

The Magic Kingdom

And as in the daily casualties of life every man is, as it were,
threatened with numberless deaths, so long as it remains
uncertain which of them is his fate, I would ask whether it is
not better to suffer one and die, than to live in fear of all?

—St. Augustine, *City of God*

This morning, I found on a slip of paper tucked into a book
a list of questions I'd written down years ago to ask the doctor.
What if it has spread? Is it possible I'm crazy? I've just returned
from Florida, from visiting my mother's last sister, who is eighty
& doing fine. At the airport, my flight grounded by a storm,
I bought a magazine, which fell open to a photograph
of three roseate spoonbills tossing down their elegant shadows
on a chartreuse field of fertilizer production waste.
Two little girls emptied their Ziplocs of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish
onto the carpet & picked them up, one by one, with great delicacy,
before popping them into their mouths. Their mother, outside
smoking, kept an eye on them through the glass. After my cousin died,
my father died & then my brother. Next, my father's older brother
& his wife. And, finally, after my mother died, I expected
to die myself. And because this happened very quickly
& because these were, really, almost all the people I knew,
I spent each day smashing dishes with one of my uncle's hammers
& gluing them back together in new ways. It was strange work,
& dangerous, even though I tried to protect myself—

wearing a quilted bathrobe & goggles & leather work gloves
 & opening all the windows, even in snow, against the vapors
 of the industrial adhesives. Most days now I get up late
 & brew coffee, & the smell rises from the old enamel pot
 I've had to balance under the dark drip ever since the carafe
 that came with the machine shattered in the dishwasher last month.

One morning I found a lump in my breast, & my vision narrowed
 to a small dot, & I began to sweat. My legs & arms felt weak,
 & my heart thrashed behind its bars. We were not written
 to be safe. In the old tales, the woodcutter's daughter's path
 takes her, each time, through the dark forest. There are new words
 for all of this: a shot of panic becomes the rustle of glucocorticoid
 signaling the sympathetic nervous system into a response
 regulated by the sensitivity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis.
 And as I go along, these freshly minted charms clatter together
 in the tender doeskin of the throat as though the larynx
 were nothing if not a sack of amulets tied with a cord & worn
 around the neck. But I tell you I sat on the bathroom floor for hours,
 trembling. And I can tell you this because the lump was just a lump,
 & some days now I don't even dread the end although I know
 it will arrive. The garage is filled with buckets of broken china.
 The girls chased each other & waved their arms casting spells,
 the trim of their matching gingham dresses the electric pink
 of the birds' wings. They turned each other into princesses
 & super-girls & then, they pretended to change back.
Oh, no. You forgot to say forever! they took turns repeating
 with dramatic dismay, melting into puddles of themselves,
 their sandals & sunburned knees vanishing beneath their hems.

Dead Man

Some are born to sweet delight.

Some are born to endless night.

—William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

We spend our lives trying to grasp the premise. William Blake is not, for instance, William Blake, but rather a 19th century accountant from Cleveland on the lam for murder & the theft of a horse. In the closing scene,

he is going to die, & so is Nobody, his half-Blackfoot, half-Blood guide.

Sure, this is a Western, a morality tale

about a destiny made manifest

through the voice of a gun & a hero whose mythic flight from innocence

destroys him. But we all come to the end of the line soon enough.

The obvious just seems wiser

when Nobody says it. *Time*, it turns out,

is the most common noun in the English language, as if by constant invocation,

we could keep it at bay.

Yesterday, I sat in another state on a large rubber ball

in my brother's basement bouncing my newborn nephew in my arms.

His mother, on the phone with a friend, asks what we should fear more,

the hobo spider or the poison that kills it. I want to whisper into his ear something that feels like knowledge:

Once upon a time, there was nothing

& one day, there will be nothing again. This is the faraway place

to which his tiny weight calls me. If he could understand the words, I think,
he would know what I mean, having only just sprung himself
from that fine sea.

Sometimes we coo to soothe him: *Don't cry, Little Bird. I know, I know.*

But only the roar of the vacuum finally calms him,
for nothing sounds as much
like the lost world of the womb as the motors of our machines.
The root of *travel* means *torture*, having passed from Medieval Latin

into Old French. As the action opens, Johnny Depp, shot in black & white,
is already rocking into night on a train. And soon, he will begin his dying.
This is not to say that the inky band fanning across the morning blue

of a kestrel's tail feathers
has no meaning, or the first fingers of rust
coming into bloom on the green enameled chassis of a Corona typewriter
left in the rain.

Direct observation, the naturalist Niko Tinbergen assures us,

is the only real thing. Perhaps this is what I should tell him.

Or that this moment,
too, is a part of some migration. Every snow bunting composes its own song,
& a careful watcher can tell one kittiwake from its neighbor by the little dots

on the tips of its wings.

