

Be patient toward all that is unsolved
in your heart and . . .
try to love the questions themselves. . . .
Do not now seek the answers, which
cannot be given you
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without
noticing it,
live along some distant day into the answer.
Rainer Maria Rilke

Waking Up Bees

STORIES OF
LIVING
LIFE'S
QUESTIONS

JERRY DAOUST

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Waking Up Bees

STORIES OF LIVING LIFE'S QUESTIONS

Mountains of the Moon

STORIES ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE



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All Passages by Water Lead Home

Look, Jim! It's more cool bovine scenery," Annie, who had just taken over driving, said cheerfully. I glanced up from the map I was studying (being in the navigator's seat) and Zoe popped up in the back where she had been curled up on sleeping bags and pillows, trying to catch forty winks.

"Moo, moo, little cows," Annie said. "Moo, moo."

"Since when are there cows in South Carolina?" Zoe said, pulling her black stocking cap up over her eyes. She was dying of cancer, and her hair hadn't grown back since she stopped chemotherapy. Back in Minnesota it was the middle of a winter so cold it would make the snot in your nose freeze solid, so she wore lots of hats. The black stocking cap was the warmest, but it made her look like a mobster. Fortunately, when she went to public places she wore a black beret, which at least made her look intellectual. "I thought South Carolina was known for peaches," she said.

"No, that's Georgia," I said. "Haven't you ever heard that song, 'My Georgia Peach'?"

"Is that by the Smashing Pumpkins?" Zoe asked, to be silly—she knew better. Zoe

knew all kinds of music. She could even sing operas by heart. She had sung *La Traviata* all the way through the deep blue shades of Missouri landscapes the night before, to keep awake at the wheel.

“Pumpkins are the official fruit of Indiana,” Annie said.

“This car smells like pumpkins,” I said, because it had that funky smell that comes with long trips—Doritos, stale pop and stale breath, ripe fruit, and sweat. We’d been on the road almost twenty-four hours straight with no sleep. That’s the only way to travel, though, when you’re in college and too poor for airplanes and motels, and too hungry for the road to let mere poverty stop you from getting on it and flinging yourself as far down it as you can. What else did God make all-night restaurants like Denny’s and Perkins and Happy Chef for?

I was trying to figure out where we were, but I couldn’t match up the little two-lane highway we were on with the map. That we were lost didn’t surprise me, since we were penetrating foreign territory—none of us had been to the Deep South before, and it seemed to hold us as enchanted as newborn infants wide-eyed at a new world: all the kudzu hanging from the trees like green veils. The old barns weathered down to gray wood, listing to the side like sinking ships.

The round, warm vowels of the language. The decades-old Coca-Cola machines at small-town gas stations that gave us real glass bottles. The Civil War monuments littering the landscape everywhere.

I gave up on the map and folded it up. “Well, children, I think we’re lost,” I announced. “Maybe we should ask for directions.”

Annie peered out from under her ever-present baseball cap at the sun. “Nah, as long as we’re headed generally in the right direction, we’ll hit the ocean eventually,” she said. “Life is so much more interesting when you don’t know where you’re going, right?” She gave me a wicked look.

She was being sarcastic. During the night we’d fallen into a long, serious conversation about what we’d do after we graduated from college in a mere three months. None of us had a clue. You don’t just go to the registration office and sign up for the rest of your life; there’s no course syllabus or class requirement. Just time and space stretching out before you like a blank canvas or an empty page. What do you do with all of that? We felt like birds getting pushed out of the nest, or little kids getting thrown in the deep end of the pool: fall or fly, sink or swim.

“It scares me witless,” Annie had said.

“Well, look at it this way,” I’d told her philosophically, “not knowing where you’re going in life makes it more interesting.”

“Ha,” she said. “I’ll remember to use that on my parents next time they ask me what my plans are. Oh, and the bank I got my loans from, too. ‘Isn’t this interesting?’ That’s what I’ll tell them when I default on the loan. Thanks, Jim.”

It was Zoe who had suggested the trip in the first place, bringing it up late one night at the university newspaper where we had all toiled together for the past four years. We always had interesting conversations there, about relationships and politics and art and religion, especially on the late nights when we were all a little wired from too much coffee and pizza. We’d been talking about the journey of life or something, and Zoe said we should go on a real journey, and when that got our attention, she said she wanted to see the ocean since she had never seen it before.

“It’s on my list of things to do before I die, seeing the ocean is,” she’d said.

“You are not going to die,” I told her. Zoe had a strong streak of melodramatic romanticism, which I figured came from writing too much poetry. “You are twenty-one years old.”

“You’ve never seen her driving,” Annie deadpanned without even looking up from her computer screen.

