intelligent as Holly must resort to such maddening, fatuous ideas. She completed her doctorate in psychology last year, but there's a creeping network of fissures and fault lines in her logic. I think that being a lesbian and thus being the target of the sort of prejudice gay people must endure, has weakened her intellect. Alice and I always worried about her sensitivity, her clinginess and tendency to despair in the face of disapproval. Only when she was swimming did she seem truly strong, those spindly arms and legs propelling her through the blue with such swiftness and ease, her vulnerabilities lost in her eddying wake. I took scores of pictures of her up on the winner's block, her face radiant as the gold or silver medal dangling from her neck. But the confidence from these victories never spilled over into other parts of her life.

Now she's one of those adult children who, in the face of great pain, flee to the coddling refuge of fairy tales. She wants to camouflage dark, jagged realities with smooth pastel myths. When Alice died Holly could not accept the bitterness or finality of it; she read books about near-death experiences and talked endlessly about how wonderful the afterlife was, how happy her mother must be now. She tried to get me to read them, but I know, and Holly knows, that Alice did not want to die at age fifty-seven, and no one can really say what she is experiencing now, if anything.

Holly's fairy tales have been getting more elaborate lately. For almost a year she has been attending a church with a congregation that's mainly gay and lesbian. Aside from sexuality and some New Age-flavored theology, though, there's little to distinguish them from the sort of holy-roller evangelicals among whom I was raised and who still make me nervous. And now Holly has been dating the pastor of the church, a Texan woman named Debra, for the past few months.

I'm apprehensive about their visit. Though I've not met Debra, I resent her influence on Holly. My tolerance for saccharine piety is low. I worry about their Christian agenda, whether they'll try any proselytizing under the guise telling me I need to "heal" and "let go."

I drive down Bay Avenue past the condos and the harbors almost empty of boats. Through the mist, which has become heavier, I see a fishing boat being hauled out of the water by a blue pick-up. Most summer residents have been gone for two months now, having departed the island in early September. Before, when David Rosen and Alice were alive and my vision of the world was still soft and blinkered, I never would have wanted to live here year-round. But the sparsity of the off-season suits me now. The awnings have been taken down from all the porches and windows, leaving the steel frames exposed. Some houses are blindfolded by shutters. This ghost-town desolation of has a quiet appeal and the blankness, the bleakness of the truth of things.

By afternoon, an ocean wind has cleared the clouds away. I pull my car out of the garage and start piling up the porch furniture, the beach chairs, the lawn edger, the gas and oil cans, the hibachi and charcoal. I have to clear out some space for a pig. When Holly called to tell me that she and Debra were coming down for the weekend, she also said they were bringing a "surprise." The giddy trepidation in her voice irked me; I reminded her I didn't like surprises, so she had better tell me what it was she and Debra were bringing. She said Debra had just bought a pig. I told her not to bring it, that it could not stay in the house. But she said there was no one else who could take the pig for the weekend, that they couldn't come unless they could bring "Terry."

I wanted to say, "Why don't you come by yourself to visit your father and leave the preacher to care for her pig at home?" But my daughter is fragile, and this is the sort of remark that makes her cry and not speak to me for a month. So I told her the pig could stay in my garage.

I'm just closing the garage door when a minivan with Texas plates pulls up out front. Holly gets out of the passenger side, waves, and starts up the driveway toward me. I can just see Debra's profile through the van's tinted windows as she opens the back door and reaches inside. While Holly hugs, Debra comes up the driveway with this pig on a leash. Debra is a large woman whose crewcut looks like a darker, younger version of my own. She wears cat-eye glasses and a bolo tie with a triangular silver fastener. The pig is small, its hooves clicking against the cement.

Debra shakes my hand with a bracing grip. She's as tall as I am and probably as heavy. I'm startled by her androgynous looks and bearing, because this has never been Holly's type of woman in the past. My daughter has always had girlfriends as willowy and feminine as she is; women who, in the year or two after Holly first came out, I found it hard to believe were lesbians. I had a lot to learn.

Debra's smile stretches across her wide face, mingling generosity with fearlessness. Though I'm still on guard – this woman is a Texas evangelical, I remind myself, no matter how she looks – I think perhaps I'm going to like her. She says, "I'm so glad to finally meet you, Mr. Delaney," with only a hint of twang, and a softness that doesn't match her powerful handshake.

So much startles me about this hulking woman with the gentle voice that it takes me a moment to notice the way Holly is looking from me to her and back again, probing the energy of this meeting. I have not seen Holly for several weeks and I'm struck by the lightness in her lean, freckled face. Since Alice died, there's been a core of sadness, a wilted, weighted look in her eyes that even her fantasies about the afterlife couldn't touch. But it seems gone now. When she first came up the driveway, I noticed a subtle bounciness to her step.

The pig is snuffling and rubbing itself against Debra's pant leg. I lean down, and we make eye contact, this pig and I. He's pink with a few liver-colored spots, and his eyes are small and black. "I cleared out the garage for him," I say.

"Actually, it's a her," Debra says. "Thanks so much for letting us bring Terry."

"Yeah, Dad," Holly says. "Thanks."

"That's a pretty remarkable looking house," Debra says, gesturing toward the Farmingtons'.

"The owners are Geritol hippies who like to sail," Holly tells her. "Their lighthouse is pretty controversial. The local paper did a story on it last year, and the guy who lives next door to Dad said he didn't appreciate living across from a 'Pepto-Bismol-coated absurdity.'"

I avoid looking at the Farmingtons' house during the daytime; it seems to diminish the calming effect the light has for me at night.

"I think it's pretty cool having a beacon across the street," Debra says.

"I never thought of it as a beacon," Holly says. She takes Debra's hand and their arms swing a little. "You see such inspiring symbols in everything."

For the moment I'm so glad to see Holly's happy that I don't care what it's based on. Feeling grateful to Debra and even liking the pig, I open the garage door to show them Terry's weekend lodgings.

Holly and Debra have insisted on taking me out to dinner on the mainland. We're sitting at a table in the



Starboard, an elegant bayside restaurant where Alice and I used to eat. I haven't been here since she died. The east wall of the restaurant, where we sit, is all smoked glass, beyond which the harbor-edged bay, the causeway with its two drawbridges going out to the island, and the long stretch of Waverly spread out under purple twilight. The November wind kicks up whitecaps in the dark water; a few hundred yards out a light winks on a yacht heading seaward.

We've ordered our dinner, and I'm halfway through my first martini. Debra and Holly are drinking iced tea. They tell me about some "church friends" – a married couple, a man and a woman – who have a house in Cape May, and whom they're going to visit tomorrow afternoon. He's a podiatrist, she's a nurse in an AIDS hospice, and they have a teenage daughter who's blind in one eye. "Their faith is so strong," Debra says. "God is really working in their lives."

I don't want to hear about their church friends. I nod politely and ask Debra how she came to adopt her pig.

I can tell by the way their faces register the disjunction that I may have been a bit rude – the martini is hitting me – but Debra forbears like a good Christian. "Good question, Mr. Delaney," she says. She smiles. Holly smiles. We're all at ease.

"I just really like pigs," Debra says. "I had one when I was a little girl in Amarillo, and I got to wanting one again. You know, your daughter is among the few people I've known who don't think it's really weird to have a pig for a pet."

"Deb appreciates my love for animals," Holly says. Her green eyes linger on my face a moment. The way you never could, she's probably thinking.

"Pigs aren't such attractive animals, it's true," Debra says. "Not conventionally attractive anyway. Some people actually think they're ugly." Behind her stubby hair, outside the window, a line of headlights coasts across the causeway just above the choppy water. The lights appear to stream in one side of her head and out the other. "I just love creatures who are hard to love, I guess. Pigs have always gotten a bum rap – look at the Gadarene swine in the Bible. Jesus let the demons go into them, and they ran into the lake and drowned. I never understood that. I mean, didn't Jesus love the pigs too?"

Holly nod, her cheeks flushed, long russet hair forked over her shoulders. "In Buddhism, too, there's a pig in the iconography who represents ignorance. But pigs are really smart animals."

"That's right," Debra says. The candlelight flashes in her glasses and the silver fastener of her bolo tie. "They know what's going on at the slaughterhouse, they put up a wicked resistance. Maybe I can relate to them because I've been hated for what I am, too – even though, like a pig, I did nothing to choose it." A cleric resonance has entered her voice, and she seems to catch herself with a sigh. "Sorry, I don't mean to start preaching. I get carried away sometimes. Anyway, having this pig for a pet – there's some kind of teaching in it for me, I think. I hope it might make me better at my job."

I was trying to steer the conversation away from religion, but now I can see that, with a minister, no topic is safe. I'm afraid to ask any more questions. A large party at a nearby table is raising a toast. A deep, stagy voice says, "To our best season ever," and their wineglasses chime.

"Deb does a great job with the church already," Holly says to me. "You ought to come and hear her preach sometime. She's so comforting, so inspiring."

Here we go. Why has Holly put me on the spot this way? She knows I won't go to church for any reason. I can't think of anything to say, so I try to smile, but my lips feel like a big rubbery scar. The ensuing silence is awkward; I bolt down the remainder of my martini.

The hostess is seating a party at the table next to us: a middle-aged couple and their two children, a girl five or six and a boy close to David Rosen's age – that is, the age he'd reached when he died. No bar mitzvah for David; no first kiss or college flame or seasoning parade of joys and sorrows such as winds through even a mildly fortunate life. At the funeral, his father spoke about how they had looked forward to the "bright horizon" of David's coming of age, only a few years away. But even Moses, he said, died before he reached the Promised Land.

