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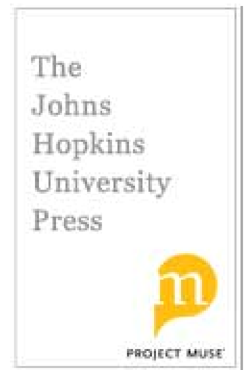
The Yale Review, Volume 106, Number 2, April 2018, pp. 152-157 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/tyr.2018.0067



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FICTION IN REVIEW

DAVID GALEF

Is there life after death? More important, does it resemble a celestial choir with harps handed round, or is it more like Grand Central Station at rush hour? Or maybe more than one sort of afterlife exists. What is an afterlife, anyway: a true existence or just an echo, an afterimage that's only a pallid re-creation of the original? Is that where ghosts enter our collective unconscious? These questions hover over Thomas Pierce's first novel, *The Afterlives,* starting with a coronary that makes the protagonist and narrator, Jim Byrd, experience a moment of clinical death before he reemerges in the hospital. As Jim notes in his matter-of-fact way (he's a commercial loan officer at a bank in Shula, North Carolina), he had no out-of-body experience, no blinding light at the end of a tunnel. Just a gap. The episode is anticlimactic, though Jim deals with it in an articulate and introspective way – the way of so many novel protagonists because those are the traits of so many novelists. He's ruminative, and the novel is a record of these observations.

The Afterlives: A Novel, *by Thomas Pierce (Riverhead, 384 pp., $27)*

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As a result of his brush with death, Jim has a monitoring app called HeartNet, installed in his chest and connected to the web, that warns him of an imminent attack. Here the metaphors start to accumulate, from affairs of the heart to a Byrd's-eye view of life. As Joyce showed in *Dubliners,* symbols surround us as part of the natural world. Pierce, whose first book, the short collection *Hall of Small Mammals,* garnered accolades from all over, is extremely adept at portraying the intricacies of everyday life. But he also likes to explore the realm of what-if, as in the stories "Shirley Temple Three," featuring a television show in which extinct animals are cloned back into existence; or "More Soon," in which a man's corpse can't be released to his brother because he died of something ominously, unbelievably contagious. Pierce is also skilled at traversing the quaggy ground of unequal relationships: a father and his wayward son in "Grasshopper Kings"; a guy and his girlfriend's kid at the zoo in the title story. These narratives create little worlds that spring into being from the first sentence and end ten to twenty pages later with a line or two that puts a new angle on what you thought you knew about the situation. The prose exhibits a tight control that pulls in pedestrian details as the what-if premises unfold. A novel's problem is how to sustain that unfolding for a far longer stretch.

So what can that kind of writerly imagination produce in the gawping space of over three hundred pages? Pierce's novel comes in five sections, with headings such as "Misfire" and "A Partial Existence," the incidents ranging from ordinary to slightly strange to downright supernatural. Ingeniously, Pierce puts across the what-if premise of an afterlife in many ways: ghosts, reincarnation, a session with a hypnotherapist, a visit to a psychic, holograms as phantom presences, cryogenic brain freezing, or just memory and dreams, as in Jim's vision of his dead father. On the level of physics, the novel presents the daisy particle, a tiny bit of matter that flickers in and out of existence, which Pierce toyed with in the story "The Real Alan Gass." Yet for all that, *The Afterlives* is a quiet novel, which is an achievement of sorts. One standard way to anchor the flyaway elements of the supernatural is to bolster them in prosaic detail. Pierce worked at National Public Radio for years and has local color down pat.

The town of Shula and its citizenry offer an abundance of

quotidiana. The locals now include a population of White Hairs, as Jim terms them, since Shula has gained a reputation as a good place to spend one's retirement (another kind of afterlife). But soon enough, the uncanny intrudes, starting with a ghost on the stairs in a Tex-Mex restaurant, coincident with Jim's renewed relationship with a childhood friend, the now-widowed Annie and her sullen teenaged daughter, Fisher. This relationship leads to marriage, a second life for Annie after the premature death of her first husband, whose drowned body was never recovered.

Also carefully worked into Jim's life pattern is the Church of the Search, "for people who wanted to *feel* God but didn't know how anymore." The church's flock, or adherents, believe in free inquiry, with guest speakers from myriad fields. One of them is the physicist Sally Zinker, who appears as a hologram projection to deliver a talk on the theoretical possibility of an afterlife accessible through a "reunion machine," based on the ghostly existence of daisy particles. As she notes, time is a mixed phenomenon: "Life and afterlife, it's all the same thing." Is this crazy, an excuse for seeing ghosts? As Jim's father, a retired math teacher, notes:

> Our brains are very pleased with themselves when they can discount something incredible. When they can return the world to normal. You hear a voice on a tape, and somebody tells you it's a ghost. OK, what do you do next? You start thinking of all the reasons why it isn't, why it couldn't be. I'm not saying we shouldn't try to find logical, rational explanations for things. Because we should! I've spent my whole life doing that. But at a certain point, you either trust that there's more than meets the eye – or you don't.

