

Ruins

Joel B. Peckham, Jr.

Friday in Amman is the Sabbath day, so very little is open or active—other than the prayers coming over the loudspeakers and the numerous mosques, whose spires reach up all around us. Five times a day, every day the call to prayer floats over the rooftops from dozens of loudspeakers, each slightly ahead or behind the other and echoing off the sides of buildings and through the valleys, so it sounds like a crowd of angels calling you home toward some kind of reckoning.

On these days I take the boys for walks through some back-lots and up the hillside roads behind our apartment. We live in Jebel-Amman, literally Mountain Amman, on the side of one of the many steep hills that form the city's landscape. And even after a month of living in this churning city, I can't shake the feeling that I could uproot, tumble down into the valley and be lost in the vacant lots and low-lying troughs in the land dotted and shining with rubble.

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I can still feel the pressure of the umbrella stroller in my palms though it's hard to believe, staring at him from the light of the hallway, that this boy, curled into sleep on his mother's old bed was once that child. His hair once long and curled as any young girl's, is now cropped tight and matted against his forehead with August sweat. Susie would hate it. She loved his hair. Cyrus was nearly four before he had his first "big boy cut." and though Darius is only a year older than his brother was on the day of the accident, he seems almost larger than Cyrus now. And what have I become?

Now?

Then?

Here. In his grandparent's house, surrounded on all sides by the howling August storm, those distinctions slither in and out of time and place like something venomous in the underbrush.

“Hate and love” my mother-in-law said, staring at me in the living room, waiting for some reaction. And for once she did get one, her words cracking the re-enforced concrete calm that I adapt when the subject of Susan’s journals arises. “Hate and love. Love and hate. I’ve never heard anything like it.”

The word “hate” is not one I allow myself. Especially when referring to Susan. She is gone, and to hate the dead, to love the dead—it all seems somehow obscene. She is a part of me, like Cyrus; that is all. I don’t try to untangle any further. What I felt for Susan was what I understood love to be. “How could she be so unhappy and us not know? And suicidal. She mentions suicide three times.” I catch my breath as if to speak. To say, she wasn’t the only one. To mention the times when I would wander out in to the railroad tracks in Michigan or stand on the edge of route 31 and think, one step and it is over. But love does not allow for easy exits. Even when everyone you love is gone. The wires pull hard at the chest. And you hang there suspended like a sideshow freak at the fair. Held upward by hooks in the skin, dangling. I say nothing. I nod. I promised Susan I would never read those journals. That I would burn them. I can remember the conversation, sitting in the house in Georgia. I didn’t like morbid talk, but even in the first weeks of our marriage, Susan would speak of her death and what I should do should she die before me. “If you want you can keep them for Cyrus and Darius, but only them.” I failed in this too. Her parents got to the house before I could, while I laid half buried in a morphine stupor in Mass general; and they took everything from the home that held a memory of her. And those twenty bound journals must have seemed some great treasure trove. And for a moment, it must have seemed they were holding their daughter. But of course they weren’t. In the end what they found was paper and cardboard and ink. And words not meant to be read by anyone. If anything, those journals were a trove for Susan to dig through for poems and essays—to shape and form into something palpable and alive. Once in a while she would read a passage out loud if it was funny or sounded like the beginning of something she could turn to art. But I would keep my promise—both to her and to myself. I’ve lived enough pain in these past years to last anyone a lifetime. And now my in-laws must suffer as I suffer—the anger and guilt of every cross thought, every dark whim. And perhaps the upsweeping joy— finding a mention of love, a happy memory of childhood—only to lead to deeper troughs. They ride those winds—with the blind anger they have for the man who hurt their daughter, loved her, made love to her, nearly drove her to suicide, then had the gall to outlive her. So the most my mother-in-law will get is the blood coming up and flooding my neck and face—a change in breathing. Perhaps some sweat. And of course, hours of sleep lost.