I'm almost finished my second martini by the time our NBA-sized waiter sets the lobster in front of me, steam rising from its scarlet carapace. My eyes keep wandering over to the shining family seated at the next table. They all have blond hair, sculpted faces, blue eyes. Their conversation has a festive air.

Holly, the vegetarian, has gotten the pasta primavera, and she twirls the linguine onto her fork as she tells Debra about a nighttime deep-sea fishing trip I took her on sixteen years ago. A whale calf swam next to our boat for a half-hour or so. "Remember, Dad," she says. "How he was swimming just under the surface, and the boat's lights showed him so clearly? He was only about ten feet away, so close that when he came up and spouted water, it splashed us. It was like a message."

I nod, seeing again that gangly teenager with the jumping eyes, moonlight and spindrift on her face. The whale made her forget her seasickness.

"He was off the coast of Waverly for almost a week," she says. "The newspaper said he'd gotten lost, separated from his mother during migration. He was supposed to be only a month or two old." Holly's eyes are glittering now with the memory, the way they did that night. We were chumming for bluefish. We'd stop in one spot, fish for a while, then move on when the blues weren't biting anymore. Holly caught a few fish, but after she saw the whale, she didn't want to catch anymore, and never went fishing with me again. She said she didn't like "killing."

This was around the time when things started to change between us. Just the year before, we'd been so close. Holly was a fourteen-and-under state champion in freestyle and backstroke that year, and she and I flew to Miami, where she was to compete in the nationals. Alice had caught the flu at the last minute and had to stay home. The day before the tournament, Holly and I spent a few hours on the beach. Because it was cloudy that day, we didn't worry about sunburn. We were naive about the Florida sun and its scorching power, even through clouds. Both of us got badly burned, and Holly couldn't swim in the tournament. I remember holding her on the beachfront terrace of our hotel room as she cried and cried. The sunburn must have made the holding painful for both of us, but I don't remember that. We took a lot of aspirin, spent the tournament days sightseeing, and managed to have some fun in spite of the towering disappointment.

I'm cracking this lobster's thorax, remembering how Holly and I used to be buddies, and how she started drifting away from me, becoming distant and contentious, around the time of the fishing trip.

"I thought of that whale at Mom's funeral," she says. "The casket was in the aisle next to our pew, and just when I thought I couldn't bear looking at it any longer, the priest came down from the altar with his holy water. He sprinkled the casket. Then he aimed right at us, and the water hit me in the face. It was cold and a little shocking. I thought of that whale spouting his water, how it had hit me in the face the same way, how there was a kind of communication in it." Holly's eyes are brimming in the candlelight from the faceted globe on the table. "And then I started talking to Mom in my head, and I could feel her presence. She was right there with me. I felt peaceful."

No absence has ever felt so absolute to me as my wife's has this past year. But I don't tell myself lies to feel better.

Debra reaches over to take Holly's hand. The silverware clinks under their clasped fingers. "You never told me about that," Debra says. "A moment of grace, it sounds like."

Something skitters up my spinal cord with a stinging heat. When it hits my brain, the words fly out of me like shrapnel: "Sounds more like a moment of fantasy," I say.

Instantly, before I even see the bludgeoned expression on Holly's face, I'm sorry I've said this. But warring with the guilt and concern for my daughter is this loyalty I have to the truth. I don't want to prevaricate, even with silence. And I don't want Holly to deceive herself.

Debra shifts in her seat and turns her head at an odd angle. In her expression I see shock, curiosity, and an unsettling confidence, even a challenge. There's anger there too, snapping in her eyes, but she's calm as a pool hustler. "Why?" she says, shifting her gaze to Holly and then back to me. "Why is that fantasy?"

I look down at the olive in my drink. Its red gash of pimiento stares back at me. I take a deep breath and let



it out. "Listen, Holly, I don't want to make you feel bad. We've been over this sort of thing before. I would love to be able to talk with your mother. But we have to face the fact that she's dead. We can't talk to her anymore, and she can't talk to us—"

"Why do you think believing in nothing means you know everything?" Holly says.

"You don't believe in an afterlife?" Debra asks.

"Anything that could bring him consolation or happiness just can't be true," Holly says.

I clear my throat. "I don't rule out an afterlife, but I don't see any evidence for it either."

"Evidence," Debra says. She sits back a little, serene appraisal in her eyes. "Can you produce evidence . . . of your love for Holly?"

I'm liking Debra less and less. The collar of my cotton shirt feels hot and scratchy as wool. I unbutton it and loosen my tie. "She knows I love her," I say, looking at my daughter. But Holly's glare concedes nothing.

The boy at the next table says in a loud voice, "But Mom thought they were dandelions." Laughter peals from his parents and sister. The boy is outgrowing his suit jacket; his wrist bones jut from the sleeves. The Promised Land awaits him, gleaming under the sun.

Debra takes off her glasses and gives me a penetrating stare. In the dim, wobbly light, with the crew cut and the mannish geometry of her face, she looks a bit like me – the way I looked thirty years ago. And, like me at that time, she's determined, implacable. "Of course Holly knows you love her. But can you show any evidence of that, any proof?"

This resemblance is unnerving; it confuses, deflates me. "I've taken care of her all her life," I say.

"You could have done that out of a sense of duty."

I look at this youthful ghost of myself floating just beneath the surface of Debra's skin; it's a timeless face, etched with accusation and judgment. I turn to Holly, hoping she'll say something, but her eyes are steely.

"Can you see my point, Mr. Delaney?"

*Can I see your gun, Mr. Delaney?*

"Richard," I say. "Call me Richard."

Our skyscraping waiter has appeared, his face beaming. "Everybody doing all right?" he asks with coercive cheer. Holly and Debra nod. "Fine, thanks," Debra says.

She watches him go and then leans toward me in a posture of pastoral concern. "Richard," she says, her voice tranquil now, nurturing, the confrontational edge gone, "Holly feels her mother's presence the same way she feels your love for her. She knows it without requiring external proof. There can't be any external proof of something like that. These subjective things are a different, but not a lesser kind of truth." The image of my face is gone from behind Debra's features. She smiles. "Can you see this?"

The handsome blond family is laughing again. The sound of all that wholesome mirth, the smarmy victor's smile on Debra's face, the gin fevering my blood: it's all too much. "No," I say, my voice climbing, "I don't see this. I think what you two believe is pie-in-the-sky idiocy. This wonderful God, this unending life – it's all horseshit. That's what I see."

Holly flinches, then her eyes narrow. "You want to lose me, too, don't you?" she says in a fractured voice.

I shake my head. "I lost you a long time ago."

Holly covers her face and begins to weep. Debra puts an arm around her. The blond family is stealing fish-eyed glances at us now. My eyes meet the boy's, and I hear his mother tell him not to stare. My brain's a hot whirligig, spinning and burning. I get up and throw my napkin on the half-eaten lobster.

I wend my way past tables filled with warmly lit faces, the harmony and laughter of harmless people. My head feels swollen, elephantine. Moony faces swivel toward me as I rush by them, unsteady on my feet. I walk past the gawky coat-check girl reading a book in her booth, and then I'm out the glass doors into the cold, brackish air.

The sweat on my forehead chills in the wind off the bay as I head down a sloping pavement toward the harbor. The heels of my wingtips click on the cement. I push on the gate of the waist-high cyclone fence, but it's locked. I climb over, lose my balance, clatter down onto the dock, jangly pain radiating from my elbow and

twisted knee. But I'm up again in a second and sweeping past the tar-stained piling as I head toward the end of the wharf.

At the end I stop, out of breath, my arm around a pile, and I look out across the water. The bay is chopped coal, webbed with skeins of light near the bridge. I smell salt and creosote, hear gulls squalling in the distance, the muffled clang of a bell buoy. The wharf sways and creaks under my feet as waves slap it. Alice and I once walked along this harbor, through a warm violet dusk, after dinner at the Starboard. We held hands; she wore a sundress. But that was in another universe.

A halogen lamp over my head lays my dim silhouette onto the water. The shadow ripples as the waves try to swallow it. I could dive and sink, my poisoned, poisoning life closed over. Big lungfuls of baywater solving everything. This is where all my truth has brought me.

I let go of the pile. I could fall headlong into the water, but instead I look back up to the Starboard. Through the scrim of smoky glass I can see Holly and Debra at the table. Holly is dabbing at her eyes with a tissue; she keeps looking in the direction by which I left them.

A car backfires on the drawbridge, and I feel an inflamed rocking in my chest. My balance falters. I fall to my knees, my hand grabbing, sliding down the rough pile. I have almost offed myself – with my daughter less than fifty yards away. The recognition sends a splintering through all of my certainties; they shiver apart in shards, they crack and split and rain down through emptiness. I suddenly know nothing. Nothing but that I love Holly, that I've hurt her, that I have to make amends.

And then she turns and sees me. It's too far to see her eyes, but I can see her face change, and I'm hoisting myself up, holding onto the pile, my hand tacky with tar, as Holly rises from her chair and makes her way between the candlelit tables. I'm scrabbling back toward the cyclone gate I climbed over on my way out here, the wind snapping at me, my body shaking. I get to the gate as Holly comes out the restaurant door. She's running toward me, this daughter I've bullied with my truth, and I'm going to need help making amends. I clutch the gate rail and throw my face up to the black sky. *"Alice,"* I cry. *"You've got to help me with this."* ●

## Island Morning • Marilyn C. Marsella

The sweet aromas of wild jasmine and vanilla stir islanders from their sleep as they listen to the gentle lapping of a blue ocean against the beach.

