

LULLABY

Is there any person who cannot be counted a seeker? Our peculiar design is like a house not yet finished, an experiment an itinerate architect tried out. What is missing—an absence—calls above the mesmerizing drone of the everyday round and at times startles us into a recognition. What we seek is very near yet very far, most great yet smallest of the small, of monumental import yet worth not a farthing, and to discover it, we require help. To whom are we to turn?

Not to the gods. They are unhelping, not just because they ceased to walk among us and grew puny. Their death was foretold by their violent birth, erupting from human consciousness full-blown, like Athena, not needing accretion, accumulation and selection, integration and denial. Of whatever name or cast, the gods give no key to the mystery of suffering. They illustrate the completed edifice, in which reflection the pain of our ignorance is magnified. Ought we to be mistrustful of perfect knowledge? A while ago, Socrates related that “none of the gods are seekers after truth. They do not long for wisdom because they are wise—and why should the wise be seeking the wisdom that is already theirs?” (*Symposium* 203e). Mistrust is the oxygen of human thought.

The all-knowing are blind and impatient when it comes to human ignorance’s ignorance of itself. They may inspire or resuscitate, but the breath must be passed to us by spirits who also know the constricted chest of fear, poverty, and adversity. The gods are not exemplars of the human condition but an artist’s rendering of how to elim-

inate its limiting strictures. The spirits who could help beings like ourselves must be both more foreign and more intimate. They must mingle with us as we mingle with our bodies, gently yet urgently. When they walk, they must walk the muck of existence with a tread as heavy as ours but uplifted. And springing up, their exuberance must not transport them to more godly realms for more than a moment. They, like we, require the ground under their heels so as to push off from earth in the direction of heaven.

Help would be easily found if the gods in this measure were helpful. They are said to be as manifold as cells in a fly's eye and to have no need of sleep. If they were substantial and obeyed the physicist's laws, great care would be needed to move about in our world, so dense would their presence be. Our desires announce a god's influence. Whenever we have wished ourselves free of limitation, a god names that condition. Which of us has the power to refrain in a stressful moment from saying, "If only I would no longer be burdened by..."? The help we need, however, comes from acceptance and embrace and not denial. Gods lend no help of their own.

Our invisible allies must share in our condition, its pain of birth, its uncertainty and peril, and its reliance on medicine, prayer, and magic. These everyday spirits are fewer than the gods, for the same reason that will is rarer than desire, hope rarer than cockiness, and remorse rarer than guilt. How everyday spirits originate does not concern me now, though unlike the gods the strength of imagination does not suffice to bring them to being. Let us say that, unlike the gods (who are creatures of time), everyday spirits have always been—or have been for as long as we have felt the need for ourselves to be. Disease brings cure; and the obstacle, its triumphant overcoming. The allies we meet in vanquishing the too-human impediments of despair, self-pity, paralysis, hatred, envy, and slough are spirits born of the twilight, the barbed wire, the no-man's-land, the desert that must be crossed.

The ancient physicians can provide a guide. They recognized that the cure, though miraculous, is never painless, and more powerful antidotes cause major upheavals in the balance of vital energies. They knew that remedies may be derived from the commonplace, substances ready-to-hand in the daily round. Such an outlook is useful. The everyday spirits whose help we seek are to be sought in the most familiar and essential of ordinary existence, the element about whom forgetfulness and memory both are miraculous—ourselves.

Is it in sleep that we come closest to ourselves? Not the sleep of dreams, which merely subtracts the object from waking perception and permutes the images to enact a story, but deep, dreamless sleep. We are not the stuff dreams are made on. The dream is a bit of foreign matter, an irritant to sleep, from which may grow a pearl or just restless discomfort. How we cling to dreams reflects our unsure grasp of what is precious. Dreams seem to tell about ourselves the way a mirror does when it catches us unawares. Our obscurity emerges. For dreams tell more about the world of waking than of sleep, which lies buried, pristine, and opaque, beneath nighttime imagery. To the great mystery, second only to (as Gilgamesh discovers, and what Sleeping Beauty falls victim to) its cousin death, we must remember the prayer of the lullaby, a night of undisturbed sleep:

Lay you down now and rest
May your slumbers be blest.

The blessing of true sleep is the infant's. To sleep like a babe is to find sleep as it was intended to be, complete abandon. Near to the sleeping child in a cradle hovers the first of everyday spirits. Hush, it is the lullaby. Quiet, mindful of need, we find ourselves there.