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On the Sabbath day I took my sons on walks through the city.

By then I had started keeping my own journal. In it I would set down observations, anecdotes. The title read like pages out of Thoreau’s *Walden—On Labor, On Difference, Translation, Rubble*:

Amman's rubble is different. Or perhaps indifferent. There is no sediment, very little garbage, almost no twisted steelwork or piping. Just tons of crushed and piled limestone with tufted grass and scrub trees growing up through it. And there is no great effort being made at reconstruction--as if the broken, brittle lots are exactly what was planned for. Where construction progresses, it progresses slowly, at night, so the buildings and bridges seem to grow of their own accord rather than piece together mechanically. On a bright day, the jagged edges

of stone light up and the heaps are as bright as any of the new buildings that surround them. Were these once houses, bridges, walls? Without the human story left behind in broken machines and furniture, even the occasional personal item as small as a bent spoon, its hard to tell.

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As a boy, I would take long walks though a field behind my house, leading past the water tanks and fish-ponds to the distant tree-line. There, just beyond the forests edge was a square ten-foot, stone foundation halfway filled with dirt and pine-needles. On humid summer days I would go there and dig in the cool black loam for artifacts—some sign of what the building had been and who had lived there. I never found anything left by human hands beneath the forest floor. But the wind booming across the field and threading into the trees brought other treasures, caught in the depression as if in a lobster trap: a bright red ball, bags blown from the nearby grocery mart, a dollar bill, and once the bones of a small bird, thin as lace and bleached with wind.

“What we want to be sure of,” my father-in-law says, his face becoming solemn, stern, darkening, “is Susie’s legacy. She worked very hard, you know, to just let it slip away.” I have just told them about Rachael. And I’m more than a little stunned. My father-in-law has hardly paused before moving on to other matters. I am always amazed at the emotional speed of our conversations. Love, Hate, Suicide, Rachael, Legacy. I hadn’t been keeping it from them, but I hadn’t told them either. Of course they knew. But how much? How much did Susie know? There is a longer story that they’ve only guessed at. I don’t tell them how many years I had spent sleeping in a different room because I couldn’t stand to love someone and not be allowed to touch her. Or the bizarre push and pull of affection and bitterness. “Why are you still with me?” I once asked Susan.

“History has to mean something,” she responded, her beautiful, tragic face in her hands. The structure that was our marriage had collapsed on top of us, but there was no clear exit. No way out of the rubble, it seemed. I don’t mention the long, hot walks with Rachael. The stolen whispers and cigarettes under the awnings of the creaking antebellum houses of Milledgeville. The late-night calls from pay-phones at gas-stations—just to have someone to talk to when things got desperate. When I felt shut in a deep box buried in the ground and looked for any light. The terrible panic of falling in love with the wrong person—or realizing I was with the wrong person all along, ten years into a marriage. The strange mix of anger and hope I felt as Rachael began to confide more and more of her terror, her own desperation. Even if I were to explain it all I couldn’t begin. It came. It was beyond me. And it scared me to death. A month into therapy, my therapist looked at me hard and said, “Tell me about Rachael” when I thought I had been talking only of her each day every day.

“No, you talk about your marriage, Susan, Cyrus sometimes, but not often. Avoidance,” she said. “We still have a lot of work to do.” And I knew she was right. But Rachael was still with her abuser—a man who still called me to ask for advice about writing, about love. And I had to pretend I didn’t know who he was or what he did. I had to pretend I liked him because Rachael begged me to. Because he wanted to “throw his arms around me and make me promise to be his friend forever,” when he disgusted me more than anyone I’d ever known by then. Avoidance. I’m still doing it. But how? Where to start? Rachael made the world shatter and come together again in new combinations just by walking across a road before me and almost tipping over with the awkward grace of a failed and faltering prima ballerina—at once exquisite