Of course, wouldn’t you know Zoe was diagnosed with cancer later that year. How ironic. At the newspaper we joked about it; our strategy was to keep her spirits up by being lighthearted instead of all heavy and serious. But then her hair fell out, and she kept getting thinner and paler, until all that shaped her face was her bony skull, and we stopped talking about it altogether. But we made very sure she got to go on her trip to the sea.

Now that we were within a few minutes’ drive of the ocean, Zoe was getting all hyper about it.

“I personally don’t see what the big deal is,” I said. “It’s just a lot of water, like any of the lakes you see lying around back home, except so big you can’t see the other side.”

“No,” Zoe said. “The ocean is the birthplace of all life on earth, including our own species. It’s like the womb for the whole biosphere. There’s something in us that longs to return to the sea.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not me. I hate swimming. I hate taking baths, even.”

“Return to the sea,” Zoe continued, not listening to me (as usual). “Think of all those people who didn’t make it across. I’ll bet there’s enough of them down there to make a whole country of drowned people.”

“Eww,” Annie said.

“My great-great-grandma was only nineteen when she came over,” Zoe said. “Of course, she had to come, because otherwise she would have starved. It was the great potato famine in Ireland that made her come. Our country is populated with the descendants of all those millions of people who risked their lives coming over the ocean, to a place they’d never seen before, to make new lives.” Zoe was silent for a long moment, resting her chin on the back of the car seat. “The water giveth life, and it taketh life,” she said.

“Amen,” Annie said, nodding.

“We’ll get some salt-spray-scented air into you, Jim, and that’ll cure you,” Zoe said. “You’ll see the poetry of the ocean.”

When we got to the empty parking lot near the state park beach, it was a lot cooler, especially with the strong wind. We put our winter coats on. Grassy sand dunes blocked our view of the water. Zoe charged ahead, slipping in the sand occasionally. When she got to the top, she let out a whoop.

“Bonzai!” she yelled, and disappeared down the other side.

“She’s not going swimming—is she?” I asked Annie, but she was already running after Zoe.

When I got to the top of the dune, I saw that Zoe wasn’t going to run into the ocean after all. She’d taken off her shoes and was cautiously walking out where waves slid across the flat sand like tongues, leaving it so glassy-wet that I could see her reflection. Annie took a picture of Zoe ankle-deep in the water.

From the top of the dune, I looked out over the empty water, which was a sort of steel-blue color interrupted by flecks of white all the way out to the flat horizon. There weren’t any boats or islands or anything out there. It was as forlorn as a desert, except of course there was all that water. And under the water, a whole world of millions of strange living things, and un-explored mountains and plains, and the shipwrecks of people who hadn’t made it to the other end of the ocean. Walking along the beach, Zoe and Annie looked so small compared to the vastness of half the world stretching out behind them.

We pulled blankets and sleeping bags and food and Zoe’s boom box out of the car and set up headquarters on the beach. We were planning to spend the night there, sleeping under the stars. There was no one else to bother us, except some gulls that Annie encouraged by tossing pieces of stale rolls out onto the sand, which attracted even more

gulls. Pretty soon it looked like a scene from *The Birds*, there were so many gulls hovering around us.

We roamed the beach hunting for dry driftwood to make a fire with, and picked up some interesting seashells along the way. Zoe said she would make necklaces for her little sisters. For supper we made baked potatoes and vegetable stew over the fire, and brought out cheese and crackers and wine and avocados. Annie put on a tape of some jazz music, and we were in fine shape.

"I am warm and happy," Zoe said, eating a piece of avocado. She was wrapped up in a heavy wool blanket, and had a scarf wrapped around her head to keep the wind out of her ears. She smiled at us; Annie and I smiled back.

"You look like a babushka," Annie said.

The sun set behind us, orange-like, through the grasses of the dunes, and the sky above the water grew darker.

"Thank you for coming on this trip with me," Zoe said. "I could never have made the trip myself, without someone to take over the driving. Not that I would have wanted to—I mean, it wouldn't have been as much fun if I had traveled by myself."

"Of course, if you'd gone by yourself, you wouldn't have had to put up with Jim's annoying music," Annie said.

"Or Annie's snoring," I said.

"Shush," Annie said, slapping my arm with a mitten.

"No, it's better to travel together," Zoe said. "We need each other."

