

Peace Offering

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I killed a peace dove once.

It was spring. I was driving down a stretch of road lined with left-over remnants of apple and cherry orchards not yet bulldozed for new houses, new subdivisions. I don't know where I was coming from, down that particular road, though one corner of my brain thinks it might have been the hospital, and that I was anxious and strung out from lack of sleep, which is why I didn't see the dove in the road there, small, grey, invisible against the asphalt. I seem to remember it was early morning, the light just cresting the mountains like consolation, and I don't know why I would have driven down that stretch of road in the early morning unless it was home from one of those hospital visits. Besides, something in my memory wants to connect the accidental suffering and death of a bird with my own human confrontations with death. But now as I write, I'm not sure it was morning, or even sure about the light. It could have been afternoon or evening, might have been a trip to the grocery store. Vacuum repair. Something banal.

I know this much, this picture:

The trees beside the road are shedding apple blossoms, air and asphalt strewn with pink and white like a summer wedding.

A rush and a sudden spray of petals blow up over the hood of my car, over my windshield. A thump and a glimpse of widespread wings. And I understand: not just petals. Feathers. Dove-grey mixed with petal-white.

Behind me in the rearview mirror a snowy, mixed cloud of swirling feathers and apple petals—a bridal veil, or a spring snow—settling over the body of a dove, lying in the road.

It flutters twice, the wing bent up in a bloodied fan, petals falling all around.



I think, *I've killed a peace dove with my car.* My fingers flutter on my steering wheel, as if that wing were me, my hand. *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.* Apologizing to the bird, to all birds, to the universe. And the image of that dove—beautiful, awful—somehow links itself in my brain to all other griefs I'd ever experienced, in a kind of grief-stream, water falling over rocks. Time runs in on itself, like the famous scene in Proust's *Time Regained*, where the taste of a madeleine cookie dipped in tea triggers a childhood memory. And I am back again, driving my youngest son to a hospital in Salt Lake City, calling my husband at work to tell him Eric needed emergency brain surgery, panicking as I listen to the sound of my child in pain.

It's odd the way the brain makes connections, the way a dove flies itself around a four-year-old grief, the way that grief rises up, sharp and raw again, for what's over and healed, the only evidence of my son's brain surgery a long scar covered up by his thick hair, the bump of a metal screw you can feel if you touch his head in just the right place, and the likelihood that he'll drop a ball if you throw it to him.



This is not the story of my son's death. It is not even the story of his grief.

He doesn't remember much. Pain does that, makes you forget.

This is the story of my grief, of my own brief confrontation with the possibility of the death of someone I love. Which doesn't sound like a huge deal, honestly. Other people suffer more, all the time, all over the world. I've read about the Russians' suffering under Stalin, under the tsars, all the people murdered or sent to the Gulag to freeze and starve. I've walked through the Holocaust museum and felt stunned by the magnitude of that crime, read Elie Wiesel's account in his book *Night*, how he was forced to watch babies thrown into burning ditches. We all read daily about the tragedies of wars, mass shootings in elementary schools and concerts, or movies and soccer games, about all the people who have nowhere to go, stranded and desperate at the border of my country because my government won't let them in. And I feel terribly, terribly guilty about all of it. I feel responsible. My child lived when others' children have died. My experience is mild compared to any of those things. It's ordinary, everyday.

But grief is still grief. And near-death feels almost the same as death; for a while it *is* the same, when you don't know which way events will turn. When Dostoevsky faced his own mock execution with a sudden, staged pardon at the last minute all planned in advance by the tsar, the terror leading up to that moment was the same as if the pardon had never come. To the prisoners, it was a kind of death.

For a moment you're standing at the brink of universal darkness and despair. Then, when everything is over and death retreats, you're left with that experience, like an awkward bundle. Heavy. Damp, maybe, still leaking blood.

My confrontation with the possibility of my child's death changed me. And the death of the dove I'd just killed with my car pushed that old hurt forward, made me want to spread it out so I could see, explore it in a way that helped me understand something true about my life. About suffering. About guilt and awe. And connection.