and vulnerable. She still compares herself to Susan, but I don't; I never did. What I loved in Rachael were the contradictions: the innocent pout, the arched eye-brow, the easy tears and the sharp retort. But these are abstractions. Is it enough to say that Rachael was the first person I've ever really collapsed in front of? Just collapsed like someone pulled the last pillar of support from a condemned building. Or maybe it only takes one pillar to fall, to take the weight of all those accumulated moments—all that history, a baby being born blue and silent, then screaming all at once, the first shared poem, a photograph of two skiers on a mountaintop in France, the cramped storage space beneath an apartment in Lincoln Nebraska. And the pillars falling, myself, Susan. Rachael, how gentle your hands were when you touched my shoulder, how gentle you were with the pieces of man who must have seemed to you so very like a ruin. When you asked me, why don't you just leave? And all I could think of all I could think of all I could think of was the ocean I used to stand by in Eastham, Massachusetts as a boy, the ocean and the sand-cliffs behind and the houses peeking over, destined to fall as the sand eroded beneath them and the light coming at me on the water, angry and roaring like a train. Avoidance. Delicate shoulders, slim, graceful neck, the line of a chin. How badly I wanted to feel that again for Susan; but couldn't; how quickly there was only Rachael and that shattering light, and the splash of a thousand pillars falling and the—

How far could it have gone, I often wonder, had we not left for Jordan on Fulbrights? For a long time, lying in bed in one hospital then another, I wondered if my love for Rachael had been the push that set the tragedy in motion. Where does it start? We dig and dig for cause—the origins of things. But I know that beginnings, like endings, stretch off in both directions forever and we are destined to live our lives and deaths in-media-res with all the lack of purpose and confusion that entails.

I could answer my father in law this way—explaining that I have begun the process of sifting through Susie's work, trying to pick up the threads of her projects. But so many of them evade me. We did not speak much in the last months and had different friends. Lived different lives in separate rooms—two caged birds, her the peacock searching for a garden and me, a flightless heron, a hawk, some gull, a bird of garbage, winged and wounded. To this day, men and women—strangers to me--will call at night, weeping, confessing their spiritual love for Susan and it is like a visitation from another dimension. They have and have had no existence for me. So I have done what I can, pieced together a manuscript and sent it to her publisher, gone through the boxes and tried to make sense of projects half-completed. And every word is a sting. Every line a twist of the knife.

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The only artifacts are those blown around the city in the desert sand and wind-storms that come once or twice a month, sending garbage bags, sheets and clothes off the lines-- anything not spiked, roped or nailed to earth--into the air to be snagged in the rubble for the play and scavenging of stray cats. The urge to join them in their dig among the detritus is powerful. But I don't believe it would yield any discoveries. It's as if before each building was leveled, the levelers had picked it clean of all human record.

Even in a journal entry I could not be completely honest. Even when the audience is the self—one can fear its rejection, its revulsion. And I had grown disgusted with myself. For years

I couldn't even look in the mirror without wanted to spit at my reflection. Sometimes I did. I've learned through therapy how hard it is to revisit the past honestly or see the present fully even when, especially when, the only real judge is looking back at you over a bathroom sink. So much lay beneath the lines. It was mere travelogue. And the traveler was moving from one place to another without real contact, accumulating none of the stains of intimacy, floating really, like a plastic bag hopping over stones, parked cars, waiting for a tree branch to catch it for a while. Those words seem so unreal now—so detached and elegant. Of course, it was all fresh paint over rotten planks.

In a telephone conversation, a close friend suggested that this rubble could serve as a fit metaphor for the soul. A poetic idea. But I think it more likely represents the soul's ruins, how hard it is to dig past them. An old man's face, like that of the taxi driver Ali with his military fatigues and smoldering cigar, is equally ruined—sun-scarred and pocked with insult—both physical and emotional. Perhaps suggested in those lines there is, some great regret or anger, a distant lover, a lost child, a stolen home, shame and humiliations personal and cultural. But the truth is hidden from us beneath this human rubble.