Far off in the distance, the light-footed sounds of tiny grains of sand being remolded as footsteps press into them softly.

One by one, flickering white candles come to life in each bungalow as cool linen canopies blow freely in the warm vanilla breeze.

High overhead, the delightful echoing of seagulls as they effortlessly rise up to greet the morning sun or dive into the clear blue water to catch a morning fish.

The earth gradually awakens from a peaceful rest.

Early morning reveals the gracefulness and speed of dolphins as they crest the water, leading returning fishing boats back to harbor. The calls of captains and the echoes of ships' bells and horns travel through the morning air beckoning to the visiting islanders.

A surfer's board stands upright in the sand in front of a small aging grass hut waiting to be taken into the crystal blue waves that billow on the surf.

The island tempts the sleepy to get up, but they stay nestled in their comfortable surroundings of big white pillows that beckon them back into a light, lazy morning slumber. They daydream about the tropical blue sky framed by luscious green palm trees, a beautiful sunrise, and soft fluffy clouds that linger in the sky as vacationing islanders sway back and forth in their hammocks without a care in the world.





Paradise • Elizabeth Maher



Spring lingered with its rain as summer crept on with its cool nights. My hood was up and my head was down as I walked hastily through the pub's door to the seat nearest the hearth. It was a dim place, lit only with candle wicks and wood. Over my shoulder, I would have seen a fine, plump pig being roasted. There was no need for that, for its smell was all too familiar. Laughter, and the sound of mugs being smashed together in merry cheering polluted the low wood and stone room. Women moved around from man to man, using their skills at seduction to make a few bits of silver only to keep their bellies full. Believe me when I tell you, this was more than likely the most honorable trade among all the people in this establishment. And I mean not to exclude myself, for I am criminal in my deeds, and immoral in carrying them out.

My elbows were resting on a weathered table; the candle in the center was dwindling down and knew that it was its last hour. There lay beside it a book, its pages tattered, and its spine broken. The crimson cover hung by but a few threads. The title was worn, and though I have picked up many dialects on my travels, this one was still unknown to me.

As I reached for the book to see if I could not decipher its text, my hand was pined down fiercely by the pointed end of a wooden cane. My eyes followed up the piece of wood, which had obviously seen many of miles in its day... It was now seeing some of its last judging by the splintering crack running up its side. My eyes had followed up the crack till it met a boney old hand with falcon like fingernails. There then followed a ragged, long brown coat, missing patches from burns, and long slits from knives. A beard had lain over the coat, gray in color, still spotted with brown from past years. His face was pale and hardened, his eyes dark and piercing. I wasn't able to tell from which his hair ended and beard began, for both were the same in color and long in length.

"The title does not matter, and that there's my seat you're so ignorantly sitting in. However, buy me a pint and I won't push down harder."

I had very little money for a pint of my own. I was foolish in those days as well, and if I had not been in pain, I would have probably have made yet another foolish mistake. I reached into my overcoat pocket and he proceeded to push a tad harder.

"I'm only going for my coins, and shouldn't like to offend you any further. I would care to be on my way." I stood up and tossed the pubs keeper a bit of silver and motioned towards the man who was still standing there with his cane upon my hand. As I turned to take my leave, the man hastened me back down. He reached over to grab a chair from the adjacent table and slid it under his tired legs. Never once did he break the gaze he had fixed on me.

"That's the way to be a good lad," the stranger remarked while settling back in his chair.

I said my apologizes and how I assumed the book was left behind by a previous wanderer.

"Curiosity is no sin my boy, but taking anyone's seat hear but mine might be."

By the look of this man, I could see that he had probably made this mistake once and come out on top to earn the one I was sitting in.

"I will admit, I am rather curious about it sir, and what it enta-"

"What brings you here?"

At the time I was unsure what, if anything I should say to the old man. Although he looked very unsuspicious, one can never be too careful in a place such as the one I was in.

"My services are called upon by a man not but one days ride from here."

"So you mean to seek the reward put forth for the capture of the man who they say has been the source of all this unease." The man said this as a statement, as if he had already known my purpose here, and that asking it was merely a sign of courtesy.

"You are correct in what you imply. I must ask of you any help you can give me in regards to his whereabouts."

"You know he is a boy, only on his 15<sup>th</sup> year?"

I did not know of this until the man told me. However, age had no meaning to me then. I was in dire need of food and a decent lodging. As I have said before, my deeds were criminal and the manner in which they were carried out was immoral. The handover of the boy, if only 15, was a necessary act for me to stay alive.

"I was not aware of this, but surely his acts overshadow this fact."

"Were you so innocent in your 15<sup>th</sup> year that you can condone the handover of this boy?"

The man said this in the same manner in which he asked me my business. A manner in which he seemed to know far more about me than he should.

"Let us not forget that this boy still has a long life ahead of him, many of years in which to correct the errors of his ways." He spoke these words of promise with his hand gripped tightly on the delicate book.

By this time the keeper had one of his women bring the stranger his ale. She did not turn and go about her business, rather she flung herself onto my lap, the same way she had done to every man who entered the pub. She began to whisper things in my ear, things that are not appropriate for a story such as this. As my sight left hers, my eyes met back up with the old mans'. On any other night, in any establishment such as this, I would have, without hesitation, paid for what the woman had said to me. Tonight however was different, the book was on my mind. I wanted to know its contents, more so, however, I wanted to know how this man knew so much about a reclusive man like myself. Although mightily tempting, I had to send the woman on her way. The stranger still had his stare fixed upon me, but his face seemed to approve of my most recent decision.

A great many of hours had now passed since I first stepped foot into the pub that night. The old man had rambled on about countless things, some amusing, some bewildering, and some just plain tiring. He had told me about past battles. Battles in which are legendary in these lands. Stories about the bravest men anyone is likely to meet. However outlandish these tales seemed, the serious look upon his face told me that his tongue spoke no lies. He told me tales of women as beautiful as the stars men look upon in the evening sky. He even told me one where he claimed to have fought a ferocious beast. The kind that are read about in children's stories.

The old stranger and I laughed for a good long time, over many pints of ale. Then suddenly, as if the man sobered up in the blink of an eye, he began to tell me a tale which I am not likely to ever forget. The place seemed quieter now, and oddly enough the lights seemed to dim when the man began to speak.



"It was about sixty years ago, in the thick of woods. Only four days journey north on horseback. I was young then, as was my brother. Snow covered the canopy of trees above us, as little snow reached the forest floor.

We were lost for several hours. Never had we ventured that far from home before...our mother had been screaming and weeping. Later I found out it was because our father had fallen in battle and she had just received word... However, she took it out on my brother and I.

Not knowing why she was so angry we decided to just start running. Which led us to the woods. My brother was scared for it was getting late. Being a few years older than he, I took to frightening him for my own amusement." When saying this, the man's face showed a hint of regret as he took in a large quantity of his drink. He then continued on with the tale.

"We then decided to climb some rocks, not very tall, but for a child they might as well have been mountains. We pretended we were the brave men our father spoke of. We clashed sticks as if they were swords. I remember my brother hit my hand, and without a seconds thought I pushed him. He tumbled off the large stone...As I peered over its edge I found him, only a few feet below clenching a bloody arm. I did not care and felt he deserved it. However, his cries were so loud that I felt I should console him just so I would not get caught. "

I was not too sure why a story of childhood mistakes would be so sore for this man to tell, a man who had just told me of the wars in which he fought and the creatures that he had slain. After a single tear fell from the old mans hardened face, he pressed on.

"It was then that I heard a twig snap behind us. I spun around with my stick grasped firmly. As I swung, someone else soon had his firm grip upon it as well. The man laughed the jolliest laugh my ears have ever heard.

'Don't be so quick to strike young boy, I am here merely to help' the man said to me.

He wasn't much younger than I am now, and I recognized him. His name was Amon Alvis<sup>1</sup>. A kook of a man. A man accused by most villagers of witchcraft. He was banished from the town only a few winters past.

No one had seen or heard from him since he took his leave. But he soon led me, as he carried my brother, to the place of his dwelling... A small log structured house, crudely pieced together. A few bear hides were thrown on some wooden chairs. A bed and a cauldron were placed along the wall opposite the entrance.

He tended to my brothers wound, and dressed it in soft white linens... Water had been boiling in the cauldron as the fire burned fiercely. The man asked me if I would care for a pot of tea, and giving the bitter winds that roared outside I graciously accepted.

Soon my brother had awoken. He, the old Amon and I were sitting upon the bear skin chairs as he asked us why we had ventured so far in the woods... I had told him why; I also told him that this was not the first time our mother had acted in this manner... She was always going on to my father about how she regretted choices they had made in life.

The old man smiled as he looked at me 'My boy, as you grow, you will find that there are bitter people in this world. People who do not know that the situations in life they are in are their fault and their fault alone... Taking it out on the young like you is an evil the old are instilled with. They envy your youth. But if you wish not to inherit this trait, you will do well to remember this. Regret is a fool's unwillingness to let the past wither away to see the clean slate that lay before him.' At the time I saw no wisdom in these words and thought of them to be the ramblings of an old man.

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<sup>1</sup> Amon being Egyptian meaning "Hidden one"  
Alvis is old Norse for "Wise One"

My brother just smiled, as though the words were all he needed to forget his mothers wrong doings against him... Amon talked for great lengths, soon the moon was high in the now clear sky, and my eyelids grew heavier with each word the man spoke.

The last thing I remember telling Amon was how both my mother and father often complained about age, how it now restrained them and made them bitter."

