

SHORT DAYS AND LONG NIGHTS

AN OLD TV SET SAYING TO ITSELF IN AN EMPTY HOUSE: "I SEEM TO BE FATED, ORDAINED, AND CONDEMNED TO LIVE IN THE MIDST OF THINGS I'M NEVER TO HEAR THE END OF."

COLD DECEMBER NIGHT. A HOMELESS WOMAN COWERING IN A DOORWAY ON EAST 3RD STREET IN NEW YORK TALKING TO GOD—AND HE, TONGUE-TIED AS USUAL.

A BULL WITH THE HEAD OF A DEEP THINKER, STANDING ALONE IN A FIELD COVERED WITH A LAYER OF THIN SNOW AND NOT LIKING WHAT HE SEES.

MY BROTHER TELLS ME: "I SAW SIX OR SEVEN PEOPLE, ASIAN, AND AS THEY WALKED BY ME ON THE STREET, I NOTICED THAT ONE OF THE MEN WAS CRADLING A SHOPPING BAG TO HIS CHEST AND THAT INSIDE IT WAS AN OLD DOG. AS I WATCHED THEM, I REALIZED THEY WERE GOING TO THE ASPCA A FEW BLOCKS AWAY TO PUT IT DOWN. IT WAS A MOVING BUT AT THE SAME TIME WONDERFUL SEND-OFF TO THE BELOVED POOCH, WITH THE WHOLE FAMILY, GRANDPARENTS AND ALL, TAGGING ALONG."

MY FAVORITE WRITING IMPLEMENT CONTINUES TO BE A STUB OF A PENCIL AND MY FAVORITE WRITING SURFACE THE BACK OF AN ELECTRIC BILL. I LIKE TO SIT AT THE KITCHEN TABLE MY WIFE USES TO CHOP ONIONS AND SHED TEARS ON, BECAUSE EVERY TIME I'M STUMPED AND UNABLE TO THINK OF WHAT TO WRITE NEXT, THE REFRIGERATOR OPENS AND HERE COMES A PLATE OF COLD PASTA OR A HUGE BAKED HAM TO HELP ME WITH MY POEM.

SECURITY CAMERA

A DOG BEGGING ON TWO LEGS

OUTSIDE A SUPERMARKET.

DID ANCIENT EGYPTIANS WHISTLE WHILE WALKING PAST A PYRAMID AT NIGHT? DID NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, AS HE TRUDGED HIS WAY ALONG THE DARK STREETS OF SALEM? I ALWAYS DO, PASSING ONE OF THE SEVERAL SMALL FAMILY GRAVEYARDS ON MY ROAD. I DON'T KNOW THE NAME OF THE ZIPPY LITTLE TUNE I'M WHISTLING, BUT THIS FAR IT HAS DONE ITS JOB AND KEPT THE GHOSTS AT BAY.

"WHAT I LOVE MOST ABOUT NATURE IS HOW INDIFFERENT IT IS TO US HUMANS AND HUMAN SUFFERING. WHILE WE ARE HERE WITH OUR LITTLE OR BIG TRAGEDIES—THE WIND IS BLOWING, THE LEAVES ARE RUSTLING IN THE TREES, THE FLOWERS BLOOM, AND DIE—THERE'S A GREAT COMFORT IN THAT INDIFFERENCE," THE POET VALZHYNA MORT SAYS IN A *NEW LETTERS* INTERVIEW. I AGREE.

THEY'D SPY ON FLEAS ON SOME MUTT IF THEY COULD—OR PERHAPS THEY ARE ALREADY DOING THAT. CROWS APPEAR TO BEGIN THEIR DAY WITH MARITAL SQUABBLES AND HAVE LESS AND LESS TO SAY AS THE DAY PROGRESSES.

INTERVIEWERS AND STUDENTS OF LITERATURE LIKE TO ASK POETS TO REVEAL THE SECRETS OF THEIR TRADE, AS IF THEY WERE FAMOUS CHEFS ON TELEVISION COOKING SHOWS EAGER TO SHARE THEIR RECIPES, AND SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *BUY AN OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, FEATURING 600,000 WORDS AND 3 MILLION QUOTATIONS AT A REPUTABLE BOOKSTORE. HAVE YOUR BUTCHER TRIM A 4-5 POUND ROAST FROM ITS PAGES AND PLACE IT IN A ROASTING PAN, ETC...* AND ARE DISAPPOINTED AND VISIBLY ANNOYED WHEN INFORMED BY THE POET THAT HE HASN'T THE VAGUEST IDEA HOW OR WHY HIS POEMS WERE WRITTEN.