Only a man obsessed with love could imagine a lover for Ali. And of course, I knew it was fantasy. Projection. I was thinking of Rachael, who stopped my heart merely by almost falling over while crossing a street. And the truth was not hidden. It was frightening. What if I left Susan? What if she finally left me? What then? Did Rachael feel this way for me? Or was she merely an imagined beam of light in the rubble? The mind searching desperately for hope. And what of the children, where are they in these notes to the self? How desperately, I would like to read a description of Cyrus now that he is gone. Where are you, my beautiful boy? Pushed from behind by the hands of a man who isn't really there.

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"I love you more than anybody," Darius shouts from the back of the car as I weave through the traffic of Hartford Connecticut. He has spent two weeks with Susan's parents and he is still glowing with re-union. Tonight he will cry for his Bibi. Tomorrow he will ask if we can call his mother and brother. And when I say no, they are in heaven, he'll pretend he didn't ask, giving an awkward smile and turning his attention back to his coloring book. "Darius, you don't have to love me more than everybody. You can love us all different."

"But I love you best."

"But you don't have to, you know. For Bibi you can have Bibi-Love. For me, Daddy-Love. For Rachael, Rachael-Love. And mommy-love. And Cyrus-love." He starts to giggle, and I point at our golden retriever, Jack-Jack in the passenger seat. "Even Doggy-love." Now he is laughing really hard, squirming in his car-seat, shouting "Doggy-love. Jack-Jack-love!". "It's the same for me. I love Rachael, and I love you, and I love Jack-Jack. But I don't love any of you in the same way."

"Do you love Rachael more than Mommy?"

Mommy.

Sitting on the colorful carpets of our sitting room in our massive cold apartment in Amman, brochures spread around her, Susan, cell-phone in one hand, personal organizer in another, was a picture of the determined traveler: bright, efficient, and ready to go. We were making our first excursion beyond the borders of the city to Jerash and she glowed with the prospect of adventure. To be honest, I wasn't that enthusiastic. I was excited to see the Roman ruins but the expedition seemed touristy. I imagined myself walking behind a smiling, head-bobbing, guide, eager to show me everything I wanted to see and tell me everything I wanted to know, catering to my every wish and charging me for every second of it. I've never liked tour-guides--in any country. No matter how well they treat you, you know the experience is false. That human being is reduced to his function, which is to please and you are reduced to commerce. You stop being Joel or Susan or Cyrus and become ten dollars, francs, pounds or dinars.

Still it was an easy sell; the brochures written in Arabic, French, German, and English with bright photographs of columns marching into pale blue sky were more than I could resist. I've always believed that ruins have a special pull to the American, for whom an old city was founded 200, not 2000, years ago. Where there are no ancient castles in the midst of its cities, no temples from long abandoned religions—where what is ancient in our land is only beginning to be excavated in the western prairies and deserts, and our sense of self is based more on faith and system than by tradition. Separated from the ancient civilizations not only by time but oceans, the possibility of actually traveling to an ancient city is as remote to most of us as a trip to Mars, and just as alluring.

More than that, there was something personal. If ever I had been lost in my life, I was lost then, and no-matter how hard I tried to focus on the moment, I could not look at this beautiful talented woman without thinking of all that I had lost, was losing each day. And to look at Susan was to fall in love with her. She had an undeniable beauty, not only of body—with her long black hair, dark almond-shaped eyes and teardrop chin—but of spirit. Susie emanated. I've never been sure of what, exactly. But she emanated. Her presence literally seemed to push out the air around her. And this presence was compelling and isolating. It pulled people to her, but kept them from ever really getting to understand her deeply. The previous night we had had one of those brutal arguments that you know will follow you for the rest of your marriage. We were hired to teach American Literature and Creative Writing. But of course, at the University of Amman there were only a few course offerings in those areas and most were taught by Senior faculty. And Susie wanted them. The truth was, she didn't want to teach at all. She wanted to write. And her experiences talking to the Palestinian refugees had galvanized her. She wanted to write of them, for them. And she wasn't going to spend her time preparing lessons on 17th Century British Literature. At first I acquiesced. Susie had a way of making her position sound not only like the most reasonable one, but the only one. "It would be easier for you, Joel; you are a scholar after all. You can learn anything, teach anything. You're brilliant." She was good at appealing to my vanity. But I knew I was being manipulated.