The pub was emptied out, and only a few men remained in dark corners. The stranger's ale and mine were long since gone. The Keeper was whipping down his counters. A few of the women who didn't have gentleman callers for the evening, swept the floors. The stranger took no notice and continued on about he and his brother's adventure.

"The next morning we woke up sometime around dawn. There was fresh eggs and hot tea awaiting us, although Amon was nowhere to be found... On the table we found a book and a letter. The book was addressed to my brother and the letter to us both. It simply stated that he had to be on his way early this morning. He drew a crude map for us to get home. And at the bottom simply wrote 'Age is nothing more then a measurement of the time allotted for a man to become wiser.' ... It isn't till my old age now that I realized what the man had meant by all the words he spoke that night... He meant us to take comfort in his words of wisdom. That in doing so we would not lead the life our mother and father hated."

As I looked at the old stranger, I began to wonder if this was not the book in which was given to his brother. If it was it, then what of his brother? The man's sights and thoughts were bent on the book, which led me to assume.

"You are right in your thoughts young lad. This is the book that was given to my brother by Amon Alvis so many years ago."

"If I may be as bold as to ask sir, how did you come to acquire it?"

"Don't be hasty young man for I still have more of the tale to tell you," the stranger replied in the most serious of tones.

"Old Alvis' map proved to be very useful for it was not nearly long after lunch time when my brother and I exited the woods. When we arrived home, mother was worried, more so however she was angry. Seeing my brothers wound only infuriated her more. She took my fathers old leather belt which once held his swords sheath. My brother wept for me. He believed the punishment I received did not fit the action I had done.

For many years since my father's death my brother remained quiet. Rarely did he speak, however, the good deeds he did were countless. Our mother died ten winters later, but however cruel she was to my brother, he never stopped helping her... Almost every night was spent with his nose in the book Amon gave him. The number of times he read it is as numerous as the stars. It was his way of escaping reality after the laboring day was done. My brother had this aura about him, made up of good deeds and a kindness to people that went unmatched. Something I never had, he was the sun and I was the moon.

He and I were arguing one day while renewing a sword for the Lord of the town. For that's what we were, Blacksmiths. The hammers end ventured too close to my fingers and impaled its flat top upon them. Without a second thought I swung the sword and slashed across my brothers chest.

My body froze with the sword in hand, for I knew not what I had just done. As my brother lay there seemingly dead I realized that I must take my leave, and quickly. I made haste to our home to pack what was needed to disappear. Bread, water, and few of my personal belongings I tossed into a satchel. While making way towards the door I saw the book. To this day I don't know why, but I took it with me as well.



I fled to a place much like the one we are in now. I sat in the corner, weeping at the loss of my brother, and at my hand no less. I rented a room from the pubs keeper and stayed there for many moons.

During one night of my stay, I pulled the book from my satchel. In all the years it dwelled in my home I never once looked at it. It seemed that it wasn't for me. But at that moment, I felt as if I should, if only for my brother's memory.

As I opened the crimson cover, I found a letter written by Amon to my brother on the first pages. It spoke of the day we visited the woods, when he gave us shelter and care. In the letter, he stated why he had given the book to my brother and not myself. Amon had thought my temper to short and my mind too set in its ways to absorb anything of what the book preached. As I read on, I began to realize that most of what the book entailed were things the old man had said to us that night. The book was about life, and how it ought to be journeyed. My brother had understood this. His everyday actions seemed to mimic text from the books pages. A book on life indeed, for if my brother was the product of it, I'd say it is wiser then the world's eldest sorcerer.

It was during my stay here that I read the book in its entirety. I realized that my brother was the man I needed to be. After my stay, I ventured out, wondering the land, helping strangers when I could and taking jobs as a smith in small villages. War broke out, and the causes were just. I fought in hopes that I could help change the world in a small way as my brother had done with his deeds. I still am nowhere near the man he was, for greed and short temper are still ideals which poison my mind. Amon was right when he said I was stuck in my ways. To this day, however, I still try to better myself. No day passes that I'd rather I had took my own life that day instead of his, for I now believe the world would be a better place."

The old man had two tears running parallel down his cheeks. My mind however was pondering many aspects of the man's story. Was he as kooked as the man Amon? Was he just an old man with a sad life or did what he tell me have meaning?

"Do not worry lad, the questions you seek will be answered in time." He pushed the old book towards me, "too long has the book been in my possession. Wasting its life with an old man near his end. I should like to pass it on to you, for I can tell your mind is troubled, and your life is not so noble. Take heed in the word written in the book, they do not speak lies. And you will do well to live by them."

Just then the pub's door flew open, and a boy stumbled in, young with a tattered cloak and worn down boots. He resembled myself as a younger lad. There was arrogance about his drunken step, and the look of a lost soul upon his face.

As I turned back to face the stranger, I found only a vacant chair. With a quick look around the room I saw only drunks passed out in corners and tired women rubbing their feet. No sign of the man's ragged brown coat and long wiry hair. The only real movement was the swaying of the door along the back right wall.

I looked back to face the boy, realizing he fit the description of who I set out to find. He stumbled as he walked, making comments of obscenity to the women who still lingered in the room. As he ordered a pint, I could see the keeper was closing up for the night. He fell into the chair in which the old stranger was just sitting.

"Do you have something in which you'd like to say to me mate?"

As the young fool said this, I wanted nothing more then to run him through and collect the reward. My eyes and thoughts focused on the book however. I still do not know to this day why I stood up and made towards the door. Maybe it was the feeling I got from the mans tale, but I did not turn him in. As I placed my hand on the doors handle, I turned to face the keeper, flipped him a gold schilling, and told him to make sure the boy has a warm bed to sleep in for the night. ●

My father left for Malaysia the week I was born. Being the fourth of his five children, I suppose I was not quite as important as business. He never really came back. He works long hours to make big money. Is that enough? Paying the bills is not the same as cheering at my softball game. The necklace from Tiffany's does not excuse his absence. When I threw a tantrum as a child, he pulled my arm out of the socket. He could not communicate with me. When it was his turn to pick me up from youth group, he forgot. I actually waited an hour before I caved and called him. He did not even know that I was missing.

Ever since I can remember he has gone to work at four in the morning, come home for dinner, locked himself in his home office, and gone to bed. I know nothing about him. Our only communication is the occasional yelling. I have spent exuberant amounts of time and energy trying to impress him and make him proud. When that fails, I spend equal amounts of time and energy trying to make him mad. I will do anything for his attention. Those tattoos worked.

This behavior has crept into my love life. I continually date older men who show little, if any, interest in me. I invest all of my being in pleasing them. I sacrifice even the most important parts of my life to make them happy. I lose myself. I need an insatiable amount of attention and affection. No man seems to give enough. When I need attention from men I initiate fights and cause as much drama as possible without totally pushing them away. My relationship with my father and my boyfriend are the same.

Who is to blame for my confusion? I point the finger at my father, but he follows in his own father's footsteps. I have to wonder if I will ever be truly happy. Will something ever change? Will I ever stop dating daddy? •

**Without You** • Laurie Wolpert

So I gave you up  
Let you go back to that once familiar place  
Where things are easy, comforting, if not always beautiful  
Returning to a place I'd rather see you leave behind  
The light peeks through, moments rare and precious  
They did not last  
I just sit back and marvel because I never saw it before I met you  
Will you ever find it?  
The joy that transcends, that strength that does not fail?  
Do the addictions whisper in your ear?  
Promising, but never fulfilling  
Stumbling, searching, seeking  
Aching below the surface  
Covered by the things that keep you busy, but never happy  
Will you see it?  
Will you become what you could be?  
Or will your dreams die, not with a bang  
Descending, spinning, spiraling into a quiet grave  
Until the sun begins to fade from a pale sky  
What will you do?  
Who will you become?

**Untitled** • Bernadette Cohen

Here I stand  
All alone  
In a world  
I can't always control  
I am afraid  
I will survive  
My whole ambition is to thrive  
There are good days  
And there are bad days  
I'll get by  
Even though I cry  
Sigh  
I don't want to be alone



**Bound** • Ej Crawford

Blinking of an eye  
A second of sight is lost  
Or is it?  
Looking inward is sight  
Maybe  
Time is not real  
Of course.  
These (un)certainities of  
Existence plague life  
But what is that?  
[Sub]Consciousness?  
Touch?  
Thought?  
Breath?  
If one of these is removed  
Are you still living?  
But are you living now?  
Every experience, pill,  
Drink, are all negotiable.  
Insight, hindsight, all subjective.  
Terms of what is really living.  
But laying there on your final bed,  
You are really living,  
Believing that your time  
Spent in this case was al[l]right  
You lie to yourself that  
You enjoyed it all.  
But did you really?  
I mean come on,  
You can see your resentments begin to  
Crowd your mind.  
You feel your throat close.  
Dammit!  
If you could have one more chance  
One more escape to do it.  
Over again.  
Would you?

I watch her everyday. She hasn't been the same since I left her that September. Her hazel eyes float in a pool of nothingness each day. They have faded like a fall leaf swirling in a small tornado in her head. Yet, she still manages to put her face on every morning.

I couldn't stop from leaving her. I remember the call that morning. My hand through the void of darkness, but I managed to catch the phone.

"Hello?" I croaked. My dry voice was yearning for nourishment from lack of sleep. My eyes adjusted to the only source of light. The red numbers on the alarm clock never hurt so much-3 a.m.

"Thom, it's Greg." I held the phone away from my ear as my boss spoke. "Get ready for L.A."

My body sprung forth, and stayed stiff. "What?"

"You're going to L.A. Jordan backed out of the sports feature at the last minute, and I need you to cover it. He said he had a 'nightmare' and can't go. Anyway, your flight is off at seven."

