

Reading in the Bardo: Seeking Comfort in the Absence of Ritual

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When campus closed suddenly in mid-March because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I filled bags with books from my office--ones I would need for teaching online and others I planned on reading. My kids' school was next to close, and I recognized that my imagined surplus of reading time would be curtailed. Then my father died, and I found that I could hardly read at all.

Reading, a constant in my life and work, had become intolerable, impossible. The fog of lockdown, coupled with the fog of my grief, made me unfamiliar to myself. Some days it was as if I were floating above the house, watching the kids resist their first- and third-grade e-learning while a woman who looked like me loaded the dishwasher. My husband was in his home office, interviewing doctors about the coronavirus for a news article, apologizing to sources for the barking dog. Late afternoon was our work-household shift change. Although reading always brought me comfort, now I couldn't focus. For the better part of a year, my family had been moving through anticipatory grief, through cancer treatments and travel for experimental procedures and clinical-trial false hope. The highest highs and lowest lows. My father moved to hospice on a chilly, gray March afternoon; he died a week later.

I had time. The stack of new books sat untouched. I'd been teaching several George Saunders stories in my fiction workshops, and his beautiful/oddball families were an unexpected balm. Rereading helped me float back down into myself. When I recommended Saunders's novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (Random House, 2017), to a student, I wanted to revisit its shadowy graveyard setting too. Like many, our family was unable to hold a large memorial or graveside service for my dad due to COVID-19 restrictions. Our traditional mourning rituals are on hold.

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I'm like Saunders's ghosts roaming the graveyard. But instead of wanting out, I want to be let in.

I first raced through Lincoln in the Bardo shortly after it was released, enjoying the playlike format of different ghosts having heartbreaking and sometimes hilarious conversations in a cemetery purgatory (or bardo, the Tibetan term meaning the state between death and rebirth). It's the same cemetery where Abraham Lincoln's son, Willie, is recently buried, and the president not only pays a visit to the grave, he opens the crypt. He cradles his son's body in his arms. More than once. I read slowly this time, sinking into the book and letting it sink in.

Saunders is known for deeply funny, satiric short fiction that lampoons American consumer culture, among other things; his work also offers a gut punch, or a revelation, or a moment of being that seems wholly apart from the humor. Some of Saunders's earlier stories are bombastic and over-the-top compared with the work that would follow, but repeated themes echo. The early stories are like early lives, hinting (at least in retrospect) at what's to come. In the novella "Bounty" from his debut collection, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (Random House 1996), purgatory is imagined as "a tiny room full of dull people eternally discussing their dental work while sipping lukewarm tea." The collection's title story features a boy who is killed in a theme park for shoplifting, then returns as a ghost who tries to help the hapless protagonist (who does not listen and then meets a Bad Fate, as Saunders himself might put it).

Across his books, recently departed souls try to sweep through the bodies of the living, attempting to change their hearts and minds, because they are out of chances to change themselves. In "Commcomm," from *In Persuasion Nation* (Random House, 2006), the recently killed can communicate the mystery of their deaths to the living and thus are released from a kind of purgatory. At one point in the story, two men are bashing each other's heads in with a rock. Fast-forward to the story "Victory Lap," from *Tenth of December*, in which one teen stops another from smashing in a thwarted rapist's head with a rock.

The kids know better. Often the most powerful moments in these stories come when children demonstrate a kind of grace, despite the problematic adults that surround them. This is not a message directed to children. With the exception of one children's book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (Villard, 2000), Saunders writes for adults,

about characters who inevitably and disastrously fail at their demoralizing jobs and life tasks. But the children, always, are absolved. They offer a second chance at life. The adults can watch and learn.

Several stories in *Tenth of December* demonstrate this, the title story perhaps most poignantly. Robin, a self-imagined swashbuckling child in a winter forest, slips through the ice. A dying man who'd planned to kill himself there realizes he wants to live; he must, in order to save Robin.