"Susie, look this isn't fair; you must see that." Then her expression darkened as it always did when she felt accused of a breach in ethics or morals. "Don't talk to me about fair." And then, "I gave up my life for you. You wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me." There was little I could say. As usual, a minor disagreement had exploded into something far beyond its scope. She was right. Whatever my accomplishments as a scholar and a teacher, it was her work as an Iranian-American poet and National Poetry Series winner that made us attractive to the Fulbright people. But it was the statement, "I gave up my life for you," words that had become a sad

refrain over the previous years, that lingered. I know that Susie believed this. Her marriage to me was what locked her to the United States. It was what lost her Swiss citizenship; it was what kept her from visiting Iran; it was a sacrifice I could never repay, and one which placed our relationship in such disharmony and imbalance that nothing in our marriage existed without its permeating vapor. And then I did something that still makes me shudder. I closed my eyes to her beautiful mouth and chin and pleading hands, “You cruel, cold, bitch.”

And the door slammed shut.

Perhaps that night, Susan wrote in her journal that she would leave me. I wouldn't blame her. Perhaps she wrote down her hatred for me. At my worst moments, I still believe I deserved it. Susie was never cold—when she finally retreated from me, it was not from a lack of passion but I think, too much. We used each other up and quickly. The way a fire makes quick work of old wooden building in a market square. We were both exhausted. Literally burned and hollowed out by it all. By the massive *effort* it all took. But there we were, caged together by hatred and love and children, and that huge weight that had built up on top of us of harsh words, and poetry, and all that stretching to meet halfway when the distance between us had always been oceanic—as broad and churning as history itself. And history meant something, after all.

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Though not very clean, the bus ride to Jarash is quick (45 minutes total) and comfortable. The busses are small, like oversized versions of the torpedo-tube VW van my father used to own and drive all over the country--though dad's bus didn't have burgundy, tassled drapes hanging from the windows, or an old woman fingering turquoise prayer beads while draped in a hajab of black and gold cotton. The outlying hills of Amman offer a stark contrast to the bustling, industrial streets of the city, with its towering deluxe hotels and extensive markets. Out in the pastures and orchards life is lived closer to the land. The squat, limestone houses, do not so much nestle into the hillsides as cling to them as if they could, any moment, be picked up by the wind and blown away. And this seems deliberate. Few trees rise above seven feet and most are bent toward the earth as if in prayer. The ones that venture upward are thin, conical firs that resemble a too-skinny girl's arms thrust into clear quick, water, awkward and graceful at the same moment. Towns dot the landscape and seem to blend into the farmland. Here a young girl in a blue fleece pull-over leans against the dusty wall of a gas-station, a mural of Rambo over her head; here two boys chase each other, playing some form of violent tag beneath and around a gigantic diesel tank, suspended in the air by chains tied to metal girders; here a girl in a pink pull-over skips down a hillside and throws her arms around a mountain goat. On the side of the highway, a shepherd guides a flock of 30 dusty, but obedient, sheep toward better grazing on some distant plateau.

The hills themselves are rolling and golden brown, speckled with white limestone boulders and green grass, or fruit trees. Occasionally, in the deepest valleys, a small lake shines. I find myself comparing the landscape to the red dirt of Georgia, or Virginia. And just before reaching the city, passing through the highways cut most deeply through the mountains, the dynamite blasted limestone passages remind me of similar roads torn through the hills of Vermont and Massachusetts. We carry our worlds with us wherever we go.

