photo by Theodore Van Alst

STILL SO MUCH TO SAY

by Jeff P. Jones

All weal, all woe — Faust

Out my window to the south, Paradise Ridge swims up from a sea of rolling hills like a giant whale in search of breath. Snow rings collar the hills in white, but the ridge, from its dorsal hump to its trailing flukes, rises as a green enormity out of the deep into the pale sky. It's late winter on the Palouse in northern Idaho. I hold my newborn son Gibson at the window and like to imagine that he can see something of the ridge, maybe a dark shape set off against the light.

I haven't hiked it since before he was born, but I know what a day like this among the cedar and pine would bring: deer tracks and coyote scat and knee-deep plunges into cakes of snow. On the summit the view would open onto a patchwork of appaloosa curviforms. If you look long enough from up there, you can see the land's own fiery birth eons ago, when this place was a shattered black puzzle floating in red liquid and the ridge—a granodioritic holdout—islanded above a steaming lavascape.

When my wife was 34 she had a miscarriage, and we followed that with a seemingly endless pursuit of what became the ever-elusive plus sign. In wanting to be a father, I had hubristically fashioned myself a Faustian seeker of more life, had taken Faust's cry to know *all human weal, all human woe* as a motto to counter the deadening thirties. The urge only amplified with age. So, yes, years of planning and second-guessing and calendar-driven sex. When we hit our forties, we decided to stop trying.

And then this: this life, this tiny face, these new fears.

The first-up wildflowers on the ridge come spring will be the blue-eyed grass; the yellow bells and sage buttercups follow, then the woodland stars. Hailstones will lie scattered among the rocks: stunted clumps of Brandegee's onion. Snowmelt runnels will peel earthen sheets from the sides of sodden banks. Then the camas will bloom, along with the larkspur, lupine, and prairie smoke.

In summer the trail grows dusty. I carry water for the dog that he laps from my cupped hands. To escape the heat, we hike evenings. Stepping down through a pine draw near the summit, I find my favorite boulder with its western sky panorama. If I've thought ahead, I have a cigar. I'm no connoisseur, but once in a while I indulge in the cinder's crackle, the trace of warmth. Shamans in the Upper Amazon blow tobacco smoke into a person's body through the crown of the skull, and I wonder how my sister Paula, who traveled to Peru for a healing ceremony for her forty-ninth birthday, negotiated that part of the ritual. She was asthmatic, kept a sign in her living room with the no-smoking icon captioned in red letters: "This means you, motherfucker."

If I stay too long, the light's gone on the hike out, and I have to trust to instinct and blind luck as I stumble down the slopes with the dog's jingling collar as a guide.

Come fall the grass turns yellow. An invisible hand flattens then lifts it. At the midway flats, I once startled a rafter of wild turkeys. On another hike, higher up, an enormous bull elk stood silhouetted atop the ridgeline, crown of antlers and all, and so still he looked like a carving.

Ages ago, long after the lava fields had hardened and been blanketed in Aeolian loess, an ice dam collapsed in the far north. A wave ten stories high scraped this place clean. Sometimes on hikes I see saber tooth tigers and mastodons clawing their way up the slopes while their young bellow down below and slip beneath the glacial tide.

On the summit are mima mounds the shape and size of a buried car, their origins a scientific riddle. And there's a patch of ballhead waterleaf that's nothing much usually, but if the end-of-day sunlight hits them just right, their feathery seed shells glow like candles. I have seen this.

The fall fires blossom, and smoke paints the western sky in shamelessly sentimental colors—tangerine, pink, purple—and sometimes a blazing scarlet that climbs off the horizon in a fountain of red. Then it's winter, and the fires are out, and the dog and I walk through the delicate first flakes, pushing upward and making eye contact at trail crossings. When Gibson's a little older this summer, I'll carry him in the chest sling on his first hike up the ridge.

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One day last year while climbing the ridge, I got the idea to send Paula a text. Her suicide just shy of her fiftieth birthday threw open an invisible trapdoor under my feet. The only thing besides drinking that brought any semblance of solace was the ridge. I hiked it obsessively, almost every day. Eventually, the landowner put up No Trespassing signs on the trail I liked, so I had to find another route.