Horror and holiness are sometimes the same.

The awfulness of any brush with death invites a kind of reverence, a sense of being shocked into understanding that life is both illogical and astonishing even though it's everywhere, sometimes manifesting itself in annoying ways: a cloud of mosquitos, a moth that eats your sweater, a biting fly. And all the numberless irritations that go with every human relationship.

There's a reverence that goes along with taking time to acknowledge past suffering, the terrible fact that one group of humans tried to stamp out another group of humans, treated them recklessly, harshly, like an imitation of life instead of the real thing. Walking across a bridge in a Holocaust museum through a room lined with rows upon rows of names of entire villages slaughtered and people murdered in Nazi concentration camps becomes a bruising awareness that you're facing something sacred in the fact of remembering and grieving those deaths.

A friend told me once that he'd overheard a mother in a bookstore telling her daughter not to read a book about the Holocaust because it was too depressing. It's a tempting approach to take with pain—our own and others'. Why should we keep horror fresh in front of us?

My pain was a small thing, really. I should let it go. It's odd how in the middle of wondering whether my child would live or die or change in some fundamental way—lose his sight, have his brain permanently damaged after being opened up, drained, and then closed again—odd

how the whole thing felt slightly familiar—déjà vu—how I felt the same sense of holiness and horror as I did walking across that bridge in the museum, and then again with the dove—each memory opening up, as if each of those things were fundamentally connected.

The universe expanding into infinity.

You sort of wish it could all go back to being small again.



I thought I remembered everything about that time, but now I wonder,
What have I blocked out, just as my son has, and what does that mean?
All the events fold up inside each other, as though happening simultaneously.
I try to fan them open, lay them out in order.

Eric called me up from a school trip to Lagoon, an amusement park, two hours after they'd left. "Can you come get me? I have a headache." He was fourteen, the park fifty-five miles away, and he'd been looking forward to this day for weeks, a reward from the school for good behavior or good grades. Or something.

"A headache? Still?" I remembered he went to bed with a little pain but said it was better that morning.

"Worse than last night. I lied so you'd let me go. It wasn't a little headache last night, either. It was pretty bad. It's okay. I just don't want to go on another rollercoaster."

When I drove the fifty-five miles up to Farmington, he was out in the parking lot waiting for me, alone. When I saw the way he sagged, the splotchy red of his face, how he slept all the way home, I thought about calling the doctor, and then I didn't. I mean, it was a headache. *Flu*, I thought. *Allergies, possibly*. Eric always had terrible spring allergies.

Three days later, with no other flu or allergy symptoms, I figured it had to be a migraine. The illogic of that still surprises me.

The phone call from Lagoon wasn't the beginning, I think now. It was the middle. How long had that headache been going on before he lied so he could ride on rollercoasters? I don't remember—don't remember when I called the doctor, either. I do remember calling my brother. Headaches run in my family. My dad remembers my grandfather having weekly Sunday headaches. When my sister was ten, she went temporarily blind because of a migraine. My daughter's headaches began in fifth grade. I have headaches and vision disturbances whenever my sleep patterns are off. And my brother has a long list of foods he won't eat because they trigger migraines. He's also a math professor—not that a PhD in math makes him a headache expert, but he's analytical and his migraines are frequent and debilitating. I knew he'd have studied up on the options.

“Do your migraines ever last three days?” I asked him.

“Sometimes. Not often.” He told me to try caffeine pills and Tylenol—or maybe he didn’t say Tylenol. I’m only sure about the caffeine because of what it did. I don’t know why I never considered the possibility that anything could be wrong other than the family migraine trait. Why didn’t I call the doctor?