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But we don't necessarily reveal them. With my blond hair, blue-eyes, and blue jeans, I was as obviously American as a can of Coca-Cola or the Nike swoosh. As a result, I was a magnet for the searching eyes and broken English of those Jordanians as curious about my country as I was about theirs. And at that time, I so desperately wanted to blend in somewhere, somehow. A part of me was always afraid—not of being targeted as an American but as a hypocrite. And if a pair of dark eyes looked too deeply, I always wondered, “Can they tell? Can they see who I am?” I had thrown a pearl to the sea, after all, and I knew it and felt the regret of it, but at the same time I couldn't stop thinking of Rachael. She grew up on a farm I thought, staring at the small farms blurring into the landscape as the bus picked up speed suicidally down the mountainsides—what kind of farm? And I thought of the essay she read about pig-busses—converted yellow school busses filled with pigs—rolling through the cornfields of Michigan. I stared hard out the glass, away from Susan, away from any potential searching eyes.

There was little need. Susie was with Darius in another aisle. And on the bus, I was left alone. In my pocket of silence, staring out the window with Cyrus propped against my shoulder, drifting in and out of sleep, I seemed of little interest to any of my fellow travelers-- another passenger among passengers. To people splitting their lives between city and suburb on their way to work, or to visit a loved one, a lone tourist, whatever his appearance or nationality seemed of no consequence.

But everything was of consequence to me—the foreigner, tourist, scholar, father, husband. Everything new and old at once. Everything charged with the shock of similarity—some moment, some tree or valley, some expression called up from childhood. Everything charged with the shock of difference and distance, with how far away I was, how uncertain the ground beneath me. And how weak the rattling roof above. Each breath seemed to take concentration. And when I wasn't floating above the land beneath my feet or totally walled off from the world around me, I was so raw from feeling that at times I imagined I'd been flayed alive. That I walked through wind and rain and sandstorm without any skin at all. There were times when I could barely look at my children—especially Cyrus, with his wisp of a body, ghostlike skin and eyes so dark they seemed all pupil, as if he were always staring wide-eyed into darkness. He knows, I'd think. I still do sometimes. What must it have been like for him—caught between adults traveling at high speed in opposite directions with him in the middle—each of us overcompensating like crazy. Smothering him with overtight embraces. “You're squishing me,” he cried one night as I sang him to sleep. And he laughed, then asked. “Daddy, are you going to sleep in another house?” “Are you leaving us?”

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By the time the columns of Jarash (Garazia to the Romans) loomed on the horizon, I was already worn out.

Thankfully we were spared the necessity of a tour guide when we met a computer science teacher in a local high school named Ahkmed, a Palestinian who took us under his wing, first marching us to the best place to get humus and kabob and then guiding us through the ancient ruins. Later, over coffee at our apartment during a break from Arabic lessons, Ahkmed told us that it was God who noticed us on the bus, God who made him see that we needed help, and God, in the guise of my mother-in-law, who made us see that he would be a good teacher.

My mother-in-law of course, loved this. And immediately loved Ahkmed. As did we all. And though she was constantly comparing Jordan to her native Iran—at Jordan’s disadvantage—she loved Jordan, too. It was not her home, but it was her element. She spoke no Arabic, but she could communicate with these people, mixing English, French, Farsi, and hand-signals dramatically to make a point, learning words and laughing off misunderstanding. And with Ahkmed there was recognition. They understood each other. None of us were suspicious of him. And we had no reason to be. He was a beautiful and spiritual man. One of the few true men of God I have met in my life. My mother-in-law convinced him not only to guide us around Jerash that day, but to teach us Arabic three nights a week. I’ve forgotten almost all of it now. But I remember him, the thin brown coat that seemed to be rotting around him, the constant five-o’clock shadow, the tar blackened fingertips, the way he would lean over my shoulder, breathing in my ear as I strained with effort, then leap up, celebrate when I would get a word or concept right. He study. He study. *Al hamdel Allah. Al hamdel Allah.*

