Robert's Story

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SYMBIOTIC SYMPHONY

Lauren Roberts

Face after face
Hands intercourse with hands
Smiles and teeth leaking
Out of lips bursting with warmth
Step to follow step
Shoulders melting to shoulders
Knees bent to fit two
A root in a stone
Bodies opening and closing
Expanding and pulling
Accepting and then pushing
A root in a stone
Splitting and creating
Binding and breaking
Face after face

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Sara Bonacum

Over the last couple of semesters this senior thesis project has been a challenge of a lifetime. The problem was never writer’s block, or even narrowing down my subject. I had decided early on to attempt a creative writing project that reflected my highest point of interest in literature: existentialism. The problem rested in the fact that I completely disagreed with the notion of existentialism itself. Coming to terms with being in love with a certain genre of literature, but disagreeing with the overall point of it was difficult. Trying to find a way to manifest my views through a humanistic story was even more arduous.

My thesis changed shape so many times, in so many ways that at times I was unsure if it would ever solidify into exactly what I wanted it to say. Now that my last semester of undergraduate study is coming to a close, my thesis has finally taken shape. It is a series of four short stories that appear to be unconnected, but turn out to be intertwined with each other, as the characters passively and unknowingly have an impact on each other’s lives.

These stories, when linked together, serve the purpose of trying to prove that the existential feelings of purposelessness that individuals feel during the course of their lives are in themselves a farce. The truth that I am trying to convey through this project is that purpose in life often hides from our sight, but exists in reality as much as we do. “Robert’s Story” is the last story featured in my thesis project.
Sitting in his car, Robert watched as the sun burned an invisible hole through the windshield of his car. The parking meter in front of him had a digital screen, and it flashed the word "Empty" at him. He stared at that word and wondered exactly when everything had gone digital. He felt that somehow the world had begun to spin faster than he could walk, and he had been left behind, working his stiff legs hard to catch up. For being nearly eighty, his eyes were still surprisingly clear when the doctor looked at them, and his heart pumped as healthy as an eighteen-year old. With one shaking hand, where skin sagged hopelessly from fingers, and knuckles and palms, he covered his young heart. He raised his other hand and tried to shield his youthful eyes from the images of Lily that kept invading the scene before him. In most of them she was laughing. She would throw her head back and open her mouth. Her uneven teeth would bear themselves to the world, as if they were their own proclamation of imperfect beauty. She had always laughed like that, especially after she cracked those silly jokes that were only funny to her. She had this way of letting everyone know what she was thinking and feeling just by the way she would move her eyes and her lips. She had a way of saying "thank you" that made you want to give her so much more. She had a way of saying "sorry" that made you want to forgive everything that she could ever do. Robert remembered the way that she used to eat ice cream. She was like a child that had never tasted it before. She would throw that head back, threatening her laugh, and moan as if she was tasting it for the first time. "God, this is Heaven," she would say, and the kids would laugh and mimic her. Tilting their heads back, they would groan, "Oh! Oh! Oh my GOD!" and lick their scoop of ice cream. It had irritated him at the time, but she would just laugh with their cruel imitations, tilt forward and touch her forehead to one of them. It must have been their secret joke because all they found it so funny.

He could see her, at that moment, pregnant and fat, huge belly pushing the blankets of the bed upward, the spine of a book cracked and bent in her hand, while her other hand held the core of an apple. "Please, I need more apples," she would beg him. It was snowing then, and apples were out of season, expensive. But he would sigh, and she would watch and smile with her crooked teeth while he piled on scarf and jacket and hat to go get more apples so that she could finish her book.