I refused to write about her death or speak of it unless absolutely necessary. Instead, I built a routine. Home from work, dog in the truck, fifteen minutes to the trailhead, forty-five to the top. I could look out my living room window, spot the summit, and know, within the hour, I could bring that faraway place close. The steep trail up the whale's back, the blood filling and flushing, the solitude, the rolling toplands—

More time, people said. You just need more time.

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In my favorite picture of my sister, she's standing in the crotch of a low-limbed tree, laughing as she reaches to help her dog Buzz climb up with her. She's got her long straight hair pulled back into a pony tail and a red bandana tied around her head, a cut-off t-shirt curling at the edges, and purple shorts. Small teeth sit inside her wide smile. She looks strikingly like Janis Joplin, whose enormous poster image—bespectacled in round purple shades and all—also hung in Paula's living room.

Paula died where she lived for twenty years, in Galveston, Texas. She left me her house, a two-bedroom bungalow that she'd gutted after it took three feet of water in Hurricane Ike, Katrina's forgotten coda. From three thousand miles away, I managed her affairs, trying, with my father, to finish the remodel she'd run out of money for. The weeks were filled with emails and calls; speaking with contractors, lawyers, property managers, Paula's friends; filing her taxes, paying bills, making explanations to various officials who were always too emotionless or too sentimental.

All the while, a stunned anger, hot and constant, burned inside me—anger at her impulsivity, her lack of pluck, her betrayal. It fueled my estate duties with a grim fervor. On the ridge hike I often berated her.

"What were you thinking, Paula?"

"You weren't thinking, were you?"

"How could you do this?"

But this day on the ridge, something shifted, and where the anger normally simmered, I felt an emptiness, the presence of her absence. I stopped and typed a simple message into my phone, and sent it to her number.

I miss you so much, Paula - I love you.

A few minutes later, almost at the summit, my phone chimed. My pulse quickened. My mind, unbidden, flashed on Paula's belief that human life is merely a fragment of a much larger universal existence, that our bodies are imperfect containers limiting our great spiritual potential.

In her Peru journal she records the visions she had while taking the psychoactive brew ayahuasca under a shaman's guidance. In her first ceremony, after a journey through a maddening repetition of geometric forms, she makes it to "spirit," where, she writes, "I knew that spirit is reality & our lives are not reality, but I wanted to stay in my life & they said then stay. When I'd forget that I wanted to stay, I would think about Jeff." And a bit later: "There were times that I didn't think I was coming back."

Though twelve years separated us, that barrier lessened with age. In her forties, my thirties, we talked more. Flew out to visit each other. Found similar tastes in politics, music, sports. In her last decade we became the closest pair among our five siblings. In 2004, we went to New Orleans for what turned out to be the last Mardi Gras before Katrina. She kissed a woman she'd just met on Bourbon Street, long and deep, as a gaggle of pervy guys surrounded them with cameras and I stood awkwardly by.

She had an impulsive, dynamic energy. After Ike, she went in with a wrecking bar and saber saw and ripped out her walls and floors. My father, my brother, and I each flew down at different times to help her with the remodel, but mostly she did it herself after work and on weekends. She'd been a helicopter mechanic in the army and a medical equipment technician by profession. At the same time, she neglected work on her house to help friends with their remodels, which was so Paula. In Denver once she missed a family dinner because she stopped for a woman whose car had broken down, diagnosed the problem, drove her to the parts store, made

the repair, then bragged only about how much money she'd saved the lady. Her favorite hat was a faded green baseball cap with the logo *Life is Good*.

Though she, like I, rejected the fundamentalist Christianity in which we'd been raised, she grew to be a very spiritual person and came to believe that the force behind the universe is essentially good—and responsive, if you knew how to ask. On visits to Galveston I'd glimpse her sitting on her bed, dowsing with a crystal over a chart. I keep one of these charts that I found in her closet after her death. Among a list of thirty-six terms are these: *Forces of light, Galaxial web, Instruments of injury*.