An offering: My bishop asked me to give a talk in church that week, and I didn’t want to. I said yes because I didn’t have a decent reason to say no. For some reason, I spoke on adversity, but I wasn’t thinking of my own. I was thinking of my sister, going through her own trauma, and especially of a friend whose healthy sixteen-year-old died a few months before when flu turned into sepsis. The words I wrote and spoke in church felt like a gift—from God to me, from me to God, and to some people I loved who were hurting. Later I found my talk ironic. I couldn’t re-read it for a long time. I didn’t want to hear any lessons from myself about why adversity is good.

Eric missed my talk. He was home with a headache. He also missed a scuba-diving trip he had been looking forward to for a month. I wouldn’t let him go, but he didn’t want to anymore. Was that day three?

I remember things in threes. A three-day headache. A three-week headache. Going to three pediatricians we didn’t know three separate times because it was the weekend and our regular pediatricians were out of town. Three times the doctors doing neurological tests and finding nothing. Three diagnoses that matched my amateur one: a severe migraine lasting a strangely long time. I remember being utterly convinced and trying to convince the doctors, too: this was a migraine. I suspect myself of having persuaded all three to a false diagnosis. *The family trait has come out strong in my kid.* Of course it was a migraine—a terrible extended one. My daughter used to sleep with her head on a book instead of a pillow during headache episodes, I told the doctors. She sometimes moaned with pain, too. Sometimes she’d throw up. Headaches are horrible.

An image: thirty minutes after taking a caffeine pill, my son banging his head against the wall in his room, yelling and crying.

A second image: My son walking across the street and banging his head against the ground in the neighborhood park, thumping his fists on the grass, yelling and crying. Me walking him back across the street, helping him onto the couch.

Eric doesn’t remember any of this. He blinks at me, surprised, when I mention it, as if hearing a story about someone else. He tells me not to

talk about it, as if something in his subconscious is warning him, *Don't open that box*, but I can't stop remembering once I start. I keep thinking how I was the one who gave him the little pill that made him bang his head on the ground in the park.



I got on the phone with the doctor again after that. "Check him again," I said. "I think he's not okay."

They did and couldn't find anything. A Sunday after-hours clinic, a battery of simple neurological tests: eye-tracking, touching finger to nose, muscle strength, grip, balance. Everything normal. *Well, of course there isn't neurological damage*, I thought stupidly. *Can't anybody fix a two-week migraine around here?* The doctor suggested Excedrin. I shook my head. Excedrin contains caffeine. I was not going to watch that again.

On Tuesday one of our regular pediatricians finally got back in the office. I told him the whole story, and he admitted my son to the hospital. Bizarrely, even then I still didn't believe it was anything very serious, but I was glad they were checking him out.

I remember feeling clearheaded and calm, concerned but cerebral, detached, rational, practical. I kept a record of events, of what we'd done to treat it, who we'd gone to see, so I could talk to the doctors intelligently. Those notes are lost. Maybe I never wrote them. I can't find anything I've written about this time in any journal or diary. Yes, I am a writer, but I haven't kept a regular journal since high school. I write novels. Imaginary stuff. There's nothing to refer to when I try to dredge up memories.

A skeleton scene: the pediatrician crouching down beside me with the MRI films in the hospital room, showing me the balloon-space inside my son's skull—a baseball-sized cyst, he said.

Me: *Yes, it does look like a baseball. Inside my son's head. Why is there room for a baseball inside my son's head?*

Him: "It might be fine. People are born with cysts in their brains all the time and never know. See how his brain has grown around it?"

I knew—absolutely, clearly, rationally—it wasn't fine.

Another phone call two hours later: A neurological specialist had spotted fluid leaking into the outer cerebral membranes, putting pressure on the brain. We needed to move Eric to a specialty hospital immediately. They could send him in an ambulance, or I could drive him.



I listened to the sound my son made on his pillow for an hour as I drove him to Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake City.

Moan isn't the right word. I can't think of a better one. I was hearing something for which there isn't a word in my language. I search the thesaurus for alternatives: *groan, sough, wail, Keen, complain, squeak*.