If this sounds like an extension of Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," that's no coincidence. Some novels want readers to take an awful lot on faith. This one simply wants you to consider it.

The plot doubles when Pierce starts blending the present with the past and the possibilities of the future. A parallel narrative from the 1930s involves the couple Robert and Claire, seen from childhood days to a marriage gone sour, as the family furniture store slowly fails during the Depression. In the mix are Robert's brother, Wendell, who was Claire's first choice before he de-

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camped to Los Angeles to write film scripts; and Claire's dog, a child substitute who ends up in flames (no plot spoiler; it's in the novel's epigraph). A signal event that occurs on the stairs of the couple's home is re-created after the house is sold and eventually turned into the Tex-Mex restaurant where Jim first encounters a ghost. Pierce is good at the art of intertwining lives, as in his short story "Videos of People Falling Down," which links a dozen people through funny home videos.

And what of Jim? His life might be placid except for the persistent conviction that, after his *petit mort* (though not in the French sense), "Everything feels inverted, turned around." This perception is bound to be discomfiting, but more through internal dissonance than external conflict. In fact, the liveliest description resides within the cameos that Pierce is so good at, from squabbling friends to the "Fortune Tellers" at the bank where Jim works. The sketches are punctuated by eloquent philosophical observations that are wonderful, even if they don't seem to quite fit Jim. When a White Hair dies in a traffic accident, for instance, Jim notes: "Death, for them, having already lived for so long, was something that occurred in hospice beds, behind closed doors, full of tubes, not on the street, not in plain view."

A central problem for this novel is how to convey the banality of existence without mimetically reproducing it. Eloquent commentary is key, and Pierce (or Jim) provides a fair amount. Yet on the same pages are too many sentences like: "The three of us scrubbed our hands at the same time in silence and then set the naps aside on the table," "At the end of the lunch we emptied our baskets into the trash can," or "I nodded and continued stripping the socks off my feet." These represent the kind of filler that makes up a life, but they possess a certain dullness. The wealth of summary and description also flatten the narrative, which frankly could use more action, though Jim is by nature a passive character, a real challenge for most novelists. He's most active when in the throes of emotion, but then he falls into the realm of cliché: "I was in love, nothing else mattered." Pierce is no Karen Russell; that's not his direction, and that's fine, but a little more imagery wouldn't hurt – especially because Pierce is clearly talented enough to write any way he pleases. When Jim reflects on his mother's increasing crotchetiness as she grows old, for example, he has this to say:

"Aging as a distillation process. The coarse salt bed left behind by the receding ocean." On a more mundane level, when Jim and Annie politely refuse a nearly empty box of donuts: "Greasy rings of stalagmite icing were all that was left of the eaten ones."

The novel grows thicker as it progresses, as incidents accumulate. The linkages are satisfying, as well, formed by ghosts or the intrusion of the past into the present. And the story of Jim's life acquires a pleasing symmetry through life with Annie, though Jim the ruminator questions it all:

> Whenever I felt too happy, I would begin to wonder if the happiness was real. If any of this was real. I would begin to wonder if maybe I wasn't still sprawled in the parking garage, a gash in my forehead, my heart unable to sustain me, my thoughts, my very being. Instead of being resuscitated, I'd simply died. There'd been no surgery, no HeartNet, and everything that had happened to me since then had occurred in the space of a millisecond, my last, a fireworks finale of synapses.

This kind of twist resembles the one in Ambrose Bierce's well-known story "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," in which an escape and a second chance at life prove all too ephemeral, in fact an illusion. Faulkner's "The past is never dead. It's not even past," from *Requiem for a Nun,* also comes into its own in this novel.

For all the reflections on afterlives here, the focus is also on the deaths that precede them. As the hypnotherapist whom Jim visits explains, all anxiety is at base a fear of death. Sally Zinker's work with daisy particles to develop her reunion machine is an attempt to get beyond this threshold to meet the dead in the afterworld, creating some of the best suspense in the plot.

Science fiction, of which this novel is a gentle instance, has a bearing here. In addition to ghosts and gadgetry, another futuristic postulate is grammers, no misspelling but rather lifelike holograms that deliver everything from information to advertising. They add a touch of the future to even a staid town like Shula, eventually becoming a significant part of the street scene. As with much good science fiction, the details come from what's going on today but extended a bit. Another science fiction aspect on display here is a philosophical angle or bent. Uninitiated science fiction

readers tend to think that future-technology stories are rosy, but the picture is mixed at best.

In a recent story from *The New Yorker*, "Chairman Spaceman," Pierce writes about a corporate raider named Dom Whipple, bound for a distant planet under the aegis of a church mission when a crisis causes a return to Earth. But Dom is far from an admirable human being, and his fate is ambiguous. Does Pierce condemn or condone the lives he's created? As he remarks in a *Paris Review* interview: "I'm channeling my inner preacher here, but I'd say trials are something to be endured, and the manner in which we endure them reveals us." As for what *The Afterlives* leaves us with, it's hard to say, exactly, which is in keeping with the novel and also with life as we think we know it.