New-fallen snow barely covers frozen blades of grass. The pathway from house to woods is more recognizably itself in reshaped contours of the countryside: Roads are narrower, trees recede from clouds, stones have new mass. First snow is the time of lullaby. Maternally, it puts to rest errant urgings, itches, and tensions of desire without argument, but by a warm persuasion of total comfort. Nothing will bother you. There is no pain, nothing to fear, no harm to come. When you wake, everything will be as you left it. The still-life arrangement of bedclothes and a few slow notes of melody are also a prayer for the dead. Socrates proposes the pleasure of death as that of dreamless sleep everlasting. Hamlet's fear of death is the terror of recurrent dreams. But the lullaby avows itself to side with life. The lullaby demands one accede nightly to waters too dark for reflection. Nocturnal baptism by an intelligence greater than the sum of the cogito plus our unconscious urgings shows the true breadth of will—so rarely glimpsed in bright daylight.

So wide and deep is will (I do not say desire) that all thought, feeling, and sensation disappear in it as a grain of salt in the sea. Yet when an annoying remnant of day obtrudes to leave us insomniac, a single thought becomes insoluble. It perversely denies sleep. In sleep-

less hours of day, many unaccustomed events pass through the mind, originating like a meteor shower from a single point in the constellation of things: our refusal. Strange that lullabies are sung for the very young. The truth is that what refuses the risk of sleep appears after infancy and rises like a star with the strengthening ego. The baby needs no help to be called to sleep. Sleep overtakes the babe in the midst of a cry, a smile, a burp, and sends her sprawling, asleep, in the crib.

A snowfall works a similar wonder with leaves of the woods. If leaves refused their cover, the whole cycle—decay, reconstitution, new growth—would suffer. As attachment to schemes of the workday grows, the infant is helped by an echoic spirit, the lullaby. The word itself is a song that lulls growing preoccupation to sleep. That dying leaves sing it to themselves may be a reason for their falling. A mother who hums to knit up the raveled sleeve of care blesses her own slumber and the sleeping world's. She would, if she could, send down a blanket of snow to cover the rocky ground swiftly and deeply with its careless drifts. In the blank face is perfect repose.

In a darkened house, a single light burns. That could be a sign of industry, a task relentlessly pursued unto dawn. But no. It is a bad sign—that the sandman whose magical grains of sand close an exhausted child's eyelids has passed over without stopping. Still, to toss and turn is better with a light on than in the dark. A distance that separates desire from its object, familiar in the daily round, takes on grotesque proportions in twilight consciousness. The paralysis of being neither asleep nor awake reveals, by its negation of all possible action, how fragile our designs are. "Lord, make me to know mine end and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am" (Psalm 39.4). Thus sings David to the sleepless Saul. Do we hear a psalm as a lullaby for the wounded spirit? The psalm soothes. No call for quietism, it lulls a disquieted heart to the rest needed for any action. Perhaps empires have been lost for want of a lullaby. Napoleon, who could not find sleep nights before Waterloo, knew this truth. To glimpse frailty and to measure by a law of our nature the infinite expanse containing our travels: That is the hope of the psalm. To say, "I am powerless; let me sleep," frees one to be breathed in, sustained, and refreshed by the opaque power.

The lullaby is always simple. Repetition of a few notes alone suffices to repair the garment rent by open eyes. Since an infant lives but a hairbreadth from deep sleep, the smallest reminder recalls angelic existence. How angelic is the sleeping face of a baby! We must not

think artists take unnecessary liberties in seeing an angel in the infant and ringing their heavenly scenes with *puti*. The undifferentiated state is as close as humankind comes to an existence beyond desire, passion, and striving.

Theologians who see birth as a fall are right only insofar as an infant, on uttering a first cry, is dropped into the sea of possibility. For angels, all is actual, every thought, every pinprick of feeling. If we may speak of it, that actuality excludes self-consciousness, because it excludes imagination. What is seen by an angel is and must be. Such seeing is not human, because it lacks the distance through which imagination moves. Spinoza calls it "seeing through the eye of eternity," *sub specie aeternitatis*. Hovering over the waters of possibility but never touching them, the angel also lacks realization. Everything being too known, nothing yields to surprise.

