

Little Deaths

By Judith Wink

At the end of *The Caine Mutiny*, World War II is over and Captain Keith is taking his warship home. The narrator looks into the captain's future:

The stars and the sea and the ship were slipping from his life.
In a couple of years he would no longer be able to tell time
to the quarter hour by the angle of the Big Dipper in the heavens.
He would forget the exact number of degrees of offset that held the
Caine on course in a cross sea.

All the patterns fixed in his muscles, like the ability to find the speed indicator buttons
in utter blackness, would fade.

It was a little death toward which he was steaming.

For once Shakespeare got it wrong. It isn't just cowards who die a thousand deaths. We all do. Some of these deaths are untroublesome. Captain Keith, for instance, is in his mid-twenties and never planned to command the *Caine* forever. He will get a Ph.D. in English and become a professor. Young adults like him die many little deaths as they leave school, leave their first jobs and their first apartments and (sometimes) their first husbands or wives. These changes don't even feel like deaths. They're more like the experience of the butterfly bursting out of its cocoon or the chambered nautilus building a bigger house for its growing body.

For older adults, it's different. One of our friends, a man in his late sixties, broke his wrist playing basketball with a bunch of eighteen-year-olds. The wrist healed but his confidence didn't; he's not sure whether he wants to get back on the court. I know several people who have sold their houses or their apartments and moved into assisted living. Their new homes have lots of amenities and all the conveniences, but everyone in this situation knows what his next home will be. "God's waiting room" is the usual nickname for these places. One inmate described his as "a Carnival Cruise on the River Styx."

The late Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdos used to say, when a colleague or a friend died, that the person had "left." He said someone had died only when the person stopped doing mathematics. Musicians die in the Erdos sense. I don't know whether Pablo Casals ever retired, but a lot of less fortunate players, professionals and amateurs, are forced to do it by arthritis, failing eyesight, physical or mental breakdowns, nerve damage, increasingly lousy reviews or a growing conviction that there's got to be a better way to make a living. Amateurs sell or donate their instruments. They give away their music. Going through these collections can break your heart. The pages are worn because the piece has been played many times. It's also been studied. The owner's notes are all over it, notes on phrasing, on articulation, on emphasis and

dynamics and the relationship of the words to the music. You can see the hours of thought that went into playing this piece. It was a labor of love, a labor that the owner will never again be able to undertake.

With luck, there will be compensations. Years ago, the Westsider ran a column by Bessie Doegenes (I think that's the spelling,) a longtime resident of the West 80s whose essays were full of dry humor and gentle wisdom. She was in the 80s in another sense, so she had a lot to say about being old. One column described her race from Central Park back to her bathroom, a race she won by a whisker. Another talked about losses and gains.

One of her friends, a good amateur artist, became too crippled by arthritis to manage a brush. He took up photography, using his trained eye to create beauty in a new medium. Another, who loved concerts, lost her hearing. She started going to the ballet. A third lost her sense of smell. Forever lost to her were the scent of roses, of clean laundry, of roast chicken. But there were a few people at her senior center who were isolated and lonely because of their dreadful body odor. Bessie's friend, no longer troubled by what others found unendurable, hugged these outcasts and lunched with them. Here's Bessie's punchline: "That smart cookie Ralph Waldo Emerson got it right: 'When the half-gods go, the gods arrive.'" In time all our half-gods will go.

When that happens, may there be gods waiting for us.