I let the words seep in for five minutes after I hung the phone up. Glancing over at my wife's silhouette, I slipped out of bed. Having went to bed an hour ago, I attempted to round the bed without disturbing her more. My body knelt before Laura. Nuzzling her neck, she woke up.

Her eyes rose, and she let out a groggy grunt.

"I gotta' leave, Laur."

"Huh?"

I repeated myself.

"Why?" Laura was hardly awake. "Wait...what?"

"I got a story! My editor is sending me to California on that big feature story about that new basketball player. Jordan backed out, so he's giving it to me!"

Silence.

"It's our anniversary."

"I know. But I need this. We need this. Not only do I get more recognition by being on the front page, but we can finally pay off the car and take that trip."

"Ten years." Laura erected herself in the bed and flicked on the light. The two of us squinted. "It's the diamond anniversary."

"Or if you're traditional it's the tin and aluminum anniversary."

Laura's eyes pierced through mine and my smile vanished. "This is no time to joke. I'm serious."

I took her into my arms. As we embraced I memorized the scent of her sweet skin.

"No! You always have these sudden meetings and sudden articles. When is it going to be about us and not the Times?" Her eyes glossed over.

"Please don't cry. You mean so much more than anything to me..."



"Then prove it to me."

"Let me finish..."

"Go ahead." I dodged her arms as they flared forward.

"I can't if you keep interrupting." I shifted to the edge of the bed.

The air fell silent enough to hear the dead breath. I looked over at the clock.

"I gotta go, Laur." That was the first time my voice crackled in our twelve-year relationship, but it wasn't our first fight.

I dried my palms before turning the knob of the dark oak door. My leather baggage felt cool on my fingers as time passed for the cab to arrive.

Laura slept without bidding me adieu, but I slouched into the cab. I told the denizen cabbie my destination, and he just sneered at me.

I kept puffing away at my cigar as it got shorter and shorter, coming close to igniting my mustache. The last time I flew more than two hours was, well, never. I shoved the last of my breakfast into my mouth, downed my coffee, and extinguished the last of my cigar.

My bagel jumped in the pit of my stomach as I waited to board that two-ton steel bird. I dialed the house from my cell as I looked over the ticket. As the phone rang over and over I stared at Flight 11 scripted on my ticket. No answer. I finally turned off my phone, and walked through the terminal.

When I sat in my seat, I cooled myself down with the fan above my head. I tapped my fingers on the window and stared out over the runway.

As I scanned the other passengers, I felt the sudden jolt jerk my insides back. We were soaring above like Gods. My body was at ease when everything went wrong. The plane froze like pineapple in Jell-O. The passengers' breaths were like long strokes taken on a violin.

I can't remember the exact number of them, but they were carrying weapons. At that moment my face melted, leaving a puddle on my shoulders. I couldn't understand their native tongue, but I saw the other passengers struggling for their phones. I reached for my cell phone and thumbed the power button.

Terrorists.

I jolted out of my seat in the back. A bang vibrated through the ears of the passengers. It was 8:37.

The pilots were dead.

My wife's voice was the last thing I heard. She was the last thing I smelled. She was my angel.

"Hello?" Her voice resonated in my ear.

"Something is wrong."

"Hello?"

The phone went dead.

There was a sudden burning over my body. I drowned out the screaming and crying. My eyes shut, but I didn't close them. The fire over my body began to curdle my skin.

My body went numb until the pain began to drain. A cooling sensation flourished my limbs, and the pain seized. It was the best I had felt in my entire thirty-three years of life.

I began to defy gravity-with a smile on my face. I ascended the earth. A louder boom pierced my ears. The sound grew so loud I couldn't even hear it.

A throbbing light slashed through the clouds like a knife through a white sheet hanging on a clothesline. I could see the light through my curtained eyes. I was so scared to keep being pulled

by the force field, but it felt so right.

I was free.

I was happy.

I was dead.

Now I sit here keeping watch over Laura as her angel. I don't breathe here, but I can smell the sweet scent of her skin, like crushed, frozen strawberries.

I wished I had said something before I left on this journey that was longer than I had expected. All I can do is yearn for her to be beside me. She is so courageous.

Every time the wind blows, that's me hugging her. Every time it rains, that's me crying. Every time the sun beats on her face, that's me caressing her skin. And everyday, before she goes to work I answer her repetitive question: "I do, Laur."

• • •

I stare at his obituary everyday. It is framed and beside my bed. Sometimes I talk to him. September was my favorite time of the year. I like the way things would start to change, and the weather would grow brisk.

We were married for ten years...ten years! We were just beginning our marriage. For starters, I'm not a morning person. And when Thom woke me up at three in the morning, I wasn't very pleased.

He had just gone to bed almost an hour before the phone call. Always working on some type of text. Whether an article or nonfiction, he sat at his desk with his coffee and cigar nearly puncturing the keyboard. We would joke around all the time.

"What did you do last night?" I would ask (even though I knew.) He would reply in that raspy voice filled with ashes: "Bruised the keyboard."

He always joked. I was hoping that waking me up in mid-morning was part of our tenth anniversary present. I was bemused at first as I slowly opened my eyes to his cub-kisses.

My eyes rose as I groaned.

"I gotta' leave, Laur."

I wiped my mouth. "Wait...what?"

"I got a story! My editor is sending me to California on that big feature story. Jordan backed out, so he's giving it to me!"

Silence.

"It's our anniversary, babe. You don't care?" I didn't mean to say it that way, but even I felt the icicles on the tip of my tongue.

"We need this. Not only do I get more recognition by being on the front page, but we can finally go on that trip. And I can pay off the car."

"Ten years." I pulled myself up, and flicked on the light. The two of us squinted. "It's the diamond anniversary."

"Or if you're traditional it's the tin and aluminum anniversary." That toothy smile wasn't doing it for me this time.

"This is no time to joke. I'm serious."

His smile was gone. "Come here, Laur."

"No! You always have these sudden meetings and sudden articles. When is it going to be about us and not the Times?" I didn't want to cry...no, don't cry.



I cried.

"Please don't cry. You mean so much more than anything to me..."

"Then prove it to me."

"Let me finish..."

"Go ahead." I thrashed my arms out waiting for a demonstration.

"Stop interrupting."

We stayed quiet for a bit.

"I gotta go, Laur."

And he walked out on me.

I laid in bed, and wrapped the quilt over my head. The door slammed and a cab became a distant sound. I just wept, went to the bathroom, and wept some more.

I was abandoned on my anniversary for the third year in a row.

As usual the 7 o'clock news was either about rape, murder, death or things that would make a grown girl paranoid. I made myself a cup of java-only sugar-and sat back down.

The coffee got cold as I stared at the amazing products on the infomercial network. I had taken the day off to be with my husband, but it was just me, myself, my iced coffee, the Wonder Knife chef, and I. We never had kids.

The clock slowly turned to eight. Eight thirty snuck by. Then I got the phone call. It was 8:37.

"Hello?" My voice chiseled at my dry throat.

"Something is wrong." Thom sounded different. I didn't recognize his voice. It was whispered, and calm. And I couldn't quite make out his sentence from almost a hundred other murmurs from behind him.

"Hello?"

The phone went dead.

I didn't want to watch the news anymore until I found out what happened to Thom. The vision of that plane crashing into the tower horrified me...I never put two and two together. And then...another plane hit. The blaze was eternally imbedded in my brain. Thom was on the plane.

I don't know why I thought that, or why I would come to believe it, but Thom was dead. His voice was settled in my head on repeat.

When the news said it was "an act of terrorism" my heart exploded, and I cried.

I kept screaming and weeping.

"Thom! Why did you leave?"

I fell to the ground, fistfing the rug. My hands turned of black and blue. I became dehydrated. The visions of the planes crashing and Thom's last words were all reels replaying on the Imax screen of my mind.

I was a hermit for months. Living on 9-11 overdrive. I forgot the days, the months. My home was the bed.

The sheets became rancid, so I decided, after weeks of waiting, to wash them. I built enough courage to walk to the basement.

I shook the pillowcase off my pillow and threw it to the ground. I grabbed Thom's and did the same.

But I didn't wash Thom's pillowcase. I wrapped it around my neck and sniffed his cologne. I felt a sort of comfort as if he were standing behind me like he usually did.

But I do crave for one answer: "Do you still love me, Thom?" ●

Usually, I avoid the mall at all costs. It has turned into a breeding ground for the up and comers. At twenty-one, I feel the need to separate myself from the mall-rat lifestyle, from the "Youth of America". My belly-ring long gone, I no longer fit into the description of too much eyeliner and overused Tommy Girl perfume. As I stand in the middle court my gaze drifts to a group of teenagers no older than fifteen, and I can't help but notice the ball of hormones that surrounds them all. With eager eyes darting up and down each others bodies, specifically that of an over-sexed girl who sways to the latest MTV hit in jeans and a crop top, the feelings of embarrassment and astonishment hit like a brick wall. They're just children. Yet, I can understand their need to be beautiful.

I suppose the hardest thing to admit is that I am superficial. We are all superficial. There's no denying I want to be noticed and admired. Although I look around me and observe subtle differences in the way the sky no longer turns that perfect shade of cerulean blue, or that the weather has gotten considerably hotter since I was a child, more than anything, I watch as my best friend, a strikingly beautiful girl of twenty years with amber hair and bedroom eyes cries on my bed and asks "Why are guys such ass holes?". Before I have a chance to give an answer that hardly I believe, she looks at me and says "It's because I'm ugly". The sad part about all this is that she's absolutely right. We have all become ugly. I smile at her mascara streaked face offering my condolence as if her grandmother has just passed with words of 'wisdom' about how she looks thinner and that there are other fish in the sea. But are there really? As a young woman growing up in a culture that idolizes the beautiful and the latest yo-yo diet, can I expect to find anything other than a conveyor-line meat-baller whose thoughts border on keg stands and weight benches? And will I think so less of myself that I will allow it?

