

There Are Angels

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His heartbeat is a fluttering moth, a sputtering flame. I can feel it in my palm. The heat of it. There are several rapid beats per second, but they are irregular and faint. His beady black eyes shine hardly at all in the white fluorescent light of the waiting room, matte sheets of weary pain. Once, he stretches his forelimbs and curls those cloudy gray claws as a great yawn consumes his fragile and boney body, exposing with a shiver the pink of his small mouth and the perfect, miniscule fangs that reside therein.

I have him swaddled in the red blanket, fittingly, in which I first brought him home only a year before. It was clean, then, unsullied with the lost hairs, brown pellet food, and various bodily fluids that would eventually come to define it. It lacked too that special, sleepy smell that hundreds of hours of his little sleeping body would lend it and that no amount of washing could expunge—a comforting smell, musky and real, a primal and animal indicator of rest and warmth and happiness.

I have a diminutive silver chain around my neck. It is beautiful, but slippery and smooth, and so I hardly feel it as I anxiously run its length through my fingers.

Finally, after about a half hour, they call my name. I fill out a few forms about insurance and the status of the animal, writing “ferret” on the small blank next to the word “Other,” and then I’m sitting in a happy yellow room with children’s jungle wallpaper and green Formica countertops, the barking, whining dogs from the waiting room barely audible. Dante’s breath, though, I can hear plainly, and his faint wheezes fill the room with melancholy, with ancient mortal grief, as we huddle and hunch together on a blue plastic stool and wait for the vet to arrive.

Dramatic, maybe, the way my memory handles these things. What’s the life of a cheap, dumb animal when there is no dearth of real tragedy to attend to? Aren’t our lives shaped by caskets and last conversations, by broken hearts and dreams deferred? There is no place in the cavalcade of entropic failure

that is real life to mourn the passing and inconsequential; if you believe the epic poets and the body collective of human myth, we mark the passage of days by the broad and sweeping, the epic reckonings and calls to witness. After all, we have songs for Heracles and Perseus, dirges for Orpheus and Cassandra and Oedipus, but it is a rare moment when we glorify or savor the innocuous, incidental flickering of an artificial light in an oft-trafficked hallway or let our fingernails pause on the nearly imperceptible defects of silver chains. And yet, and yet.

The interior of the Cristal Hotel, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Polished black marble forms every fixture, and the heady smell of chlorine from the swimming pool permeates all thirty floors. Five times a day the state of the art sound system, an interconnected network of high-end white JBL speakers hidden cleverly throughout covert alcoves so as to be audible from even the most remote and recessed places in the whole of the building, plays the Muslim call to worship, a warbling, penetrating, decidedly foreign melody with ululated quarter tone ornamentation like fluttering, feathery wings and a breathy drone beneath. A good portion of the patrons here will each time remove their shoes and make their way to one of the many prayer rooms to supplicate themselves before Allah, to impose rigorous and regular transcendence onto the shape of their days.

There are sandstone-colored mosques, beautiful and often dead, on nearly every street corner—beautiful things with graceful minarets and fascinating Moorish arch work—that can be seen through the ceiling-length windows of the hotel. Even behind these tremendous panes of glass, the stifling heat of the Persian Gulf spring sun and the smell of stinging desert sand in a cool breeze make themselves apparent if only by some vague and vicarious process. Spend a moment wandering the plushly carpeted halls and you will hear the German and Russian of well-to-do businessmen and families on holiday intermingle with the Arabic and Urdu of the native Emiratis and expat Indian workers, an intoxicating mix of lilting and barking sounds that is nothing like the twang of American English. The boutique in the lobby, named in gaudy green neon letters “So-Pretty Clothing,” features a comic distribution of *dishdashba*-ed men and *abayah*-ed women alongside more Western tourists buying brand names like Guess and Gucci, an amicable mixing of cultures that is all smiles and heartfelt greetings and conspires, in a decidedly unsubtle way, to remind you of the import of these moments, of the potential for depth and profundity that swirl in this alien and singular place.

And in a very real way, I am here. I am consumed. I am a devoted cultural voyeur, I am painfully and acutely aware that this is a formative experience, that *life* itself is in these halls in some immeasurable way, hiding in every facet of this lively and vivacious excursion, in the well-tended hotel rooms and sacred, sequestered ablution halls and empty burning deserts. Shivers dimple the skin on my arms every time the clock strikes a holy hour and groups of devotees bustle to commune with their God. And yet, for all the faith and godliness that suffuse this place, the dedication to deities and *dirham* alike, there are no angels I can find; I am sublimated by my own attentions and by the wealth of reality, and so my thoughts float over all these far-reaching differences like a flat stone skimming over the surface of a glassy lake, and I find that, no matter how I try, I cannot feel my necklace. Vast arrays of information will be taken in and internalized on this trip; a grand narrative will form in hindsight, I know; but it will be hazy and distorted like a distant mirage, an artifact encased deeply in gauzy and obscuring cloth, a travelogue as travelogues are. The whorls on my fingertips find no purchase as I wander, and divinity is absent from my heart.

I've grown pensive. A friend asks me how I like the trip thus far. I say, "I am surviving." I do not think she understands.