Sough: a moaning, whistling or rushing sound, pronounced "suff"—which sounds like "suffering," but the sound coming out of my child was nothing like a whistle.

Keen: too high-pitched. *Moan*: too soft, with its slurry "m" and long open, rolling "o." *Groan* is better—that growl at the beginning—but the "o" rolls and softens what should be guttural, deeper, more awful. It's an Old English word, of Germanic origin. Possibly the stoic Saxons and their Anglo-American descendants didn't like to speak openly about their trauma.

Neither do I.

Detachment. Even as writers exploring our motives and experiences in personal essays, we admire restraint, understatement. Talking about pain feels sentimental, sappy, and, especially, whiny.

I am not detached. I am without the right words. A kind of muteness.



If I hadn't been so sure a leaking arachnoid cyst was a migraine, how many days of my child's pain might I have eliminated? Seven? Three? Fourteen? How much pain am I responsible for?



When you believe someone who should not die might be about to anyway, grief lays you out, spreads you flat. The universe has stuck its shoe on top of you, and you have nothing left to say to it. Your words have gone flat too. You feel you never had any words to begin with.

It's like the moment in a tour through a deep mountain cave when the forest service guide turns off the lights. You stand there and wait for your eyes to adjust, and when they do, you see only perfect dark, a kind of wall-wrapping absence of light around your face, neck, and body, there in the belly of the earth, underneath all things. Someone laughs because it's so awful, and for one minute you see how vulnerable you are.

The whole thing feels somehow beautiful too. Transcendent. Outside time.



You cradle the grief in your hands and rock it, like a wounded baby.



I don't want to write about any of this. It's not a big deal. Nobody died. Everyone's fine. I begin to type, then stop, go get a drink. I walk upstairs and walk back down. It's none of anyone's business.

An organ without stops. A high-school English teacher handed me that metaphor of myself because I wouldn't write about anything I felt without mocking it. A good image: all that potential force and air and sound, no way to express it. Maybe that's why I write fiction—then it's not me; it's just some character in some novel. An imaginary character can suffer too, but it's not my suffering, not exactly. I don't have to be vulnerable in the same way.

The main character in my current novel is mute.

I sit back down at my computer feeling raw.

I wonder if any language has a word that captures both the sound and sense of agony. Russian might, but I don't know enough of that language to say; I only know the noun that means pain, hurt, sickness: *bol*. The Russians know trauma, their literature an enormous dictionary of suffering. All those centuries of terror under the tsars, and then nearly another century under the communists—even the land, with its impossible cold, wraps the people in suffering. Cold Russian winters helped defeat both Napoleon and Hitler, while the Russians hung on, enduring. Russian writers have devoted entire novels to the idea of embracing suffering. Russians used to have suffering clubs, my Russian-teacher mom tells me. People could only belong if they'd gone through enough trauma. They compared their suffering, bragged about it, held it up like a hunting prize.

My mom smiles wryly. My dad got arrested within minutes of stepping over the border into Russia after a three-year mission to Finland during the late 1950s, and my parents lived for three years in Russia—first in Moscow, then in Siberia—as mission presidents supervising Church missionaries, one of whom was murdered in Ufa while they were there. My parents have had their taste of Russian cold, but these things are nothing that would get you into a Russian suffering club.



Once I heard a presentation by a writer who claimed books can heal traumatized children. He talked about mirror neurons that respond in an empathetic person's brain when they are shown the image of another person in pain—the empath's brain lighting up in the same place where the neurons light up in the injured person's. Writing can trigger that kind of empathetic response, he said, and bring about literal, physical healing for a child who reads about another child's trauma.

Laurie Sheck traces the origin of the word for empathy from a German word, *Einfühlung*, meaning “the ability to feel into.” “To feel into—which doesn’t mean to understand, or analyze, or interpret, or heal. Doesn’t mean to solve, define, make steady, claim knowledge of, but has something to do with drawing close, with how there’s a radiance more mysterious, more unspeakable than horror; more private in its wounds, more lasting.”¹

A mother cannot separate her child’s grief from her own. She “feels into” on a cellular level, in a primal way. Her blood once ran through his veins; the cells of his body began dividing inside hers; her life made his eyes, his liver, his skin, his hands, his brain with its neurons, now lighting up all over with crazy pain.