“Thanks God,” Ahkmed said. And God may have been at work. I don’t know. If we hadn’t met Ahkmed that day, Susie and Cyrus would most certainly still be alive right now. We would not have been in his friend’s van traveling to Aqaba on the Sabbath day; we wouldn’t have placed our lives first in his hands, then the sleepy-eyed driver’s, then God’s on an unlit desert highway. We wouldn’t have hit that sand-truck. Ahkmed would be alive too. I wouldn’t be a single father writing forlorn essays in a two-bedroom apartment on the side of a mountain in New Hampshire. And I wouldn’t be with Rachael now. *Al hamdel Allah. Al hamdel Allah.* How the ironies accumulate. How my life has become this convoluted mix of suffering and hope. My father-in-law says he doesn’t know if he believes in God anymore. For a long time he would sit on the couch in his family room, not sleeping, trying to figure out a way that someone was responsible for it all as the news droned on behind him. As the world refused to stop even a moment in its revolutions. It was a “hit” he said once, that Ahkmed was really a terrorist and Susie, as a writer of controversial poetry, was a target of the Iranian government or some branch of Al Quaida or the Israeli Secret Service. The banality of accidents is more than he can take. Accidents are meaningless, pointless, and brutally real. What was that sand-truck *doing* across the road at that moment on that day? (Laying sand). And who was this driver, this man with the droopy eyes who my mother-in-law now swears was on opium? (just a friend of Ahkmed’s, picking up presents in Aqaba for his wife and kids). And Ahkmed. How well did we really know this Ahkmed anyway? (He taught computers in a Palestinian neighborhood for a school that had only two computers for 200 students).

My mother-in-law is mostly silent on the matter of God. She writes poetry now—tells Darius she is writing a book for him. Like me, trying to understand it all, make something of it all. Not so much accept it, but make events spin and turn and change to what she would make them. An epic story with heroes and villains. And I find the poems beautiful. Tragic in what they try to do, in what they represent as much as what they are. There is recognition. I understand these people. Even if we don’t communicate as well as we’d like, even when the simplest disagreement erupts into the ugliest of arguments. There was a time when I was always looking into the essence of things. Years ago a poet friend of mine returned a manuscript with just a few words scrawled on it: “Joel, I worry about you; you are always almost desperately searching out the meaning of things. But not everything is meaningful. Most things just are.” I took it as an unintentional compliment. I am not glib. I am not clever, I thought; I am passionate—intense. And I still believe in essences, in the soul. But I guess I have become less determined to

understand them, more willing to accept that some knowledge is not mine to have. I believe in God more than ever. But I don't know why.

Avoidance?

Perhaps I believe because I have to. Because I survived. And there must be a reason. But to believe that would be to believe that there was purpose too in a young boy flying through shattered glass at seventy miles an hour on a cold night in a desert. "I can't believe in a God who would let this happen," my father-in-law says, and I feel myself thinking, "Neither could I." And yet I do believe. I so desperately believe.

Now my mother-in-law sits across me, and I honestly don't know what she feels as I tell her that Rachael and I are together. That we love each other. That we are happy. I want to say, "You don't understand. The building had collapsed, you see. There was no light. I was buried in it and I was going to just lie there. But something said, Get Up! Get Up! And there was a hand and there was light. Rachael came to me. To me and Darius."

Heroes and villains. Poetry.

Al hamdel Allah. Al hamdel Allah .