For someone that is older, it might be hard to grasp where I'm coming from. I can see the eye-rolls now about the absurdity of what I've said and how does this have anything to do with anything. Well, listen carefully when I say this. It does. It has everything to do with it. Tell me how often you see a commercial that, in someway, is selling a product that's supposed to enhance our physical appeal. Even news programs, in between updates of the war in Iraq and bombings in England, are laced with segments about next season's fashions, beauty tips to attract that man, and some celebrities' woe-is-me sob story. Ideally, we are becoming a society of people who are judged not by what we know or have accomplished, but by how well we can fill out the seat of our pants. And that scares me.



There have been times when I question my existence on this earth. Not in the sense of being put here for a specific reason, but more in the sense of being allowed to exist, seeing as I come from an interracial union. My mother; the typical all-American white girl with flaxen hair and hazel eyes, and my father; a mocha complexioned man with almost feminine features, produced a baby girl of equally exotic looks. Years later I look in the mirror and think about the simplicity of loving another and creating something out of that love, and still, underneath it all, lays the knowledge that if it wasn't for those who fought for equality and civil rights years back, I may not have been here. I may not have been allowed to be here.

When 9/11 happened, I finally felt it. The bubble that surrounded my Norman Rockwell painting world had burst in a matter of minutes. I was sixteen then and for the first time I no longer felt justified in complaining about anything because I still had my life. I was shocked, as I'm sure everyone was, but my shock stemmed not so much from what happened, but why it happened. Until that point, I knew nothing about the world. I could give you the name of the president, maybe. But if you asked me the best way to get rid of a pimple, or how to get that perfect summer curl for your hair, I could write out an entire novel. The realization that I was living in a vicious cycle of over-pampered American children threw me for a loop. I had become the exact opposite of my parents' generation of freedom fighters and leaders. I was officially a follower.

I watch as my mother gets ready for work, usually fighting back the tiredness she feels of being a single parent with a basic high school education. Sometimes I see it in her eyes, the fear of knowing that for the rest of her life she will have to struggle to get ahead. There are times she has cried to me over the phone, her voice choking back the screams I know she needs to let out. Yet, she keeps going like a train barreling through the night. My mother is, because she has to. My mother pushes, because she has to. My mother fights, because she has to.

Reading back through the words I've written, I question whether or not I have made any kind of point at all. I suppose I am an unlikely candidate for such a story, mainly because I am living it right now. I don't have the monopoly of sitting back and watching as it all unfolds. All I know for sure is that each day is different, my mind ever changing to accommodate my emotions. I'm positive that if written a week from now, every word on this page would be gone and replaced with new ones. I think about where I'll be years from now, living a life that is probably opposite of everything I want at this moment and I know that I should worry. I know that I should be bigger than those who find comfort in the petty and misguided ways of youth, but I can't because that's who I am; twenty-one, clueless, and wanting nothing more than to be me. ●

The Bible always scared the hell out of Arthur. He hated feeling helpless and small, and that's just what that book did to him. His best friend Luke loved the Bible. Heaven was such a certainty to him that, at times, Arthur envied his blissful ignorance and blind faith. He couldn't fathom the idea of a young boy being more religious than his parents, but they never argued about their opposite beliefs. It never mattered. That is, it never mattered when they were young. When the two boys grew up and began to think harder about life and the universe, things began to change.

Arthur was an only child and something of a family baby. He had it easy for most of his life. This allowed him to flit from hobby to hobby, never taking anything seriously. He didn't very much like kids his age. Especially when he reached high school and his peers seemed to all become fools.

Luke was the eldest of seven children living with a single mother. She had visions of what her kids were to be when they grew up, and her plan for Luke wasn't coming together. He loved her, but he was brave and often rebellious against her. He followed God's law, and none other.

It was slightly miraculous that Arthur and Luke even became friends. They seemed to be from opposite ends of the Earth. Something just worked, and they got along brilliantly. Part of it was surely their shared distaste for kids their age. It seemed that marijuana and alcohol were what ruled the lives of most fellow sixteen year olds, and they agreed never to be like those people (indeed, the enemy of one's enemy is their friend). And their humor. It was unique and strange, involving fights with inflatable chairs, multiple conjoined slip-n-slides, and many other exploited plastic based items.

For years, everything was going just splendid, save for the occasional grounding that Luke would receive for things like digging holes in his backyard for fun and no other reason at all. Arthur would laugh when he'd hear about Luke's latest misdeed, and they'd continue life. However, the ongoing strife between Luke and his often grumpy mother was growing evermore intense. There would be periods of months in which Luke would be house ridden and excommunicated from Arthur. But Luke's birthday was fast approaching, and eighteen meant he'd be leaving his mother's house to go wherever God's wind would take him.

June 25th came and he wasted no time in doing just that. He packed his hideous Plymouth Sundance with an odd collection of belongings. Among them, a lamp, a VCR, his essential Holy scripture, and a pillow. A simple man, he had become. He set out hastily and didn't look back. Initially, that is. He of course looked back a few minutes later when unsure thoughts of his strict, but well-meaning mother snuck into his mind. He shook them off and continued on. Heading for nowhere in particular, he just drove with the Bible as his passenger.

When dusk departed and the air began to chill, Luke pulled into a dark lot and made the drivers seat into a bed. He dozed and he dreamed. From his vast and rambling myriad of dreams came a vivid picture. One that grabbed his unconscious attention. It was a vast desert in which naught could be seen but golden sand and pale blue sky. He feared he may never escape this wide-open prison. He had no guide. No direction in which he might travel. A devious laughter pierced the air and the sky darkened.

Luke awoke, wondering if leaving home was so wise as he once thought. He had no place to go. No direction. He wondered if this was God's intention: to teach him to honor his mother. He opened his Bible arbitrarily and read the first passage that he saw. It read: "Go in peace. Your journey has the Lord's approval." Luke took it for a definite divine intervention and laid his head down with a smile.

When Luke awoke the morning after he received his divine message, he was somewhat disoriented. He



lay there in a car full of eccentric items that he recognized, but he couldn't recall why he was there. His Bible entered his field of vision and inspired a flood of recollection. God communicated with me last night. He recalled his flight from the constraints of life with his mother and felt assured by the idea that God approved of that journey. Luke had a plan. He would follow the only true direction he knew in life and become a priest. Continuing down the highway, now towards the home of Arthur, he had conspired his plan and it began at Arthur's home.

They say if you wish to remain friends with someone, never speak with them about political views. As Luke would soon find, the same was true for religious views. Arthur sat in his room, alternating between reading a fantastical bit of mythology and eating an outstanding batch of beef jerky. A true life of excess, huh? The room was slightly askew, but dramatically more orderly than the rooms of most eighteen year olds.

Arthur enjoyed history. Enjoyed the lessons it had to give. He liked facts. A definite realist, he was. His fascination was interrupted by a gentle tap on his window. Laughing aloud, he bounded down the stairs and opened his front door. Luke awaited him in the yard, tossing pebbles at the window to Arthur's room.

"Good day sire." Arthur greeted Luke with his customary mock English accent.

They laughed and caught up. Luke explained his bold escape from home and his reassuring message from God. Arthur respected the Bible for it's allegory, but in no way believed that Noah literally had a boat that housed billions of animals, or that Adam and Eve literally met a snake, resulting in the fall of mankind. Luke was different. He knew those things happened, just as he knew God intended him to read that passage the previous night.

Arthur's welcoming parents allowed Luke to stay with the family for a while, so long as he helped out around the house. The first few days were idyllic summer days, consisting of a great deal of imitating rap songs, eating harmful foods and making unreasonable plans to build a raft from logs and sail it down the local creek.

On a particularly beautiful summer day, they sat on the rocky bank of the creek. Its surface sparkled with the joy of the sun and sang in it's perpetual motion. A truly beautiful world. The boys reflected on years passed and friends with whom they had lost ties. They spoke of the future and their plans. Arthur, the uncertain dilettante complained,

"Man, I haven't got any idea what I want to do with myself."

Luke was always reassuring.

"It's cool, man. God has a purpose for you. I guess just wait. It'll happen."

Arthur hated this kind of thing. What he did with his life was his choice, not that of some omnipotent being with a personality. Right?

"Come on. You know I'm not into that stuff." Arthur chuckled.

"It's not even that, man. You don't have to go to church or whatever. Just accept Jesus. It's for your own good."

He explained his plan to become a priest, and he wasn't kidding. Infinitely brave and confident, Luke could and would do whatever he set himself to do. Arthur was growing impatient and desperately wanted to change the subject before an argument began. He hated having beliefs forced upon him. How could a reasonable person believe a literal son of God existed? And that simply believing in him would grant an eternity in heaven? It was illogical, to say the least. Before Arthur could change the topic, Luke spoke again.

"Don't you believe me? God sent me a message the other night. Remember?"

Of course Arthur knew that any page Luke opened to that fateful night would have read something that could be interpreted as speaking directly to Luke. It was pure chance that he opened to that page, he thought.

"Sure, I believe you opened to that page. Just, how can you know it was directly from God?"

"That's the point, man. Faith." Luke feared that now Arthur did not trust in him on top of his lack of trust in God. Faith was simple. As Saint Augustine stated, "Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe."