My child’s grief is mine. And then new grief layers over my borrowed grief because I know I don’t feel everything he feels and can’t take any of it away.

But Eric didn’t feel grief. He felt unspeakable physical pain. And I didn’t experience physical pain, except in the sense that emotional pain creates a physical response, a stab in the gut, a headache. Not his headache. My own.

His experience is something I can’t know. “The soul of another is a dark place,” Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin says in *The Idiot*.² We can none of us ever know another person’s experience. We can “feel into.” We can imagine. We can’t know.

I wonder if empathic healing can work backward. I picture my mirror neurons lighting up in my brain as I listen to that nameless sound, feel my brain reaching out to my child’s brain while fluid from a huge cyst leaks into his arachnoid membrane, pushing against soft, grey cerebral tissue, my neurons taking on that suffering, as though my taking it on could ease his a little, could take it away. Does it, just a tiny bit? I want it to, more than anything. The worst is hearing it as I drive, watching, not able to stop it.

I’d never heard of mirror neurons and empathic healing until long after that car ride, after the surgery, after Eric’s pain was gone, the wound healed, scar barely visible even if you’re searching.

When I remember, it all feels present.

Fenestration of arachnoid cyst is the name for what the doctors do, they inform me. This means they cut away a cookie-sized piece of skull,

1. Laurie Sheck, “Dostoyevsky’s Empathy,” *Paris Review*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/11/11/dostoevskys-empathy/>.

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, a new rendition by Anna Brailovsky, based on the Constance Garnett translation (New York: Random House, 2003), 247.

poke holes in the cyst, insert a drain, put all the pieces back together with metal plates and screws. I try not to think of Humpty Dumpty but can't help it.

I know in French *fenêtre* means “window,” so *fenestration* makes sense. Opening a window into the cyst so the leaking fluid has a place to go. They’re also fenestrating my son’s skull, opening a window into his head, which invites a range of implicit meanings, as if they’re planning an invasion of his private thoughts and feelings. *The soul of another is a dark place.*

The resident surgeon holds up her hands to show the size of the cookie she means: three, four inches in diameter, a Granny’s cookie, one of those huge homemade chocolate-chip discs. This is no Chips Ahoy.

Me: *Why are we comparing this to food?*

The resident surgeon is cheerful. “It’s a pretty common surgery. Should go well.”

I’m glad it’s not experimental, that the surgeons have done this many times before. But I’m bothered by her choice of words. “Common” makes it feel trivial. A nosebleed. A scraped knee. As if suffering is ordinary.

Which of course it is.

Eric doesn’t move, eyes closed—seemingly asleep. But as soon as the resident leaves, he says, outraged, “A cookie-sized piece of my *skull*?”

They keep testing his eyes. His vision is fine—a good sign, but if the pressure continues, he will go blind, then suffer other neurological damage. Death, eventually.

Everything should be fine. A common surgery. Not worth worrying about.

My husband is there by then, and Eric’s brother. They chat and joke, try to cheer him up. Eric lies still, eyes closed, concentrating. He can’t be present with us. He is visiting the Suffering Club.

Some neighbors call, and my mom, but I don’t want to speak to anyone. I keep thinking about my friend whose sixteen-year-old son died of flu in this same hospital, and I think, *This is what she felt*. Watching her son join the Suffering Club. Falling into a cave with the lights off. The universe squashing you with its shoe. I keep thinking, *Every human on earth experiences something like this sometime during their lives. Because death is a thing. It exists. It’s common. Universal.*

I think of Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov, who couldn’t believe in God because children suffer. My mirror neurons are going crazy. Suddenly I’m crying for the suffering of all children, for my child, for all suffering mothers, for the common suffering of the human race. And for my

myself, because I have to suffer, too. I sit in the hospital room and try not to let anyone see me sob.