TO TELL THE TRUTH, I'M ALWAYS SCRIBBLING SOMETHING IN SECRET. ONCE MY WIFE CAUGHT ME CHEWING THE END OF MY PENCIL AND SAID TO ME: "I HOPE YOU'RE NOT WRITING MORE OF THAT BORING DOGGEREL YOU CALL POETRY?" "NO, SWEETIE," I REPLIED, "I'M JUST BALANCING OUR CHECK BOOK AND GETTING READY TO WRITE YOU A LITTLE LOVE NOTE AFTER THAT."

MY SUMMER REGRET: THE NAKED NEWLYWEDS RIDING THROUGH THE JUNGLE ON A TIGER IN A PAINTING BY SOME POOR IMITATOR OF DOUANIER ROUSSEAU, THAT I COULD HAVE HAD FOR FIFTY BUCKS AT A GARAGE SALE, BUT LIKE A FOOL PASSED UP.

"I'VE NOTHING TO HIDE," THE CITIZENS OF VARIOUS POLICE STATES IN THE LAST CENTURY NEVER TIRED OF REPEATING, AND NOW WE ARE HEARING AMERICANS SAY THE SAME. HOW IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE BOTH FREE AND HAVE NO PRIVACY, DOESN'T SEEM TO ENTER THEIR MINDS.

HIS GRANDMOTHER, WHO LIVES BY HERSELF, ROAMS HER OLD HOUSE AT NIGHT LECTURING MIRRORS FOR HOURS.

A POEM IS A CLOCK, A STRANGE CLOCK WHOSE MAKER INTENDS IT TO STOP AFTER A CERTAIN NUMBER OF TICKS.

“A MAN’S LIBRARY IS A SORT OF HAREM. I OBSERVE THEY HAVE A GREAT PRUDENCY IN SHOWING THEIR BOOKS TO A STRANGER,” EMERSON WROTE IN HIS JOURNAL IN 1848. WITH E-BOOKS AND THE INTERNET, EVEN READING IS NO LONGER A PRIVATE ACT. GETTING OUT OF BED LAST NIGHT TO FETCH A BOOK OF OVID’S EROTIC POETRY MADE ME FEEL I WAS ENGAGING IN SOMETHING RECKLESS AND SUBVERSIVE THAT ONE DAY WILL BE HELD AGAINST ME.

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG POETS, JIM TATE AND I BECAME INFATUATED WITH JIMMY RODGERS AND HIS YODELING. WE’D GET PLASTERED, PLAY HIS RECORDS FOR HOURS, AND YODEL ALONG WITH RODGERS. OUR PLAN WAS TO LEARN TO YODEL LIKE HIM, SO THAT AT THE NEXT POETRY READING WE’D ASTOUND THE SOPHISTICATED AUDIENCE BY YODELING LIKE COWBOYS AFTER EACH STANZA OF ONE OF OUR POEMS, AND EITHER BECOME A LAUGHING STOCK, OR BE REGARDED AS GENIUSES BY THE AVANT-GARDE. BUT WE NEVER GOT GOOD AT IT.

DEAR ETERNITY,

HAVE YOU BEEN HOARDING OUR DEAD OLD WATCHES, THEN FLAUNTING THEIR FADING GLITTER HERE AND THERE IN THE NIGHT SKY?

I KEEP THINKING ABOUT THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN I PASSED ON THE STREET LAST NIGHT WHOM I WILL SURELY NEVER SEE AGAIN. “HE LOST HIS HEAD AND SPENT THE REST OF HIS LIFE LOOKING FOR IT,” THEY’LL SAY ABOUT ME.

GYPSY FORTUNE-TELLER SITTING AT A SMALL ROUND TABLE IN HER PARLOR LATE ONE NIGHT AND STARING INTENTLY INTO AN IPHONE WHILE WAITING FOR A CUSTOMER.

HIS WAS A SAD, SAD LOVE STORY THAT MADE EVERYONE WHO HEARD IT LAUGH.

EVERY POET HAS HIS OR HER OWN WAY OF MOURNING THE PASSAGE OF TIME. THAT MAY BE THE SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY OF WHY SO MANY PEOPLE ARE DRAWN TO POETRY.

“I’D RATHER LISTEN TO A TREE THAN TO A PHILOSOPHER,” MY OLD FRIEND TONY PERNICIARO USED TO SAY, BUT NOW THE TREES HAVE NO LEAVES AND HAVE LITTLE TO SAY TO THE SNOW JUST BEGINNING TO FALL.

“WE ALL GROPE AROUND IN THE DARK,” I WHISPERED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT JUST TO HEAR MY OWN VOICE.