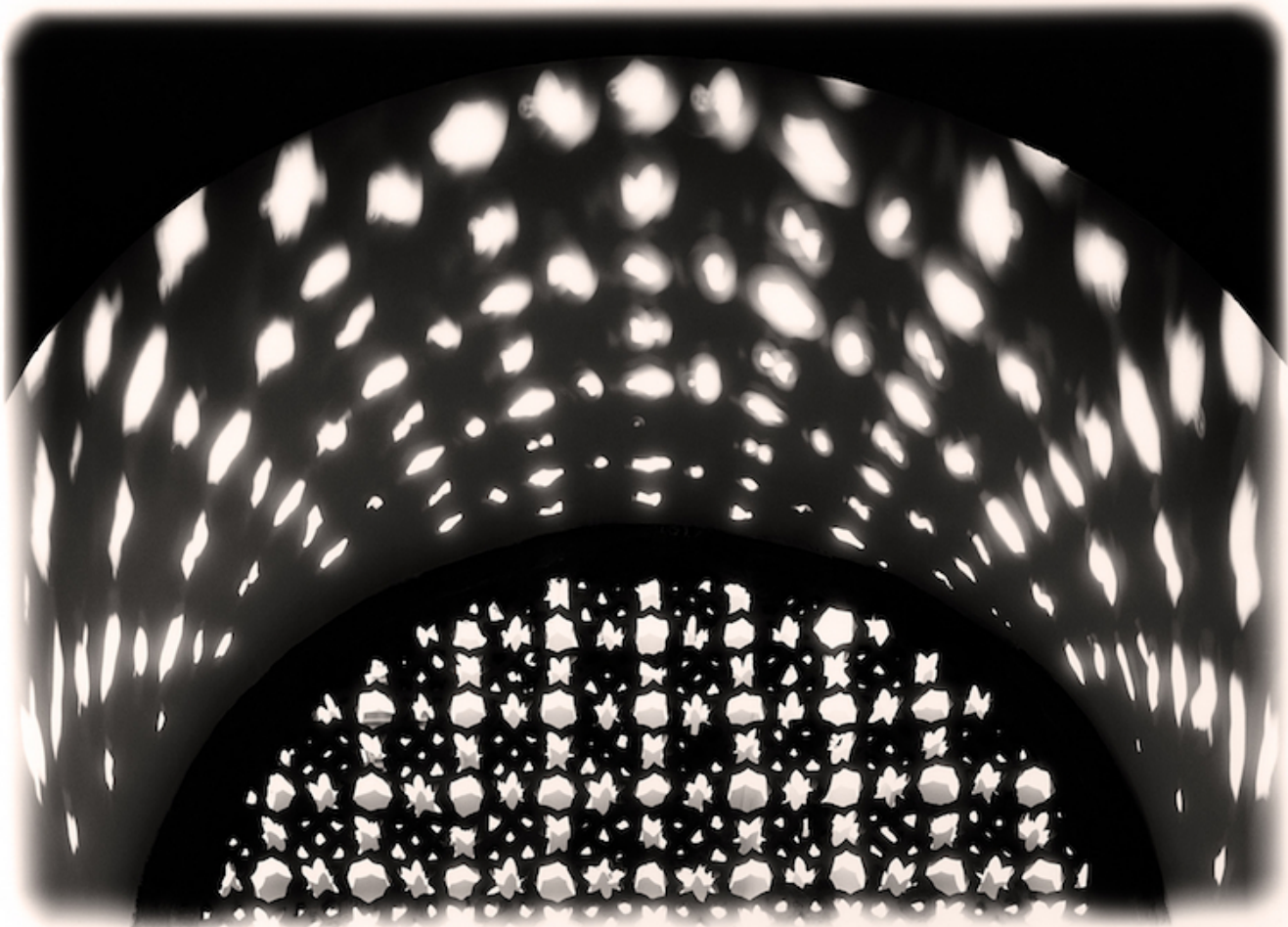


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Essay by Samantha Leigh Miller

When the Wrong Narrator Comes Back



Writing has saved my life on more than one occasion, although I didn't realize it at the time. In my early twenties, heartsick with doubt over my ability to mother my young children, I wrote 1,200 pages in the space of six months. The result was a rompingly bad horror novel in which I martyred my sister; villainized, crippled, and then killed my mother; set a would-be rapist on fire; and tossed my seventeen-year-old heroine off a roof so that her death might save the world.

"Is that supposed to be me, Sam?" my mother asked over the phone after finishing the book. "That crazy woman who

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beat those poor children?"

"No, Mom. That's not you."

My father read it in one sitting, writing his notes in longhand. A Columbia graduate, he taught literature for much of his life and lived by a poet's creed. He married my mother when I was eight, and their marriage lasted only long enough to give me his name. But it never mattered that we weren't connected by blood. I was his most dedicated student.

Your prose is fat and weighs down any hope of engaging the reader, he began in the letter he sent with his notes. Don't waste your time with a rewrite. This story isn't worth it. Some of your sentences, however, are exquisite. Next time, write only those.

It was the mid-nineties when I wrote that novel, when everyone wore flannel and Starbucks was new. I wrote it during fleeting periods of synchronized naptimes, on pads of yellow paper that I smuggled sometimes into the hotel where I worked the second shift. When it was done, I didn't feel I'd finished something, though. I felt as if I'd escaped.

After the century turned and the Towers fell, my daughter spent her birthday in the hospital—bluish, bloated, and breathing from one lung. She nearly died many times during a period of four years, and again I turned to writing. This time, I wrote a short story about a very sad woman whose daughter, Hannah, talked to angels. The woman's husband had just left her, and because of some unexplained illness, Hannah was about to leave her as well.