The veterinarian is a smallish woman, maybe five foot three, with black hair tied behind her head and kept in place with a pebbled brown many-limbed butterfly clip. Her sterile white lab coat and cork clipboard grant her a certain air of off-putting officiousness, but she plays it easily behind a well-polished smile. All business. She asks me, glancing at her charts, if this is Dante, and what can she help me with today; I tell her of his erratic eating habits and his over-sleeping, his general malaise, the extreme skinniness that pushes his brittle spine through his patchy fur.

A deep V is impressed upon her forehead as she listens attentively, making but a couple quick notes on her clipboard. The way she nods belies confidence, empathy, understanding. She speaks to me about the potentialities of this particular situation as she feels with steady hands along his frail body, checking his digestive tract for discernible lumps; in the middle of explaining to me the genetic predispositions for these animals to certain types of cancer, her cool look of medical beneficence fades for a brief moment into one of genuine weariness as her probing fingers catch, and her manual exploration comes to a resigned rest.

Life clips on around us. An orderly knocks on the door and leaves some paperwork. Somewhere behind the walls of the examination room a heavy

piece of machinery hums serenely into life, only to fade quickly into ambient buzzing. We are surviving, and I cannot stop toying ineffectually with my chain.

Two X-rays and a brief, courteous discussion of financial considerations later, his tiny head is cupped in my hand as she presses a thick syringe into his abdomen. She is aiming for the liver, she says, which will help to disseminate the chemical quickly and efficiently, with little pain, to shut down all the biological systems as rapidly as we can manage. I can feel the taut muscles of his neck twitch slightly as the needle penetrates him, but his eyes don't seem to really change, nor does his rapid breath. The black eyes focus somewhere in the middle distance, and the ragged heaving comes shallowly, unperturbed, from his sable, furry face.

I cannot help but wonder if he has any concept of soul-baring vulnerability in this moment. Does he stare at death as it encroaches upon his fragile form? Does he exult in the unique confluences of his life, in the inexorable pull of past and future on his tiny constitution, does he sing to the high heavens his fear and his praises and his curses? Is there an angel in this moment or is it another plodding, coursing figment like so many mornings and nights before?

Rainer Maria Rilke tells us, "Every angel is terrifying" (11).

But then, my fingertips falter on a chain link upon which there's a small deposit of rust-red oxidation. I never noticed it before. There are hot salty tears on my nose—I am acutely aware of their slick lugubrious scent, their cloudy, heady sting. I can feel every detail of Dante's head in my fingers, the gorgeous slightness of his jawbone that protrudes through paper skin, the pulsing esophagus now going dry as the poison does its heavenly, dirty work, the bristly protuberances of his stiff whiskers. I can see the muscles in his eyes relax as the pain-knit fibers relinquish their hold on his beautiful, minute irises; I watch in admiration as the small spark of his mind is snuffed out into black smoke.

This is not nearly the greatest tragedy I have known, and yet for some reason its implications work their icy fingers through a wide, bright hole deep in my mind. It is easy to live dutifully and purposefully with a confidence in the depth of one's own experience, to think that by some force of will we can wring from the fabric of being purpose in abundance and justification in all moments, but we do not choose our visitations. All we can do is try not to deny them when they deign to arrive.

So, I go forth in that miraculous Middle Eastern jewel of a city, into the hot Arab night, restless and overwhelmed, playing with my chain once again. I stray from the hotel in the sacred hours past midnight, down the broad avenues towards the city's waterfront corniche and towards the ocean, past the hordes of lean and mewling Arabic cats and the white Toyota taxi cabs and the crowds of impoverished Indian workers that huddle in alleyways beneath crumbling Soviet-bloc style facades. Strange smells of roasting meat and saltwater air and ethereal breezes tantalize my nose, bond themselves to my memory, burn themselves through layer upon layer of my waking faculties, and I just so happen to prod a kink with my cuticle.

Then, inexplicably, there are angels in the subtly shifted stars, the twinkling pinpricks of light that seem rotated on their axes and yet outline somehow the same shapes they did at home. They are in the familiar globules of artificial light that distort the night air into hazy coronas of blue like beaded pearls on an endless string, so ordinary and yet lighting up palm trees where I am used to seeing maples or pines. They leap from the license plates of parked cars, familiar Hondas and Subarus except that their identification codes are ten digits long, all numbers, the first five characters separated from the last by a small black silhouette of an eagle in flight.

The closeness of links on a masterfully crafted silver chain can at first blush make it seem one object; they fool the senses, these tiny, nearly imperceptible things, and it is so damnably easy to believe there is nothing between them, that this is a chain like every other chain you've felt, a familiar sensation, links affixed to links, a stock and rote part of life. It is not; they are not. It is the smooth and shifting skin of a desert snake, the nearly silent sussuration of lapping waves on an Arabic shore, the shuddering, dying breath of the smallest of creatures; they are halos and pure, cutting notes, reckonings and calls to witness, clarity and purpose incarnate, and they will show themselves to be distinct in the strangest of moments.

Cling to this truth. It is everything.

WORKS CITED

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Random, 2009. Print.

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