

Breathe, Snap, Repeat

ANUPRIYA GANGULY

Picture a balloon. The first attempt to breathe air into it is often difficult, for the rubber is tight and not very pliable. Should you release some of this air and try again, you will have a much easier time filling it. But the increased pliability of the balloon also means that you must be wary of the amount of pressure you apply to the rubber; now, it is more likely to snap. Likewise, death, broken relationships, or disease can seep some air out of our lives, and the vacuum created by these losses is not easily filled. While successive losses might steel us to face future misfortunes, they often render us cynics, forever suspicious of life's negotiations. We install barricades for ourselves, forcefully reading a "no" in place of a "yes." And even if we do manage somehow to re-inflate our lives, the thin, pressurized rubber may give way once again.

"Are you an only child?"

Despite the innumerable times I have encountered this question, I always hesitate to reply in the affirmative: "Yes . . ." I want to add: yes, I *would* have had a brother—a brother to bicker with, a brother to include in crafty schemes to defy my parents, a brother to irritate, a brother to confide in. But fate denied me this blessing. Anurag passed away in an accident at the age of six, three years before my birth. Yes, today I am an only child, and only more emptiness can replace this vacuum that time has created. So I resist.

In his essay "Yes," Brian Doyle, a new father of three, expresses his fear of a similar loneliness. He admits to being "terrified of the fates that may befall [his] children—fates over which [he has] no power at all, not the slightest, other than keeping [his] little children close to [him] in the presence of cars and dogs and such" (701). Doyle's trepidation over his children's safety stems from the loneliness that engulfs him in their absence. "In the wee hours of the night," Doyle confesses, "with one or another of my little people, I find

myself wondering what it might have been like to not have so many. It would have been lonely. I know this” (701).

Is the void of a child more consuming than that of a brother? I hope to never know. But I know where Doyle’s apprehension stems from. In this dread of solitude, we do not worry about the welfare of another. We worry for ourselves, and how life might continue in the absence of a loved one.

As a toddler I would incessantly demand that my mother tell and retell tales of Anurag’s childhood mischief—the way he would pound away on the roofs of new toy cars to manufacture his own line of trucks or hide my grandmother’s eyeglasses inside discarded, ragged leather shoes. Anecdotes about him still mesmerize me unfailingly. Unlike other children of my age, I never needed an imaginary friend, for I foolishly convinced myself that my brother would someday return. My mother, a devout believer in the teachings of Hinduism, ensured that this blind faith in God would be instilled in her daughter as well. So on Sunday mornings, as I sat cross-legged, facing intricately carved figurines of *Durga* and *Shiva*, knees brushing against the cotton of my mother’s *sakwar*, I pleaded with joined hands that Tintin, my pet cat, actually happened to be my brother, reincarnated. I yearned for Anurag, whom fate had snatched away from me.

Even after the passage of two decades, he forsakes death to demonstrate his presence. Every time they utter my name, *Anupriya*, my parents remember him, the one they could not keep. Can I fathom the sting of these lingering wounds that my parents have endured since the loss of their first child? No, I cannot. Only another parent can comprehend the love, optimism and dreams with which parents welcome a child into their lives. To yank away this trio would be unthinkable crushing to one’s will to live. To sentence someone else to my parents’ fate would be inhumane.

Following the accident, my father seriously considered submitting his life to sainthood. But we humans are notorious for easily yielding to even the smallest, dullest ray of hope. Doyle demonstrates this idea in “Yes,” when despite his consuming fear for his children’s safety, he learns to say “yes to them, yes yes yes,” and to the “jangled joy” and “cheerful chaos” that they bring to his life (701). Life does not always grant us a chance to say “yes.” But there is always a chance to say “*sa*,”—to affirm simply that ‘it is.’ In Gaelic, Doyle’s ancestral language, there are no means of articulating “yes” and “no.” The closest equivalent to an affirmative is “*sa*.” And yet, this does not restrict Doyle from welcoming all that life has to offer—his children, wife, horror, fear, exhaustion, and even death—with a resounding “yes yes O yes” (701). We can either simply submit ourselves to life by saying “*sa*,” it is as it is, or we

can wholeheartedly welcome the good as well as the bad with a resonating “yes.”

“Yes,” my parents said, as they decided to have another child—and in so doing, accepted the possibility of losing another one. But I understand, too, that that “yes” could not overcome all their trepidations. It was entirely natural for them to overprotect their second chance, at times in ways that prevented me from realizing my responsibilities and becoming sufficiently independent. Not until the age of seventeen was I permitted to step outside the house alone—a mundane gesture for most twelve-year-olds. The notion of my travelling anywhere unaccompanied deeply distressed my mother.