More pieces to the puzzle.

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In the time it took me to open my phone, I had already imbued the response with disproportional meaning. How could I not? As crazy as it sounds, I already thought of the pending text as Paula's voice from beyond the grave. She hadn't come to me in dreams, and this bothered me. She believed so strongly in the afterlife that if anyone could find a way back, I reasoned, it'd be her. But at least now I'd have this message.

I love, too – Jose.

I read the text over and over, interpreted it every way possible. Jose loves Paula, whomever she is. Jose loves me, the sender. Jose simply loves.

Her cell number, clearly, had been repurposed. I pictured a man in a pickup somewhere outside of Houston, stopped at a gas station, maybe, and weary from a day's work, a cold drink pinched between his knees as he delayed the drive home long enough to respond to a stranger's misdirected text. Of course, maybe he meant it as a joke, too—maybe that pickup was filled with a chortling work crew—but that's not how I took it.

I still believe that Paula resides in Jose's message. The light and the affirming love she so often spoke about in her last years seems, to me, evident.

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Days when northern harriers were out, circling the summit, I'd watch them carve around invisible currents. Isn't each life formed from chance, each moment even? A footfall startles a hen and her poults follow, a cotyledon unfurls beside a rock where a seed happened to fall the year before, an elk goes spell-rapt still, a flower blooms on this day, a moose vanishes into the brush: moments built on a thousand whims.

All that last week of Paula's life, I had meant to call her. Had thought about it each day and simply never made the time. We saw each other the weekend before at a family funeral but parted poorly, failing even to say goodbye. She had stung me with a passing remark, and I was trying to negotiate how to reconnect without losing face. Clearly, I had no idea about her state of mind or brewing work crisis, but a simple question—hey, what's up?—would've incited a conversation. Then came the Thursday night phone call from my father that sprung the trapdoor. I stood there holding the phone against my ear as the walls of my own pettiness rose up and swallowed me.

In Dying to Be Free, Beverly Cobain, Kurt's aunt, writes that her suicide attempt was prevented by chance when, at the minute she'd preordained for her final act, she mistakenly picked up the phone instead of the pistol. She reports other suicides waylaid by happenstance, a passage in a book, a stranger stopping to help, a phone call.

Had I reached out to Paula in that last week, I'm convinced that I would've sensed how bad things had gotten. It turned out that, upon her return from the family funeral, she thought she was going to be fired for taking too much personal time. I could've short-circuited her plans, at least for a while—of this I'm certain.

Guilt, claims Cobain, is ubiquitous among family survivors of suicide. I can read this and tell myself this, but in the end it brings thin comfort. Lying in bed, my mind moves from one memory of her to the next and between moments that might've been. These memories and wish-dreams are wobbly steppingstones—should have, could have, would have—floating on a red sea. Sleep fails to bring the steady shore. My dentist says that if I keep grinding my teeth at night, I'll have to wear a mouth guard to bed.

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Though I've never been a morning person—and these days I'm more sleep-deprived than ever—when I see Gibson first thing, I can't help but croon, *Goodmooorning*, which incites his half-moon smile—and suddenly the day's weight eases a bit. Born five days before what would've been Paula's fifty-second birthday, since her death, he's the first thing to bring joy.

How all is woven one, uniting,

Each in the other living, working!

Faust thinks early in Goethe's drama. Shortly after, he despairs at the human lot, questions the value of his book learning, and turns suicidal. He lifts the glass to his lips, but the angel chorus interrupts and childhood memories draw him back. Then, when Mephistopheles offers him the wager, insisting that he can lead Faust to contentment, Faust agrees, assuming that he'll never settle for the moment. And it's this fulcrum point in Goethe's drama that intrigues me the most, when Faust, drunk with yearning, declares that he wishes to undergo

All that men everywhere undergo, their whole portion,

Make mine their heights and depths, their weal and woe

What recklessly admirable naïveté! Because who can fathom the depths under the eggshell of each moment? Such a romantic impulse, to throw in with all of life even unto shipwreck, but until the wheels leave the pavement, the pain side of the equation's too easy to overlook. Chance eventually railroads us all. When it comes and we're left in its wake, life becomes a rehearsal of pain.