When intelligence returns to its organic impress during deep sleep, necessity and existence again coincide. All absence is absent, and also, as Socrates says, all love for searching things out. The fall from heaven is pregnant with birth, about which angels remain ignorant. Eyes open with sounds of suckling, the infant finds the mother's breast. She is fed. A need is nourished through satisfaction, and the babe comes in from an angelic wilderness. Hunger makes her human, just as Gilgamesh's companion Enkidu's hunger leads him to the folds of humanity. The baby is given a merest taste of possibility before returning to deep sleep, but it is enough. Permanence in the angelic void of necessities restores energies with incomparable vitality. Who can resist abiding in the realm of deep draughts? But an infant has taken in the fleet taste of contingency and, without more, cannot endure. From now on, the way back to the angels will be blocked, imperceptibly at first, by dreams of the taste, until empyreal perception is altogether forsaken.

Fear not. The lullaby forever points to sacred emptiness, more unchanging than a Spinozistic God. Its plain melody is an invitation, intoned in semidarkness. Release, however, takes a soporific stronger than warm milk when a little pain obtrudes. Thus the drinking song, the bacchanal, comes just before the lullaby in a medley of sleep. Therein a peculiar problem arises. Wine intoxicates, besides lulling the mind to bed. Born of the grape (and hence of the earth), it may restore an inebriant to heaven, or only to heavenly imagination. A dreamer carried away by a vision of angels lies at an uncrossable distance from the source of sleep. This is the paradox of Jacob's ladder, the ladder of dreams.

Angels descend easily, but humankind ascends only through rigor of mind. To compensate, we have tried a direct assault on heaven's gates. As Babel's architects discovered, one's proximity to the upper world invokes laws of retribution to which action is not ordinarily subject. The ladder may fall to pieces, leaving disturbed dreams. The fact that drunkards babble in their cups is a clue to the real effects of drink. Only upon falling dead drunk do we indeed enjoy the sleep of a babe.

Other offspring besides the bacchanal exist as well. In Plato's garden, the story goes, Resource, "having drunk deeply of the heavenly nectar," sank into heavy sleep. There, coached at Need's hand into begetting a love of seeking truth, he awoke a father to desire. The story tells that with need's prompting our resourcefulness, all search begins. From which follows human history and the baby's. Are there, therefore, medicines too strong to soothe the pulse of imagination? Even mother's milk, no less pure than ambrosia, has its complicating side effects: the dream and its yearning for another taste. Only a simple lullaby, the unpretentiousness of its bleating sheep, directly effects entry into deep sleep without aggravation. It eschews heaven's gate and the angels' conference. It lulls us back to the source.

Under a blanket of snow, the fields sleep. "It looks as if," Frost observes, nature "had gone to sleep/Of its own stupid lack of understanding." The fields sleep because they always have. Sleep is no seasonal affair like hibernation, but a condition of organic life. And we, of that life. Angels patiently hover until dreams of life are done and they can again walk weightless over our vessel. Their constancy may never be rewarded, for humanity's yearning is real and wakeful. For them and for the meadow, snow is a great comfort.

Snow covers the country lanes one by one and puts the lights of houses out. In hamlet, village, town, and city, however, lighted windows glare at the snow with increased intensity. Cramped communal life forces men and women to defy nature and grow forgetful of the organism's needs. The city never sleeps. Its vibrancy is an ill-defined blend of dream and function, illusion and accomplishment, phantom and substance. We barely hear a lullaby for clanging pipes, screeching cars, and the staccato of telecommunications. When it snows, beauty is disregarded. The stuff is ploughed under, under city grime, and the hum (not lulling, but grating) is not softened one jot. The city is technology's refusal of comforted sleep.

Has sleep been defeated? In a country household we know, from the looks at the breakfast table, who suffered insomnia. In the city,

looks are anonymous and show no intimacy except at a height of danger. No one keeps statistics on losses due to the lullaby's being throttled. The deficit is really a gain, because city philosophy stresses a missing element, and the missing element calls for a search. The country allows dreamless sleep to restore wholeness, absent in desire's daily round, and that is that. A contentment close to well-being results. In the sleepless city, things do not add up to an integer. Tastes, feels, sounds, and sights pass through a restiveness unalleviated by the night in bed. Since labor moves in unending shifts, some work in the middle of the night. *Sleeptime* is a relative term. The lullaby is another melody, quaint in spirit, of no clear purpose. Memory's image of angelic peace only increases suffering. The tense urban state has great import. Socrates avers that he cannot philosophize beyond the city walls. Only in the lullaby's absence is a question born. What is the way back?