As my adolescent self grew, so did my need to stretch my liberties. Last year, while a friend was spending the night at my house, I assumed that it would be reasonably safe in my parent’s eyes for the two of us to go on an evening stroll around my housing complex. To the muffled sounds of rubber soles meeting gravel, we ranted about our so-called miseries, which mainly amounted to discontentment over grades and college acceptances. Upon returning from our brief interlude, a security guard approached us at the corner of the block and asked if we lived at 15 Ipil Road.

“Yes,” I immediately responded. The guard explained that my parents had been searching frantically for me for the past half hour. We rushed up to the house to find my father stationed outside the gate, eyes bloodshot and cheeks dampened by tears that refused to evaporate despite the humid Manila air. He did not need to explain.

With the joy of acquiring something comes the fear of losing it, even more so when that something is a person—one’s own progeny. Prior to the birth of his children, Doyle “wished desperately for them,” and “cried because they had not yet come” (701). Now that they have made their mark on his life, he prays

for them every minute with fear for their safety and horror at the prospect of losing them to disease and accidents and the harsh fingers of the Lord, who taketh whomever He wishes, at which time He alone appoints and leaves huddled and broken the father and the mother, who begged for the joy of these round faces groping for milk in the dark. (701)

Outside of the capitalist realm, few things in life come with an attached warranty card. Once we are blessed with something we have sincerely coveted, we are not guaranteed that it will be ours to keep forever. But is it really worth fretting over the possibility of its loss for the remainder of our lives?

In his essay “Cyclops,” David Sedaris presents his own ideas about parental overprotection. Sedaris recalls how his father used to agonize over his and his sister’s security. He exaggerates his father’s fretful nature, placing him in a comic light, but the fear that drives that fretfulness is nonetheless palpable. On one occasion, when Sedaris is attending the Fourth of July celebration at a country club, his father cautions him that one of his friends became handicapped when a cherry bomb exploded in his lap. The bomb “blew his balls right off the map,” the father says. Sedaris recalls standing in the corner and watching the fireworks as he says, “with my hands between my legs” (293).

Though Sedaris’s father may have disguised his constant terror for his children’s wellbeing with humor, he nonetheless instilled a fear of living in them. As a boy, Sedaris remembers wondering if his father “had any friends who could still tie their own shoes or breathe without the aid of a respirator.” Even his little sister, Tiffany, who as a child had thoughtlessly stabbed him near the eye with a sharp pencil, and was later severely scolded by their father, “couldn’t lift a dull crayon without breaking into tears. Her pretty, sun-tanned face assumed the characteristics of a wrinkled, grease-stained bag. Six years old and the girl was broken” (293).

In our greed to keep all the precious things we have, we may forget to frolic in the present moment. Because we constantly dread losing a part of ourselves, we may lose the part of ourselves that can say “yes.” But this need not be the only way. Our losses need not be final. Doyle lost his grandmother to death, and with her, he lost Gaelic, the tongue of his ancestors and the final link to his heritage. He claims to have attempted to bolster his knowledge of the language as best he could; his essay, in part, is about that futile process of recuperation. As Doyle enunciates words such as “*an buachaill*,” Gaelic for ‘boy,’ his children craft a language of their own, comprised of monosyllables that roll off one’s tongue: *bo, no, woo, wee*. In losing the “McCluskey” and “Clancey” from his mother’s and grandmother’s maiden names, and in realizing that he does not understand much of the Gaelic tongue, Doyle realizes that he cannot pass on his inherited culture in full, because his understanding is incomplete. Nevertheless, the neologisms of his children, his unconditional love for them, his natural fear for their safety, and the “puzzling wonder” of the love he shares with his wife, allow him to create his own legacy (701). This will be his new heritage, and the heritage of his three children.

As my parents wrestle with the aching possibility of losing another loved one, are they further perpetuating this vicious cycle of loss and gain? It occurs

to me that not everything needs to fall into these two opposing categories; for it was through my brother's absence that I felt his presence. My parents showered me with the love they could not bestow upon him, the protection he was denied, and the expectations for his future that fate so cruelly crushed. At the same time, gaining these blessings has not muted the void of an absent sibling.

My parents may have accepted the fate that their first child will never return, and I suppose I, too, have come a long way since I prayed for my brother's reincarnation in the form of a cat. At the same time, my parents challenged fate by deciding to have another child. Though it may be easier to say "sa," to affirm that life is what it is, sometimes we have to search for a language of our own, in which we can learn to say "yes" in whatever tentative way we can. Yes to the air that gives shape to our balloon, yes to the possibility of its escaping, and yes to the rubber containing this air, which threatens always to burst at any moment.

WORKS CITED

- Doyle, Brian. "Yes." *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 699-701. Print.
- Sedaris, David. "Cyclops." *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 292-95. Print.

12 - MERCER STREET