I showed this story only to my father, who noted: *I don't get the impression that it's Hannah who will leave her mother, but rather, it's Hannah's mother who will inevitably leave her child. Is this what you intended?*

His instinct was keen, as it always was, because even I didn't know what I'd intended. Still, I recognized that word. *Inevitably.*

I'd never really had a reason to die, but that didn't stop me from looking for one. When I was seven and my sister was nine, our neighborhood gang liked to play chicken in the street in front of the basement apartment where we lived outside Philadelphia. While everyone else lay twitching on the pavement, nervous, giggling, poking each other with their feet, I stared up at the sky. I wondered idly if the tires of a car would actually separate pieces of my flesh when they rolled over me or if my Mighty Mouse T-shirt would be mashed like potatoes into the asphalt.

Inevitably.

I kept writing. Each time that I transferred my pain onto the page, the act of capturing the image—the sick, festering, dead thing that had rooted in my mind—laid the image to rest. Each time I tapped away at the keyboard, I buried the dead thing with my words. And I saved myself. It worked this way for a few months, then a few years. It worked this way until I foolishly thought it would always work—until I came up against a kind of death I couldn't bury. And so, it buried me.

Years rolled along. My daughter didn't die; she got bigger, I had another baby, a boy, and he got bigger, too. I got older, my marriage got uglier, but still, I hadn't found a reason to die. Every time I thought my life was almost over, it never was.

When I was thirty and my marriage finally fell apart (a surprise to no one but me), I wrote an essay about the day my children and I moved out of the house. In it, my protagonist throws all her belongings into plastic lawn bags and then sits at the end of a long hallway, daydreaming about slicing her wrists open with the knife she'd used to cut the tomatoes for her children's lunch. I never showed that one to anyone.

I kept looking.

It wasn't until 2007, when my father died in a faraway New Jersey hospital room, that I finally found my reason, or it found me. In his absence, whatever footing his name and presence had given to my life crumbled and gave way. I knew killing myself was no longer an option. It was simply inevitable, even if the thought of it terrified me. This was

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what I'd wanted all along, wasn't it? Something to shove me off the fence? Why was I being such a petulant child now?

A month later, in an attempt to save my own life, I sat down again at the computer and poured out my darkest and most violent ideas about my father's death. I'd just read Nuruddin Farah's 1986 novel *Maps*, in which his orphaned male protagonist struggles through the preamble to the Somali civil war. I was inspired to draw on the unrest raging in Africa to express the unrest raging in my own mind. I wrote in a frenzy, driven only by the need to get my thoughts on the page and out of my head before the dead things buried me forever.

When I finished, I titled it "A Riddle" and sent it off to a tiny literary magazine that focused (ironically) on peace and nonviolence. The magazine published it a few months later. After that, I deleted the file from my desktop, emptied it from the recycle bin, and shredded my hard copies.

But this time, the dead things continued to dance. They sprang at me from the very blackest corners of my imagination. I was drowning, suffocating, buried alive. Writing hadn't worked. I hadn't escaped.

I see now that I was arrogant and stupid, full of hubris that made my failure all the harder to bear. In the end, it wasn't the flashes of horror or my all-consuming despair that proved most dangerous. It was the narrator I'd exhumed. I'd given voice to the dead through the orphaned boy in *Maps*—I'd changed my narrator's gender and dropped her into the Horn of Africa, but I recognized her just the same. I knew her, as one recognizes the youthful features in the face of an aging childhood friend.

She laughed at me again and again. "The only proof of life is death," she said, and I knew with cold certainty she wanted proof.

And so I stopped writing.

It took me three years to dig out from that moment—three years, during which I put down my pen, stepped away from the computer, and surrendered any hope of defeating her. Three years, in which I sought out death by any means it might have me.

I survived those long years, however accidentally and with no small amount of grace, and I've since realized my narrator was wrong. Life is not evidence of death. Quite the opposite. It is only in ugliness, in death, with all its transmutable, transferable, transfiguring forms, that we bear witness—triumphantly, joyously—to life.

When I wrote again, I wrote this.

Excerpt from "A Riddle"

An old man lies on the floor in a hut and stares at the ceiling. Others walk. Others talk. He says nothing. He stares. There is a bird, hidden up there, he thinks, but the others do not see it. He is fed. He is washed. He wets himself and he is changed. He is talked *about*, and spoken *to*. He has ceased to be *with*. He knows this and the others know it too. A life *among*, he thinks. A life before his time on the floor. He closes his eyes. Smiles. *Among*. He will drown inside the liquid in his lungs while the others discuss the dinner meal above him. With parched lips and a dry throat, his chest will fill with water. His eyes will open and his heart will stop and the bird will come down from the ceiling and pick crumbs of food from his white beard. And I am he.

—Samantha Leigh Miller, [Raving Dove \(Fall/Winter 2007–2008\)](#) [4]

Art Information

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- "Introjection" from the series "[Modulations of Light](#)" [5] © Saïd Nuseibeh; used by permission. Additional photo details: Also known as "Dappled Light from Fanlight Grille," this eighth-century carved plaster window originally appeared above a doorway in Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, Syria. Photographed in the Damascus National Museum, 2006.



Samantha Leigh Miller is an educator and freelance writer whose creative work has appeared in literary magazines such as *Raving Dove*, *Peace Chronicle*, and *Sofa Ink Quarterly*. Miller has also coauthored research in peace pedagogy for the journal *Teaching of Psychology* and presented her work at conferences around the country.

She lives and teaches in Pennsylvania, where she strives to help others find their writing voices.

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