I had forgotten that part until I wrote it just now.



And then it was over. Nobody died. Nobody went blind. The doctors put my child back together with metal plates and screws—forget Humpty Dumpty. He came out of surgery with half his head shaved and a drain coming out of his skull through crisscrossing stitches. Eric thinks he looks like an alien, like Frankenstein's monster.

Sometimes joy after grief looks like Frankenstein's monster.

Three days after coming home from the hospital, Eric had a seizure, banging his head against the kitchen floor, over and over, couldn't stop. I was gone, running some errand; his sister, Carrie, out of the room, so he went through it alone. He doesn't remember that, either, but his sister does. Carrie's eyes still fill up when she remembers and tells me about it.

Mirror neurons.

Here's what Eric remembers: a summer of no biking, running, swimming, playing ball, jumping on trampolines, or getting on a longboard—how frustrating that was, how he hated everything. He remembers the huge red picture of the cartoon Tasmanian Devil that hung straight across from his hospital bed, all fierce and full of teeth, like a metaphor, and how he made us cover it up with a sheet so he wouldn't have to look at it. I remember laughing at his grumpiness, cheerful because he was alive and getting better. I remember in the hospital two days after the surgery the anxiety of watching my bright fourteen-year-old struggle to put together a simple child's puzzle, and then how six months later he was up on the mountain, skiing, and a couple of years after that, earning A-grades in chemistry and physics, and how they didn't feel like just a couple of As. They felt like morning sun cresting the mountains.

It wasn't death. It only looked like death for a minute, and then death said, "Never mind, I'll leave you with some scars and metal in your skull instead. A decent trade."

Eric is glad he has forgotten. He vaguely remembers something about a cookie-sized piece of skull and incredible pain and knows he doesn't want to go there, even now. He doesn't want to talk about it, doesn't want me to talk about it, wants it not to have happened.

But it feels as if I've opened a window of my own, a *fenêtre*, fenestrating my head to let something out, and maybe something in. Understanding, light, a sense of connecting to something larger, to the suffering of the world.



In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's beloved Father Zosima tells how his dying brother got up every morning and apologized to the birds, because, he explained, if he were only a better person, the world would be a better place for that bird, for all birds, for all humans everywhere. We are all guilty before everyone and everything, he says joyfully, before "each and all," a phrase Dostoevsky's characters repeat again and again, as they find joy in the face of their own suffering. In other words, embracing suffering allows a kind of transcendence of it, like a firebird reborn from ashes, flying across the sky in a glitter of hope. As if saying, yes, to love is to suffer, and to embrace suffering is to embrace connection, and to love and be vulnerable and feel connected to someone else—to everyone else—is to begin to live. To walk through a Holocaust memorial to another people's agony and weep on their behalf is to turn that awful wrongness into a kind of redemption. "Any man's death diminishes me," John Donne famously said. But maybe it's more like, "My willingness to suffer enlarges me." Or simply, "Blessed are they that mourn," as Jesus said, a reminder of the connection between grief and love, that all our sorrow for another person matters.

Suffering, pain, grief, joy, horror, holiness, awe: These things mysteriously link and wrap around each other like vines, tree roots, mold, and moss in a forest ecosystem. And wrap around us. Grieving together in a kind of holy communion with the whole earth, with "each and all."



I am still haunted by that dove.

The image feels both gruesome and deeply holy, a small symbol of the Suffering Club of the world.

I pause, holding my son's pain again for a minute. Rocking mine because I can see it needs to be taken out and rocked. The image of the dove stays in front of my eyes, beautiful, awful, carrying with it a sense, almost, of having stepped outside time: A spray of pink and white petals and dove-grey feathers, flying up in a cloud in front of my windshield. A line of light—real or imagined—tracing the shape of the mountain. A fanned and bloodied wing.