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Under Ahkmed's more certain gaze, following behind in the path of his relaxed gate and the vapor trail of his always burning cigarette, we moved through the gates of the ancient city. I'd not expected the ruins to be so complete or large. Two gigantic theatres were nearly perfectly intact and I was able to climb to the top, boys in toe, and sit in the cheap seats, imagining what entertainment went on down below. The Oval plaza was also intact and one could still see the grooves worn in the roads by chariots and carts. The two temples to Artemis were in worse shape, nearly flattened both by earthquakes and by the desecration visited upon them by Christians in later centuries. It was exhilarating to stand and sit in places that were once the center of commerce, trade and art for centuries, to look down the columned thoroughfares and wonder how busy they once were. But it was also overwhelming. Leaning on a wall in what was once the inner chamber of the temple of Artemis, I couldn't help but wonder what men and women labored and hoped and prayed here, what rituals they performed to give contour and meaning to their lives. Again I was struck with an almost desperate longing, trying to re-populate the city, filling the lonely market square with men and women like those I'd seen in the suq on the other side of the highway, shouting laughing, and struggling, a certain desperation behind each barter, each lowering of price. A woman with blackened hands sews a pair of shoes, another pulls the hand of a small child as it screams and laughs, two men shout over the price of perfume, or the hind-end of a lamb. What scents of spices and burning fuel made the air shimmer? What colors and clothes did they wear? Did they love and hate each other? Were their desperations like mine? And if they could stare across history to meet my gaze would there be a recognition; and would that recognition comfort or horrify? Would I still avert my eyes?

From my vantage point on the ruined temple mount I could see Susie and Ahkmed in the distance. Ahkmed was standing thirty feet above the ground on the ledge of a stone tower and was waving Susie over. Bending at the waist, open hand turned up, as if asking for a waltz. She hugged her arms around her, shook her head and laughed, that bright, sharp, wind-chime laughter. I cannot honestly recreate what I felt just then.

Avoidance.
Jealousy.
Love.
Fear.
Exhilaration.
Regret.
Longing.

My mother-in-law remembers this moment, too. And offers it up as evidence of some sinister intent on the part of Ahkmed. But I don't think she believes it. Because when you meet a good man in this world, you know it. And Ahkmed was simply and beautifully good. And if he was reckless then, he was reckless like a man who has discovered the reality of God and finds in that belief no answers, just some powerful creative presence that may or may not be just or kind. Whose ways are foreign to us and whose powers beyond our understanding. And so he dances on the ruins, thankful for his little life, his little death.

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And I wonder, did they love or hate their Emperor, that lonely foreigner in whose name the taxes were levied and temples built. And when Hadrian at last made his one visit and viewed the great arch constructed in his honor, did he feel as if he knew these people, did he care to? Or did this city blur and blend as cities must to an Emperor, something to hold in his worldly hand and toss in the air like a ball.

That arch, finished just before his arrival, was to stand as the new gate to the city. But the gate was never finished. And still, it stands a lonely sentry to the city in the distance. After thousands of years as one of the hubs of commerce in the Middle East, the trade routes changed and very gradually, Garazia became depopulated, fell into ruin and was covered in sand where it remained preserved in obscurity until a German traveler recognized the ruins. Eighty years later, archeologists are still uncovering the remnants of this ancient and mysterious world.

We spent many hours walking through Garazia before hiring a van to take us back (the next bus was a good 30 minutes off and the children were exhausted by then). Driving back I nodded off to sleep as our new teacher began his lessons, reciting the names of towns and cities. One of them, where I had seen the two boys playing beneath the fuel-tank, was originally a Palestinian Refugee camp. Now its squat houses spread out for miles, the land swelling with their descendents. I was struck, as usual by the enormity of what I still don't know about this country, about the world. Ahkmed smiled, guiding me through it as best as he could, taking me home to other journeys, other, more lonely excavations.

Such is the work of the archeologist of the city and the city's soul. Where we are always pulled along as much by mystery as beauty. And rubble is merely a name for traces left by human hands and loss and time.

Joel Peckham lives with his son, Darius, in Batavia, Ohio. Recent essays have appeared in *River*

Teeth and *The North American Review*. His second book of poetry, *Asleep at the Wheel*, is forthcoming from Pecan Grove Press in 2007.