Arthur, of course, didn't buy the whole faith bit. Friedrich Nietzsche said, "Faith means not wanting to know what is true." Arthur couldn't agree more. His mind was made for questioning, and faith just left too many questions.

"I guess."

Luke feared for his dear friend's soul. He had spent too many years looking past Arthur's heretical ways. He decided that if he was to be a true friend, he must make Arthur realize.

"We're not kids anymore. We can't just keep wasting time joking and waiting around. The world is messed up and ugly. But there's a better place."

Arthur looked around at the exuberant creek and his world's brilliance. He recalled the words of Henry David Thoreau, who influenced him to realize just how beautiful this world was. "Heaven is below our feet as well as above our heads."

And Luke thought this was an ugly place? Luke continued,

"It's all just a test. The devil is seriously everywhere today. You can't let him win."

Taken back, Arthur stared at his friend, who seemed to have transformed in moments. He had never been so radical with his beliefs as this.

"I s'pose that's your opinion. I see the world differently, and I'm happy here."

"There's no opinions. There's just right and wrong. I've let you think you're right long enough, man. It's arrogant to think you know everything and you don't need God. Get out of the spotlight" "It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels." warned the wise Saint Augustine; and Luke heeded.

By this point, Arthur's eyes were fixed ahead to avoid Luke's gaze. He was offended. His best friend found him arrogant. His best friend seemed to be losing his mind by the second.

"Oh come on." His tone was more harsh than he had intended. Arthur seldom spoke, and scarcely ever raised his voice. He pressed on anyway.

"I'm not the one who claims to be living the only correct way".

"It's not my way, man. I didn't invent it. Jesus did."

"Indeed, and it's your choice to live it. It's my choice to not live it."

"It's for your own good."

Luke did not understand. Why wouldn't Arthur believe him? He continued his attempt to convert his mislead compatriot, but in doing so, he made Arthur even more uneasy. Luke had progressed to mention the vanquishing of evil, various prophecies and the ever popular End Times from the book of Revelations. Arthur hearkened without a word. He knew every generation for the past two thousand years thought the end of the world would be in their lifetime. This one was surely no different. But none of this biblical nonsense did anything but frighten him. Now the person whom he though he knew best was sounding to him like a cult leader on the verge of some sort of Holy killing spree. Luke cited numerous biblical quotations, all of them profoundly unnerving to Arthur. He didn't wish to hear any more about the Archangel Michael destroying evil, or the visions of John the Evangelist. He got up and walked briskly away from his friend. Luke shot back at him,

"It's for your own good." But Arthur was too far away now. He didn't get it. His heart hardened before the love of God.

Luke's best friend would be damned.

Arthur's best friend was a naive fool. ●





J. H. Sunflower in Parking Lot • Yvette Dozier Williamson



## A Fulfilled Fairytale • Aleksandra Scierska

Jesse gives a big sigh. It is impossible that he will have this story written by tomorrow. Plus, the old computer is doing its tricks again and doesn't want to save the file under the correct format.

He stretches his arms and his face twists in pain. Sitting for hours on an uncomfortable chair has certainly not done his spine any good. His stomach gives a couple of rumbling noises – a sign that he hasn't eaten since the morning. However, instead of focusing on food, his thoughts keep wandering back to the main character of his previous stories, the beautiful Amaryllis, a girl of uncommon wisdom and bravery, whose adventures he conjured up and portrayed in his fairytales.

Who would have guessed eight years ago that something which began as simple as "Once upon a time..." would lead to a series of bestselling books, recognition, and money in an otherwise always empty account, and basically, anything any writer could have dreamed about.

Or so it seemed.

Jesse's demeanor now seems preoccupied; his eyes glaze over in thought. A delicate smile is trembling on his pale lips and they are moving barely producing a sound.

"Amaryllis, Amaryllis," whispers Jesse, as if he is reacting to the presence of somebody he hasn't seen for years, who has unexpectedly appeared in front of him.

Suddenly, as if waking up from a dream, he quickly shakes his head. Overwhelming weariness puts a shadow on his face again. He goes to the kitchen and turns the light-switch on, but the light flashes for less than a second and the kitchen goes dark again.

"Unbelievable, it must be the fifth bulb since yesterday. It's time to move out of this dilapidated house," he mumbles while walking to the cabinet to get another bulb.

The house is very old, and ever since Jesse can remember, it has always needed a thorough renovation. He moved in here many years ago with his wife. His ex-wife, that is. It was back then, when he wasn't a renowned author of a famous series of books for

children. It was back then when he was sane... or was he?

His whole life has changed completely since he started to write fairytales about Princess Amaryllis.

Sometimes he thinks that it wasn't him who created her but it was she who gave him this life.

Over time he simply stopped caring about the outer world. The only thing that mattered was writing her story.

And now?

It is all over.

The series came to an end. The publisher decided this.

"It is time for something new," he said. The new story should focus on adventures of a male character, so young boys will be able to relate better to him.

Jesse cursed. He can't find any more bulbs. He knows there should be some left in the basement. Jesse shivers at the thought of having to go there. He was always afraid of dark basements and this old house has a particularly dark one with no electricity. He doesn't even remember the last time he had gone there.

Holding a candle in a shaking hand, he descends the basement stairs little by little. They are wooden and make squeaky noises with every one of his steps. At the bottom of the stairs he trips in a hole he isn't aware of.

"Ouch!" Jesse screams as he falls on a cold basement floor hitting his head on one of the steps and dropping the candle.

He lies there in complete darkness for half a minute, trying not to panic.

Suddenly, he thinks he hears something like a sweet melody coming from nowhere.

He knows this melody all too well. Amaryllis likes to sing it. It is the prettiest song he has ever heard. And he hears it in his head much more often than ever before. He must be losing his mind.

"Enough of this!" he thinks. But then he bolts upright.

No, it is not an illusion. He can really see the light coming from behind the door at the end of the basement.

The melody grows stronger and stronger.

Jesse's body is shaking but he manages to get up. He begins walking along the walls almost hypnotized by the source of the bright light. Finally, his hands touch the rough metal of the door. He hesitates for a second but decides to slowly push it open.

Dazzling light and an angelic voice singing a song fill the doorway. Jesse squints his eyes trying to see.

The look on his face changes immediately when he recognizes something... somebody?

He is totally captured by what he's seeing. His numb lips are trying to say one word over and over. At last, he just smiles, opens his arms and walks inside the mysterious, sunny space.

The next day, when the sun rose, its rays fell on an empty space where once there used to be a very old house. ●

Funerals are funny. I am not referring to that polite laughter in response to a joke during the eulogy. I am talking about the kind of laughter that splits stitches and gives you a cramp in your side. I am talking about the kind of laughter that turns faces red as fire engines and evokes waterfalls of tears. You haven't attended a funeral like that?

When I was seventeen, my fun-loving great uncle Raymond passed away. He was my father's uncle and they were close. I loved him as well, but I could hardly contain my disappointment at spending a weekend with my family, in the minivan, on our way to a funeral. At the time I thought it was funny how shocked everyone seemed to be that Raymond had died. He was old, lonely, and lived too close to my grandparents as far as I am concerned. That triple threat was enough to kill the healthiest person.

Once at the funeral home, I watched the mourners pouring in. I had to give Raymond credit. He had an extensive line of blue haired women crying over him, huge bouquets of flowers, and a pack of army buddies there to see him off. Unfortunately this meant the stench of Vaseline and analgesic rub was running rampant. The odors infiltrated my nostrils and I fought back gags. Finally it was show time. The lights dimmed and those of us in the immediate family were escorted to a more private back room. We were told it had the best view. The best view of the casket? My three brothers, sister, father and I sat behind my grandfather and Raymond's lady friend. The service started out like any other. The pastor quoted the relevant scriptures and told anecdotes about his relationship with Raymond. His droning voice reminded me of bees in a hive.

Suddenly, with a glance to his left, the pastor turned this typical funeral into an all out laugh fest. He nodded in the direction of an usher who nodded back and reached behind his chair. I craned my neck to see what all this nodding was about. Then I saw it. The large black box full of knobs, dials, and buttons came forth like a dragon from its cave. It squealed to life and its beady red eyes lit up. A feeling of trepidation came over me. My great uncle's funeral was cause for a karaoke machine? I looked to my sister for reassurance. She shrugged. I wondered if we should make a request.

"And now a song from Raymond's brother in Christ, Harold," announced the pastor. Harold stepped directly in front of the open casket. He clutched the



microphone and like a lounge singer, he belted out the first note. The noise he emitted could hardly be considered funeral worthy. He made dying cats getting hit by a screeching car sounds. The words could not even be deciphered. He swayed back and forth while he crooned and "felt the spirit". I felt the urge to laugh.