My sister's death, coming as it did within three months of two other family deaths, made for the worst year of my life so far. And it's the *so far* that fires the acid jets when the phone rings, that causes obsessive monitoring of the baby's breathing, that incites irrational fears of everyday things.

Even as I succumb to them, though, I know that such reactions are flawed. Evolution tricks us into trepidation, and we allow filters to fall over our senses that dull the vibrancy of felt life. All as a way of bracing against pain. How do we peel away these filters? How do we counter the mental deadening that aging wants to impose?

Paula loved nature. In an Ayahuasca vision, she speaks with each tree on her house's lot, checking on its health and happiness. I refuse to believe that her communion with the organic world was one of the puzzle pieces of her death. She completed her suicide as a result of some unquantifiable mix of health and financial issues, depression and work trouble—but her love of Galveston and the Gulf, of the nearby wetlands, and especially of the 0.13 acres on her lot only ever refreshed her energies.

As Faust climbs the Harz Mountain slope in that strange interlude "Walpurgis Night," he thrills at the natural beauty all around—

The spring has laid her fingers on the birch,

Even the fir tree feels her touch,

Then mustn't we, too, feel new energy—

and says, "While legs hold up and breath comes freely, this knotty blackthorn's all I want."

All her life Paula wanted to take a free breath. She carried her inhaler everywhere, twice dialed 911 without the breath to speak. In yet another Peruvian vision, she writes, "Then I started asking if I could be cured – & spirit said sure – just breathe & I did & it was amazing. I was just breathing through all my lungs easily." Nine months later—a gestational inversion that grew her desire to become disembodied—she covered her face with a plastic bag, pumped helium into it, and fixed her breathing problem for good. She did it in the bathroom at work, a last memo to her heartless manager.

She left notes. In mine, she apologizes for running out of time, then adds the phrase that refuses to fade.

"There's still so much to say."

Now there's so much more, Paula: Gibson's bird talk, his crooked little grin, the small triumphs of tummy time; your house, which Dad and I finished the way you wanted, the driveway we paved in decorative cinderblock so your grass can breathe, the new cypress tree in your front yard—all conversations lost like coins to the deep.

What's left are only pieces as fleeting as a whale glimpsed sliding below the surface—but fragments that I plan to keep, of the sister whose idea of dressing up was matching her baseball cap to her t-shirt; who drank Dr. Pepper like she owned stock; who loved morning motorcycle rides along the seawall; who lived for adventures hiking, caving, canoeing; who bought her youngest brother a deck of playing cards with girly pics when he was thirteen and liked to ask him if he had hair on his chest yet; who fed him his first jalapeno, crayfish, po' boy; who taught him how to laugh and who told him, a month before she left it, how lucky she felt to be part of their family; and who once cruised Broadway in her pickup, blasting "Electric Avenue" and dancing in her seat with a grin so light it fixed the carefree moment in the air.

Time passes, of course, and late summer arrives with its languid afternoons that melt into endless blue evenings, and the ridge path meets my every footstep with its solid presence. The dog runs ahead, tail up, happy to be back on his stomping ground. Gibson babbles and points at the treetops as he floats along in the chest sling—facing forward, as he always insists. He likes to see what's coming, too, it turns out.

I'm in "dad shape," which is to say out of shape—tired and already sucking wind. But we're going up, by god, even if I have to stop a dozen times to catch my breath. We're going up the whale's back, past the radio towers and the wind-warped cedars. Up past the wild raspberries and mima mounds and boulders. We're going to collect it piece by piece.

We're going to take it all with us. Today, together, we're going to the top.

Jeff P. Jones's debut novel *Love Give Us One Death: Bonnie and Clyde in the Last Days* won the George Garrett Fiction Prize. He lives on the Palouse in northern Idaho. www.jeffpjones.com