

An Angel on Stilts

[A] wheel in his mind whirred: believe, do not, yes, no, yes, no.

—Bernard Malamud

Once I met an angel on stilts.

She was standing next to the seesaw in the park, her neck in the clouds. It was the first day of spring. She wore long jeans under her wings and a T-shirt with an elastic hem. She and her stilts were the gray of old white shoes.

She made me think of you. I remember you so well, my friend, so tall, so ready to swoop in and save me from behind the scenes and then pretend you didn't, that you don't even exist, the way angels do. You used to call your friends and have them waiting at the taxi stand when I got too cold in the Baltimore winter and caught a train to a city I didn't know. You'd buy an air mattress and have the delivery girl deliver it, and set up the pillows, when some guy you thought I shouldn't sleep with asked if I had a guest bed. You'd transfer me \$20 when there were dinners you weren't there to take me out to.

You're dead now, or just gone. One's no different than the other; to the unloved, the beloved must become dead. She who is friends with the man who didn't love her either never really loved him or loves him still.

I love you still, my friend. I have been looking for you for eleven years.

So when I saw the angel on stilts, her head up in the clouds, I said, "How small does the world look to you, from up there?"

Her wingtips hung a yard above the treetops. She pinched her forefinger and thumb a quarter-inch apart, to show how small my head seemed. She pinched the whole park to the span of two inches.

She was operating at a different scale than you and me. I was thrilled. I asked her could she see you someplace down here, and I described you, but you are eleven years older now and who knows how much more sad.

Because I couldn't see her eyes while she did me the favor of searching, I decided she was you, a bit. I decide this about people sometimes, when I'm missing you the most.

She couldn't find you. I said it was okay, that you'd left a while ago and forgotten where I lived was all. When I'm missing you the most, this is the story I let myself believe.

Because I'd decided she was you a bit, I asked her, "Would you kiss me?"

You see, you never did.

She said she hasn't kissed anybody since her little baby daughter, and besides she's not a real angel: these legs are just long stilts; these wings are papier-mâché and glitter. She wears this getup because that daughter of hers died, but before then boy did the girl love it when she played dress-up in the park, and now she has nobody to play dress-up for.

I hugged her around the stilt, knowing she couldn't feel me. The seesaw tottered. The world is so full of real sadness. Sometimes I am mad at you, because you only invented mine. You could have just loved me back the way I wanted, and then I wouldn't have to carry a good-as-dead man like a stone on my back the way this woman carries wings.

"I love your dress-up," I told the angel on stilts. "Those feathers! That height!"

"Truly?" she asked me. From the tone of her voice, I thought she smiled.

"Truly," I said.

But I lied, a bit. I miss you. Sometimes it feels like there is nothing true to say, except those words.

~

Once, before you went away, I met a real angel. He was sitting in the first-floor window ledge of a bookstore, typing on his laptop. This was January eleven years ago, when I was young and a little bit