The most used verb is also the most humble—
merely *to be*.

Nobody can teach to William Blake the auguries of William Blake.
We are, instead, our own vatic visions, bumbling prophets. Our sense of ourselves

as invented as film.

Later, in an ocean-going canoe lined with cedar boughs,
he will drift out into cold breakers, two bullets in his chest. But, here,
in his small hat & wire glasses, he still seems

sweetly comic. He holds up a letter;

someone's promised him a job. His fancy plaid suit makes him look like a clown.

Florum Principi

Without names, our knowledge of things would perish.

—Linnaeus

Prince of Flowers, who set out to give an order to the multitudes, my collection
is so different from your own,

which you filled with the carefully pressed

lectotypes of bear's ear & foxglove & carpeted with the pink *Borealis*
which blooms so briefly midsummer beneath the Lapland pines.

Mine holds two tarred boxes & boatless oars & the broken sonar equipment,
which came with the house & goes on sleeping on a shelf in the garage,

despite the revving of a neighbor's Jet Ski—on a hitch in his driveway,
spewing exhaust one moment & stalling the next—

& the honk of a car alarm that sounds all afternoon without reason.

Who can say how the world made strange by our understanding of it
would seem to you, who went to ground before Darwin asked

whether *a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created*
parasitic wasps, or Charles Willson Peale exhumed the hull of a mastodon

in a thunderstorm in Newburgh, New York, to prove beyond question
that a mighty species might cease to be. Among specimens of butterflies

you christened *agamemnon* & *mnemosyne* & the skin & bones
of the John Dory *Zeus faber*, a fish whose flank is said to bear the stain

of St. Peter's thumb, what could have seemed more improbable than change?

The turf roof of your cottage in Hammarby still puts forth houseleek
& the narrow-leaved hawk's beard. And the shoots sprung from the seeds

of the empress's honey-sweet *Corydalis nobilis* still threaten to overtake
the yard.

Here, however, the Surfside Diner is now an information center

& the Three Coins Motel & the Ebb Tide have been razed to make way
for vinyl-clad condominiums no one has the money to build.

Their sandy lots, still littered with a few bricks, accumulate beer cans
& the twisted frames of aluminum beach chairs. Dandelion & cocklebur.

Aster & thistle.

And if I'm feeling blue, it's because I've been looking
all morning at the old photos I've promised to send to my brother,

who has a new son & can, therefore, stare into the untended past
& not be bent.

My senior year of high school, I drank too much

& rode my bicycle around until dawn, then sat at the counter of the beach grill
eating bacon & eggs for free because the waitress was my best friend,

who ended up strung out & disappeared after falling in with a junkie
named Joe who worked in the kitchen. When my grades slipped,

no one phoned my house or suggested Guidance get involved.
My troubles were less than most.

I can't account for what the people

in the pictures might have been thinking, why they didn't demand their daughter be home at night in bed. In this one, my mother is smiling.

She's had her hair done; she's wearing those big gold hoop earrings I've got in the drawer.

Because you knew two words were enough

to separate chickweed from mallow, I want to talk to you about the soul & the question of when we become irrefutably ourselves, a question

theologians have debated for centuries, going so far as to ask at what point miscarried fetuses must necessarily be human & ought, so being, to be blessed.

Were I not Alexander, the great Macedonian conqueror proclaimed at Corinth, *then I would be Diogenes*.

I cannot tell you exactly why

this story charms.

At eight weeks, a careful observer can see all the parts: the tiny specks of the eyes, ten discrete toes,
but the chromosomes—

which not even the pre-Socratic Democritus, who hypothesized the existence of the uncuttable atom, could have imagined—

are there from the start.

Yesterday I read about a genetic disorder: the afflicted are driven to hurt themselves & those they love. It is,

by all evidence, extremely rare—a single, inexplicable glitch in three billion bits of code. Case studies include men who thrust their hands into their mouths

& bite off their own fingers. Some bite off their lips.

They beg to be restrained.

There will always be those who insist everything is getting better,
even when we can't discern it.

But this must really have been what you felt

in your grove of plums or in spring under the Siberian crab apple,
whose blossoming limbs appeared from a distance to be burdened

with snow.

Today is the first day of autumn though it's only August.
It's the first day though—the air & the light pregnant with something

like despair or the sudden stillness along the coast when the tourists
have gone.

We don't want to be lonely, but we are. *Disappointment?*

More like the promise of a disappointment we're disappointed hasn't come.
Melancholia, Hippocrates might have suggested, & it's a beautiful

appellation—

a constitution under siege, he thought, to too much black bile.
Three o'clock. A yellow wind whispers its one note over & over

into the willow's ten thousand salt-blistered ears.

Just now, only this—
something so small not even you have given it a name.