That Socrates is right about philosophy is not a paean to urban life. Instead he embraces a spiritual discomfort necessary to a creature born to fullness and lulled back thereto at each night's parting. The lullaby sings of immortality. Is it any surprise a sleeping infant looks blissful and blissfully looks forward to sleep? Immerse her in desire, cut off the way back, and she begins to know fear. I have watched babies in their mothers' arms, words sweetly sung in their ears, fearfully refuse to close their eyes. The knowledge is beyond mere obstinacy. A germ of their diminutive willfulness lies in a fall from grace. They may be afraid of bad dreams, but the matter is more pregnant with hope.

Young children begin to obey the law of gravity. Having tasted the tree of knowledge, they turn toward their own nature. They sense the waters receding, that they may no longer find the black, nourishing body of their source. Even at this early point, an infant faces enemies that we all face—consolation and hypnosis—as well as the truth of what we want. The countryside has a clarity that the city lacks, but lacks the means to use it. The country person may dream comfortably in bed night after night, becoming victim to the condition of the earth's life. There is a contentment in watching snow cover a landscape year after year in dumb repetition, and also a capitulation. A person fed the milk of life knows a schism in his being and has grown resigned to chance happiness, a good harvest, a merry feast, or a successful marriage. Simple joys are that simple. The danger they advertise is the life of the simpleton. Earned enjoyment is otherwise. Joy is earned only when unlulled by nature's lullaby. Exeunt happy peasant, a simpleton for having fed on country fare without feeding himself. Enter urban rat

whose sleeplessness has made him shrewd and resourceful and who wishes to remove its cause. Not everyone is made for happiness.

Even sleeping nature, her stones, streams, and trees that pass in and out of existence without a dream, can be incited to wakefulness. Then an immeasurable distance between basal consciousness and the daily round is eradicated. Then life can dance with death without contamination. At the call arises the Orphic song. It also belongs to sleep's medley, though it is far more dangerous than lullaby or bacchanal. The lullaby violates no prescribed limit of nature. Likewise the bacchanal, whose orgy ends in a lullaby, for nature knows and respects the violence of lust and bestiality. The opaque waters of renewal gleam sleepily below the ecstatic sexual climax.

When Orpheus's lyre moved rock and root, a balance was upset. A wall was breached. No longer of the angels' realm, earth's things became sentient beings and threatened to seek what Orpheus's contemporary, Gautama the Buddha, called "enlightenment." Gautama spoke of the humanity of nature, an idea that we find self-contradictory. The great workman, the bodddhisatva, was he who postponed his own attainments until "every blade of grass" found its buddha-mind. When Orpheus conferred locomotion on stones, the effect was to advance the cosmic clock a few hours. An accelerated rate would have ended history and our local epoch before the next sunrise. Such foreshortening of an individual's quest is unnatural.

Put another way, Orpheus discovered a way to heaven that did not pass through deep sleep. A wayfarer could wakefully ply the seas back to the source and wakefully contact the great whole. The prescription is entirely new. Like a mother her swaddling babe, we must encircle the fullness of our being, from an inchoate, formless state to a most elevated clarity. Dream, dreamlessness, and waking perception each in turn must yield to the cock's crow. Shortcuts are forbidden. Finding this out, Orpheus sang, and nature came alive to his music. His waking cry penetrated even to the upper world, and nature rebelled. Hence the violent and unequivocal manner of Orpheus's death.

"We ought to offer a cock to Asclepius." Socrates' last words on passing from life to death are a reminder of the need for health care. Perfection of an infant's health permits the lullaby to work. An imperfection of ours eventually calls for the dirge, a lullaby in a minor key. Deep dreamless sleep is a draught designed to restore care. Dawn refreshes the eyes washed by sleep's waveless intensity.

Yet a day may fall quickly into dis-ease. A wrinkle so slight we feel it predestined may upset the peaceful morning light. A dirgeful anxiety attending the less than perfectly healthy awakens. With its drone, we stand in the muck of possibility, trying to allow a cross-fertilization to take place. As I understand it, we must cast a little light upon the sea of blackness and behold a lotus rise to the surface. The cogito must be extinguished, and its shards scattered over the waters from which dreams are born. The very act of impregnation transforms our being utterly and takes us far from our first subject, the lullaby. Suffice it to say now that Orpheus's crime, awakening nature, made it seem as though one was able to love at will. If a sleeping world obeys me, then surely my heart must. But the truth, when painfully sought, shows the opposite. The will to love involves a surrender of lover to beloved. That is the way the world works, and that is why one cannot assault heaven's gates. And surrender is precisely a mother's lullaby as she sings it softly near her infant's sleeping face.

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