Most of all, he remembered the way it felt to have her sleep beside him. He would wake in the night and wonder if he was dead. He would look at the window of the bedroom and stare at the curtains, and fall victim to the way she always insisted on having the window cracked to let in fresh air, realizing that it really was nice on these summer evenings. The curtains would billow out, and then suck back in, and Robert remembered wondering if that was God breathing in his own bedroom. His eyes would burn, the dry climate taunting him to close them again, and he remembered the one time that he remembered the gentle sound of a breath stronger than the one that moved his curtains. Hers. Looking at her in the dark he could see everything. Every feature was accentuated by the shadows that haunted their matrimonial bedroom. Her pillow burned with her hot breath and the warmth of her face, and in this memory, Robert opened his mouth and cried alone in a maroon Pontiac sedan. "Empty" taunted his grief and he reacted. Pushing the car door open, his not-so-young legs stumbled down the bank to the sandy beach. The ocean roared and he sat down to think and fondle the bottle of pills with her name printed so boldly on it in his pocket. A young girl walked by, and all he could think was that she had her whole life before her. She was young and beautiful, just like his wife had been...before the first stroke. She walked on, and Robert thought about the way that Lily hadn't been able to walk after awhile. The ocean, so capable, could run in and out and up and down the sand, but Lily couldn't take herself to the bathroom. The stroke had incapacitated the left side of her body...the hand that she held books with, the one that she used to crack their spines, was curled at her side and useless. He thought of that hand and the way that it laid there, contacted, the fingers curling in toward her palm, and how he had to clip those nails so that they wouldn't cut her while her fingers rebelled. As if her hand held an invisible string connected to the left side of her mouth, Lily smiled sideways then. She would look up at him, and smile, so proud when he read cheesy Hallmark "get well" cards to her from her kids, and signed in crayon from grandkids. The truth is that Robert wondered where they were when she was re-learning to tie her shoes, and pull up her pants after going to the bathroom and brushing her teeth. They had put her in a home.

The second stroke came soon after the first. It robbed her of the other side of her body. Robert couldn't help her anymore. He couldn't lift her from the bed into a chair, or from a chair onto the toilet, from the toilet to the bathtub, from the bathtub to a chair. But he was there at meal times. He would spoon mashed-up peas and blended steak into her sagging mouth, and a few times he looked into her eyes while they welled up with tears. She couldn't talk but in her way they told him of her grief.

The third stroke hit and the doctor put in a feeding tube. He cut a hole in the very place on her belly that Robert had kissed so many times, and a tube stuck out where it was red and sore to feed her. He remembered the way that he had leaned forward toward her belly this last time. His lips were old and chapped, and her belly was wrinkled and sore, and he had kissed the place where the tube was coming from. The nurses had put a special chair beside her bed for him to sit in and he cracked spines, ate apples, and read her books, even though her eyes were clouded, unresponsive and sad. He went every day to her side, and then today she was gone. He was careful to take an old bottle of Oxycontin from the cabinet that had been hers, for pain, and bring it in his pocket to this beach. He forced his eighty-year old limbs to walk, and he continued down the beach with the bottle in his hand. Stopping for a moment, he looked at her name...
and gripped it tighter. He was going to take the whole damn thing, and find her, wherever she was, in that place where her hands weren’t curled in and her smile was flawed, beautiful and wide again. She was going to uncurl those fists and reach out to him, and wrap those arms around him, and whisper in his ear, “I need more apples.”

As he contemplated unscrewing the childproof lid, a glimmer in the surf caught his eye. Forcing his stiff legs forward, he worked his way into the edge of the wet foam and bent to find a penny rolling with the heartbeat of the water. He lifted it from its watery grave in his wrinkled hands. It sat in the late sun among a palm of sand and shone, cleansed by salt.

Robert remembered then the first time he was on this beach fifty-five years previous, and it was with her. He had kept an old and corroded penny in his pocket for as long as he could remember then, and was convinced that it was lucky after years of victorious baseball games and passed tests. He remembered Lily’s hair, long and dark, embraced by the wind and reaching back to it in an erotic dance, while the sun had leant down with its bright ribbons to crown her his queen. He was poor then and had reached into his pocket and fingered his lucky penny on this evening when he needed luck the most. He had uncurled her delicate hand and placed that penny in her palm, saying, “I’m not rich now, but someday I will be, and I will give you everything that you deserve if you will be my wife. I will make you the most wealthy woman in the world and work to make all of your dreams come true.” Lily had thrown her head back in her way and laughed. Its sound bounced of the sun and hit the water, only to make its way back to his forever-young heart. “I don’t need money; I just want you to feed me apple sauce and read me books when I’m old and can’t do it myself.”

Robert dropped the bottle, pocketed the penny, determined to give it to his grandson, and walked back to his car. The “empty” sign wasn’t flashing on the parking meter anymore. Someone had bought him some time.