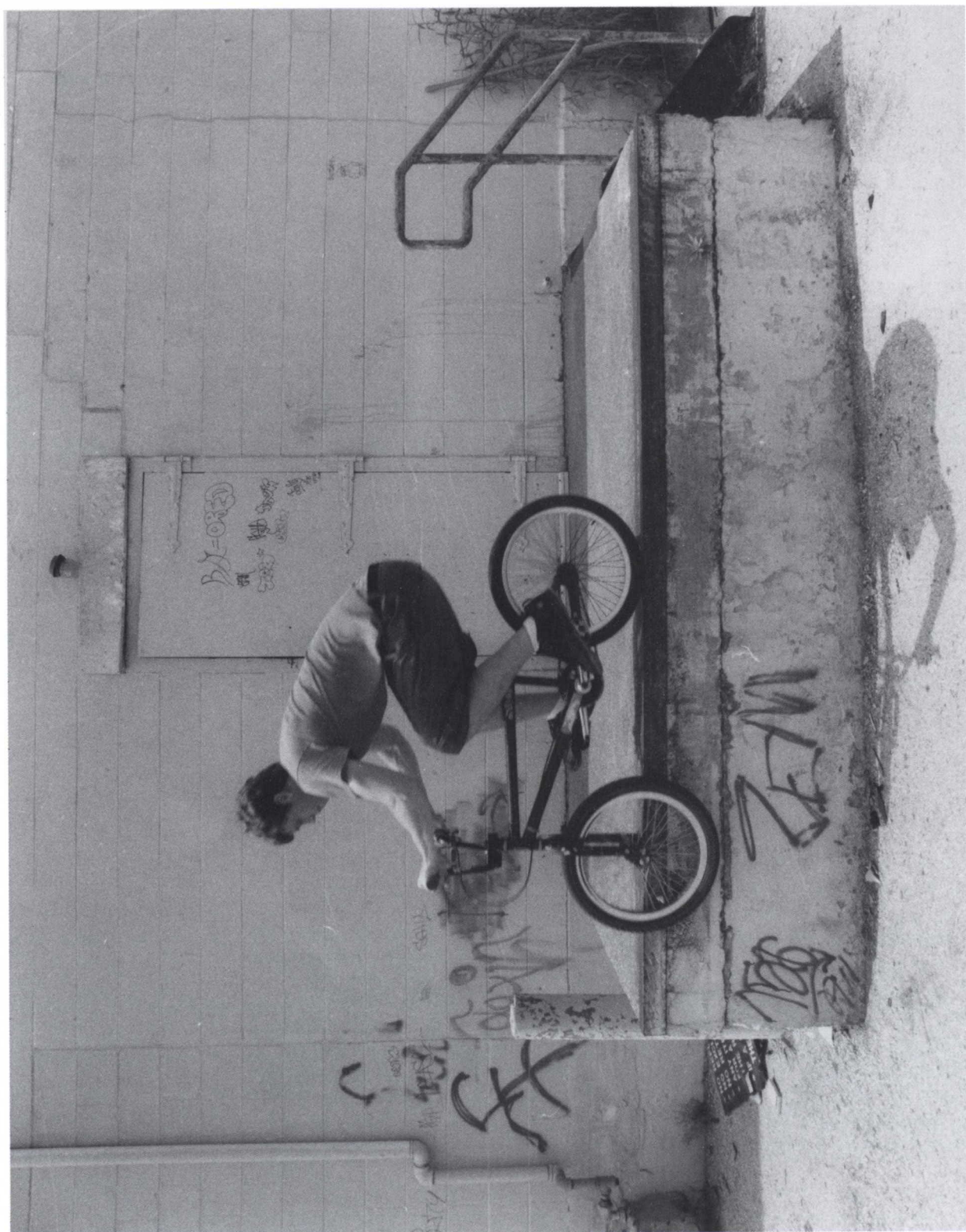
The tickle started slowly in the back of my throat and I tried my best to stifle it. I lost that battle. I covered my mouth with one hand and grabbed my stomach with the other. I was snorting at this point and laughing uncontrollably. Beside me my sister was laughing and tearing up. She tried to fake a cough to cover her chuckling but it only made matters worse. Next to her, my brother Greg was doubled over laughing, hissing like a snake. His whole head turned red as if it would explode if he did not let the laugh escape. My other brother Doug was hunched over with his face covered. Surely, most people thought he was overcome with grief. To me, his shaking shoulders indicated he was laughing, not crying. My brothers stood up, grabbed each other, and stumbled out the back door. I could hear them erupting into guffaws through the thin walls. My father leaned over to give my sister the evil eye and shake his head. Others turned to see what was going on. As the song ended, we gained our composure and sat stoically. The pastor took his position again front and center. He told stories about Raymond's working ethic, hobbies, and his wife who had passed away years earlier. Then he turned towards our private room.

"Now we will hear a few words from Raymond's friend Ethel," he pronounced

Everyone turned to look at Ethel, expecting an emotional speech. Ethel did not seem ready for her speech, as she was snoring. Maybe she thought Raymond was boring? Her head leaned completely back and her mouth hung open. It was so large and dark I half expected bats to fly out. Her glasses were half off her face and a roaring sound came from deep inside of her. I could not contain myself anymore. I looked at my sister and we burst into laughter. Tripping over my family, I scrambled for the back door to join my brothers. Once outside in the safety of fellow laughers, I managed to take a breath. Greg and Doug were still in disbelief of the karaoke machine as I explained Ethel's views on my great uncle. They exploded into more laughter. The three of us sat there laughing and bawling our eyes out for a good fifteen minutes before we got it together.

"Can you guys sing David Bowie at my funeral?" I asked.

We looked at each other and started cracking up. Other mourners thought we were rude, crass, and immature. We didn't come for them. Perched on that little stoop I realized how bizarre everyone's outlook on funerals really is. Wearing black, crying, and sticking our loved one in a hole is hardly normal. Life is meant to be celebrated. Even the shortest of lives are worthy of a laugh. Raymond lived well into his seventies surrounded by his family, his hobbies, and the memories he treasured. There is nothing sad about that. I knew that if he could see what had just taken place in his honor he would have laughed too. ●



Smith Grind • James Bencrowsky



## The Old Woman From The Garrettford Trolley Stop • Jessica Fowler

The 3:50pm trolley ride from 69<sup>th</sup> street in Darby to Bartram Avenue in Collingdale was predictably overcrowded. Outside, the clouds were giving away to sunshine after the morning's heavy rain.

At Lansdowne Avenue at least thirty high school kids boarded the trolley. They come in a large line from down the hill which leads to Archbishop Prendergast and Monsignor Bonner high schools. As the trolley quickly grew from being crowded to being stuffed inch to inch with people, the noise level rose to twice what it had been a moment before. I listened to the sound of countless conversations going on around me and tried hard to drone out the noise of the giggling, cursing, and noisy high school kids.

I was seated behind two Prendie girls, both wearing the identical maroon sweatshirt and stockings with the gray and maroon plaid skirt. Their identical golden pony tails were bouncing back and forth as they laughed together at some private joke. I watched them whisper back and forth to one another, unaware of anything outside of their own conversation.

"Garrettford," the middle aged balding trolley driver called and a chorus of beeps rang out as several passengers got up from their seats and walked to the front. As the teenagers barreled out of the trolley as though they were in a giant rush, an old woman slowly approached the trolley car from the red-bricked trolley stop pavilion.

She wore a gray sweat shirt with the words "I believe in angels" written in teal cursive with the image of an angel sewn beneath the phrase. In her left hand she clutched a beige pocket book and a Hallmark bag, in her right she was holding a SEPTA transfer which she was trying to hand to the driver as she clung to one of the metal poles for support. She grasped her bags in her small, wrinkled fist.

"You pay when you get off, ma'am," the driver said, with an added sigh. His voice sounded as though he were speaking to the most unintelligent of all creatures. He answered without looking even slightly in her direction, as though she deserved not even a glance from the corner of his eye. Still, she smiled gratefully at him.



"Thank you sir," she said, her clear blue eyes shining with cheerfulness. She turned to the filled up trolley car. There were no seats available and I waited for someone to yield their spot to her as the yellow and orange triangle instructed, but nobody moved. The girls in front of me continued chattering. The woman held onto the pole with an expression of weary desperation across her face as she lurched forward and back again each time the trolley slowed and then started. Several moments later, the trolley reached Drexel Manor right as I was about to give the old woman my seat, but three or so people moved to get off, one of the older boys with a forest green Bonner sweatshirt on bumped her hard as he moved past, yelling to someone on a cell phone.

She took a seat next to a tall and stick thin boy whose headphones were playing loudly. I could hear the rap lyrics through the gibbering and jabbering of the many high school girls in front, in back, and beside me. He rocked his head back and forth and muttered lyrics.

"Excuse me," she said softly to him, but he was oblivious. "Excuse me," she repeated again. "Is this trolley going toward Sharon Hill or Media," she asked, uncertainty filling her voice as she looked out the window worriedly. Nobody answered and I was almost unsure for a moment if she had even spoken. With one shaky hand she pulled herself up from the seat and walked to the trolley driver and asked him the same question.

"It's going to Sharon Hill, ma'am," he said in the same blatantly condescending and annoyed tone as before.

"Thank you so much again sir," she said, but now with a now more hesitant smile. She looked back at her seat as though it were the end of a long and strenuous struggle and moved with her hands clutching gratefully to each pole along the way before finally sitting.

People are so prone to act above and superior to the elderly. Here this woman was, at least seventy years old, being ignored or disregarded by a trolley full of people who haven't been through half as much as she has in her lifetime. This woman has probably seen and experienced twice as much than the combination of the knowledge the two high school girls in front of me have acquired. Yet, they laugh at her expense when she nearly falls when getting up again to get off the trolley. It hurts to think of what that must be like, to live your life and to go through so much strife and struggle year after year and once you are old, to be treated with minimal appreciation from the people you encounter. I feel my stomach growing sick as I sadly watch her.

She stands to exit, nearly losing her balance, and walk to the front of the trolley to get off. Through the foggy window I watch as she walked off. She stood there for a moment on the sidewalk with an indecisive look stretched out upon her pale and wrinkled face. It was as though she were waiting for the next blow to come her way. Despite all this, she smiles pleasantly to the trio of young girls about to enter the trolley themselves. She, and those of her generation, deserves respect for being strong enough to be capable of enduring so much and yet somehow still remaining so unyieldingly optimistic.

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