More recently, in "Love Letter," published in April in the *New Yorker*, a grandfather responds to his grandson's request for advice. There is a near-future America, and a corrupt government has deported the grandson's love interest. The grandfather tries to offer counsel and helplessly defends his own inaction as the leaders came to power. "What would you have had me do?" he asks. "What would you have done? I know what you will say: you would have fought. But how?" By the end of the letter, he turns to the grandson for advice, his questions no longer rhetorical but pleading.

When the frame enlarges, Saunders's work expands to include not only the humiliating jobs and adult failures followed by eventual satiric/tragic death, but also the young people on the periphery as witnesses, doing better at life than the adults could. Consider Willie Lincoln in *Lincoln in the Bardo*. This dead child holds so much power, it's as if--

"Mom?" my younger son says from the other room, a plastic wrapper crinkling. "Can I have a snack?"

"Are you already eating a snack?" I ask.

A long pause. "Would you like some? "

Not bad, kid.

WHERE was I? Here. The bardo. My father's obituary was one of many with a line about "a memorial service at a later date," due to COVID-19. We held a ten-person service in early April, with out-of-town aunts and uncles joining via Zoom. It was an approximation of what we wanted. Wearing a mask made crying difficult, so I sat in a chair six feet away from my mother and sister and thought about that instead of crying. (I have done plenty of crying elsewhere.) We squirted hand sanitizer into the kids' palms at regular

intervals. We did not hug. That's not entirely true: I hugged my mom, honorary member of my household's quarantine pod.

I said the prayers in unison with the priest, feeling not comfort but agitation that this small gesture was all we could do. I tried not to complain; Dad would not have complained. What is a complaint anyway but a prayer for change you do not know how to manifest? My parents prayed the rosary every night, even when my dad's voice was hoarse.

Some religions profess that mourners must perform certain rituals to release the loved one's soul to the next realm. According to my family's Catholic tradition, ashes must not be scattered but buried. I don't believe that my father's soul is in limbo without a proper send-off; we are the ones in mourning purgatory, seeking comfort in the absence of ritual.

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, when a grief-stricken Abraham Lincoln visits the cemetery and holds the body of his son, Willie, he is attempting to comfort them both. Nothing else can be done. Willie desperately wants his father's attention, even after death. This painful moment of failed connection is countered by Willie's realization that he and the other lost souls are dead, not sick or waiting to be healed. This understanding releases them, and when the souls go--wherever it is they go--Saunders imagines it as a "matter-light blooming phenomenon" complete with "bone-chilling firesound."

Still, there are stragglers in the cemetery. Foulmouthed ghosts and heavy partiers Betsy and Eddie Baron lament that their ungrateful "f--ing kids" never visit them, failing to acknowledge their many and varied shortcomings as parents. Betsy has a revelatory moment that frees her:

Eddie? No.

They was our kids.

We f--ed it up.

Two of the book's main ghosts, Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III, cannot leave the bardo until they right the wrong of failing to help a child who had arrived there, didn't know to move on, and now was trapped. Only once they have freed Elise Traynor can they become free.

Anger, fear, and shame are the real purgatories of Saunders's fiction. To be stuck in that bardo, while living or dead, is to be lost.

I SLOWLY write these words in a notebook on summer mornings before my children wake up. Many entries end with "Here they come" followed by a description of their tousled hair, or the elephantine sound that boys ages seven and nine make while coming down the stairs. Often I am perturbed by the intrusion, angry with myself that I can't manage to get up earlier, that I am not alone enough to write and be lost in my mind.

Other times I know that these boys are what keeps me moving forward. Their interruptions bring relief, and I am saved from my thoughts, which lately tend toward the morbid and fearful. I replay what else we could've done to help my father, who helped us all our lives. When will I feel less lost? Online I track the package containing the kids' hand-sewn Minecraft masks. I wonder if the maskless woman who sneezed (then glared) in the grocery store parking lot was carrying the virus. Was I in the path of her droplets? Would I then put my mother in danger, merely by breathing near her? The kids might fare better if they caught it. Though they could lose me, or my husband.