I leaned back to look at the darkening sky; I could make out the first stars there. I thought of *The Lion King*—stars being the souls of dead people or something like that. It was hard to comprehend Zoe as a star, though, a sharp little quiet piece of light. If she had her way, she'd be an exploding star, a supernova. Actually, if she had her way, she'd keep on living. Her pale presence so close on that beach—the blood and the breath moving in her like the waters of the ocean, her quick eyes, her songs, all the things she could spin with her hands and her heart—all of that burned with greater brightness than any of those faraway stars. And if a star fell from the sky, who would miss it? The universe is piled deep with them, and they all look alike from this far away. But when Zoe fell from the earth, there would be no getting her back. It made me mad at God, for taking away her life just as the most interesting part was coming up. I imagined God as someone who gives a kid a present, then smashes it to pieces.

"I never did like *The Lion King*," I said, breaking the long silence.

“What?” Annie said, frowning as if I’d sworn or spoken some blasphemy.

“So now that we’re here at the edge of the ocean, what do we do?” I asked, to change the subject.

“If I had a boat, I would sail across it,” Zoe said.

“I wouldn’t,” Annie said. “I’d be too afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Zoe asked blandly.

“Getting lost. Drowning.”

“Drifting out there without any drinkable water for weeks on end is what you should be afraid of—a slow death like that,” Zoe said. She poured herself more wine. “I should build a boat and sail across the ocean.”

“Where would you go?” I asked.

“You can go almost anywhere by water,” Zoe said. “Where to begin? I would go to the island of Pohnpei, where the yams grow ten feet long and the grasshoppers get as big as chickens, and the schoolchildren use giant pandanus leaves for umbrellas. In the 1800s, whaling ships stopped going there for provisions because so many men would desert that no one was left to sail the ships home.

“I would go to Glacier Bay to climb blue mountains of ice at the height of summer, when the sun never sets. I would take my boat to India, where I would learn to play the sitar. Maybe I would devote my life to

teaching poor children in Calcutta to read and write Bengali.

“No, I would compete in the America’s Cup sailing race without officially entering. Or maybe I would sail to Venice, where the cats own the city because there are no cars to run them over, and I could sing opera on the Bridge of Sighs. I would make friends with stamp collectors everywhere I went, and send postcards to all of them from every country I visited. And there’s all of the South American coast, too, which is much closer to here. I could go to the Galapagos Islands and ride giant turtles for fun, or study new plant species and discover a cure . . .”

She pulled up short, as if she hadn’t meant to bring that subject up with us—but how could we not think about it, as she sat there listing all those things she would never do? In the awkward silence, we heard the ocean breathe. She looked up at us. Her eyes were so big in her pale face, lit in several water-colored shades of yellow by the fire. She smiled like a ghost.

“The good thing about dying from cancer is that, in the good moments, it wakes you up more alive than most people ever are in a lifetime. God scatters us across the earth like so many mustard seeds, hoping we’ll live the abundant life. God puts on this amazing dance act, this three-ring circus, this traveling

magic performance”—she extended an open hand toward the water and the world beyond, “and what do we do? We all watch television and miss the show.”

I had never heard Zoe give a speech like that before, and her earnestness embarrassed me, a little. I thought she might be slightly drunk from the wine. Or maybe being so close to death made her bold.

I saw tears on Annie’s face. Zoe looked over, too, and she moved to cup Annie’s cheeks with mittened hands.

“Don’t cry,” Zoe said. “Not for me. I know where I’m going. Just because you can’t see to the other end of the ocean doesn’t mean there isn’t another shore all ships come to, right? We look out across the water and we don’t see it, but only because we can’t see that far. But we don’t believe anymore that if we sail over the horizon, we’ll fall off the end of the earth. I can smell it, Annie, like sailors on a ship can smell land ahead in the dark. It’s there.”

She leaned forward a little and kissed Annie on the forehead. “Don’t be afraid; God is with you. Be brave. Explore everything. And don’t watch too much television.”

“But I’ll sure miss watching old reruns of *Friends*,” Annie teased, smiling a little and pushing away the tears with the palms of her hands.

“Make real friends instead.”

That night all of us huddled together in our sleeping bags, trying to stay warm on that cold beach by the sea under the bright, bright moon. Zoe and Annie seemed to sleep soundly, but I kept drifting in and out of dreams. I think the rhythmic noise of the waves washing onto shore kept me awake, plus I worried that the tide would come in and drown us. Was the tide coming in or out tonight? I didn’t know.

We were on the edge of new territory, each of us ready to go our own way—Annie and I out into what people referred to as the real world, Zoe out into another world entirely. The real “real world.” The new world. A place I hoped Annie and I would come to at the end of our journey. We were on the edge of new territory, ready to step out, and nothing would be the same for us again.

Hush, hush, the waves seemed to say.

Zoe turned over and kicked me. “Move,” she mumbled. “You’re squashing me.”

I made some more room, and fell asleep under the sound of their breathing, and that of the ocean.