Here they come. THUMP THUMP THUMP. Yes, we are sad about Grampy and about everything being canceled, the boys indicate in various ways. But we are also hungry and not super good at remembering whether we should fish waffles from the toaster with metal utensils. (You should not.) We still need reminders about walking around the house in socks soaked with ditch water. (Also no.)

The boys have started making their own breakfast. Older orders younger around the kitchen. "Hey, don't put the cereal away yet. Did you hear me?" It's as if he's performing mom ventriloquism. In the sink are the enormous slotted spoons they've used to eat Honey Nut Cheerios, because the clean cereal spoons were in the dishwasher, thus invisible. These boys. They live with such exuberance and make me laugh every day, even while driving me crazy. They keep me present in a moment that otherwise feels unmoored in time. Sometimes they do this by offering me snacks, because they also want snacks. Of course I accept.

You have to keep body and soul together, after all.

UNTIL you can't anymore. Dad had been ready for hospice for several weeks but delayed in order to continue treatment, because that's what he thought "the girls," my sister and

I, wanted. And we did want that, for a time, until we understood--once he let us know-- how bad things had gotten for him. And for Mom, who witnessed it all. There's no stopping what's coming, only delay, and if that delay makes things worse, you cannot continue.

We have only the time we're given. What did you do with your time, that is, your life? Did you help or hurt others? These are the moral questions Saunders's fiction asks, as characters glimpse, evade, or experience their inevitable end. Who did they hurt, and how do they make it right? The children in his stories serve as mini consciences; they remind the adults of their own younger selves. Maybe their better selves.

In turn the relieved adults praise their children for coming through in the clutch. In "Victory Lap," teenager Kyle rescues Alison from an assailant, then nearly kills the man. Alison has nightmares that he actually followed through. Her parents offer comfort, reminding her of what really happened: Alison ran outside and shouted, and Kyle dropped the rock instead of using it as a weapon.

A bad thing happened to you kids, Dad
said. But it could have been worse.
So much worse, Mom said.
But because of you kids, Dad said, it
wasn't.
You did so good, Mom said.
Did beautiful, Dad said.

A few years ago, while teaching this story in an undergraduate fiction writing workshop, I read the line "Did beautiful" and imagined it was about parents reassuring their children and themselves, giving their offspring the validation and self-esteem boost they may have lacked as kids. That was an earlier reading life, lived by a different me. Now I read it through a widened frame, the picture expanded.

You did beautiful by being alive and free. You did beautiful by choosing, when you had a choice, and it cost you nothing that mattered, to keep others alive and free, too. And when the time came and you held a heavy, hurtful thing in your hands, you did beautiful by letting go.

ON A humid July morning we finally gathered for Dad's graveside service, again with the masks. We'd delayed in hopes of having a big memorial Mass and luncheon in the church hall basement, something the out-of-town family could attend. Not this year, as COVID-19 cases climbed. The service and burial were short, and our small group didn't

linger at the cemetery. Later we raised glasses of Jameson in a toast to Dad, the kids lifting their cans of Sprite. It felt good to perform these rituals.

That night I stood in the yard searching for the comet that was supposed to be visible in the northwest sky. Comet NEOWISE had been discovered in March, the day after Dad died. The boys were sleeping in their room filled with books, in our house filled with books: comfort waiting on a shelf, ideas and words to be read and reread outside of time and space. I grew up in such a house. My dad was a physics guy, a cosmos guy. He wasn't big on fiction but read anything by Isaac Asimov, anything by Carl Sagan. He loved setting up the telescope to show us the universe. Dad would know if the thing I thought was the comet was actually the comet. I couldn't ask him. Lucky for me, he gave us so many places to look.

Just as my neck started to ache, a shooting star dropped through the Big Dipper. I had been waiting for a sign from Dad all day. This was it. Something released in me, watching my own version of a matterlight-blooming phenomenon.

Is that you, Dad, rocketing across the sky? You did beautiful too.

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