

Sometimes Beauty is the Only Thing That Matters

--from Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*.

Our hero is the angel Daniel, who has fallen in love
with the trapeze artist Marion and by way of his

telepathy listens to her thoughts. In her despair
she says to herself sometimes beauty is the only thing

that matters. His is a most beautiful face, the actor
Bruno Ganz, and of course Marion's beauty is a given,

the actress Solveig Donmartin, her character holding
Daniel spellbound with her anguished, melancholic stares,

and too in the ring as she twirls round and round in the air
performing her risky acrobatics. Wenders captures

the beautiful faces of the children in the bleachers
next to Daniel as they stare in amazement at Marion's

twirling in the air. Does beauty always carry a risk?
Always a high wire act? What would Wenders say,

or Kahlo, or Gauguin, Cervantes? I think the most
beautiful thing I've ever seen are flocks of birds in flight,

perhaps the most striking example being the thousands
of starlings that weave their shapes these days over

Rome because, as researchers tell us, cities are warm
and Rome's tropical weather accommodates their

need for it. We're told their pirouetting is the way
they decide together where to land and spend

the night, testing the air for an hour or so, gaining
various views of the city's trees below. I used to be

in love with the beauty of language, trying to pirouette
on the page to discover landings, trying to emulate

Basho with his cicadas and frogs. There is certainly
beauty in some turns of phrases, though, such as in

this one from Montaigne: “every metaphor limps.”
What a rich trope, a double-pirouette—a turn within

a turn. I picture Montaigne in his castle thinking of a
beautiful old man or woman he saw limping that day

and twisting the image in his mind to find its meaning.
I think dance, though, is the most beautiful art,

its vulgar athleticism sublimated into easy movements.
It is its simplicity that is at the core of the beauty,

deceptive as it usually is, creating a tension in our
minds as we find it difficult to believe what we’re seeing

but pleased by it nonetheless, like with the starlings
painting their liquid portraits in a pink dusk over Rome.

Omnism

Means believing in all religions—just discovered it. Been an atheist for years, but as soon as I saw it, I knew it's what I want to be,

what I must be, an atheistic Omnist. Perhaps the first ever. I doubt that, but I'd like to think so, though I don't know why

we treasure firsts so much. Does it matter? Does it *ever* matter? December 14, 1911, Norwegian Roald Amundsen became

the first person to set foot on the South Pole and died in 1928 trying to rescue someone whose dirigible had crashed off the coast

of Norway. Not only did his "first," the one he's known for, not prevent his tragic death, but given his de facto dare-devil nature

and given, as we know, how easily one achievement can lead to an ambition for more, it may have *caused* it. "Hey self,"

I imagine him saying, "you're Norwegian Roald Amundsen, the first person to set foot on the South Pole. Surely the great explorer

of Antarctica can save this idiot from his dirigible, for this is merely the Norwegian Sea and have people *not*, has anyone *not*,

seen pictures of the South Pole?" Not sure why, but Amundsen's heroics reminds me of a Marcus Aurelius quote: whenever

you find yourself unsettled by something, calm down, "for soon enough you yourself must become a vagrant thing of nothingness."

Don't worry, be happy, because you'll be dead soon, and death for Marcus Aurelius, we must remind ourselves, is final. Maybe

I was thinking Amundsen himself could've been thinking of a Marcus Aurelius quote and was encouraged by it enough

to save the idiot in the dirigible. That flips the script, making Norwegian Roald Amundsen not only *not* an arrogant daredevil,

but the Marcus Aurelius of the 20th century, a brave happy camper all the way to his inevitable, soul-crunching death.

But how does inevitable, soul-crunching death jibe with my newfound darling Omnism, the little baby I found on my doorstep

that I've fallen for, the bundle of joy who coos and caws and gurgles
in my arms? I even love its throw-ups, the little burp-puddles

the consistency of yogurt that magically appear on your shoulder
when carrying around little cherubs. Yogurt throw-up, the sacramental

relic of my new religion, or religions, I should say, my newborn
omni-faith. So how is my new baby to thrive in my secular house,

one that offers its adherents no promise of an afterlife, what for
time immemorial has sealed the deal for countless beings seeking

solace from the prospect of soul-crunching death? And why not,
it's a beautiful vision, the undiscovered country as Prince Hamlet

called it, leading him, though, to suggest a certain wariness regarding it,
that country from whose borne no traveler returns, giving us pause,

he says, before killing ourselves. Undiscovered, indeed, I can't even
bring myself to believe it exists. Then again, looking into the eyes

of my new baby, I can't help but think somewhere somebody has
envisioned a heaven of non-existence, a city of unceasing silence

where lie the unpaved streets of nothingness. No punishment,
mind you, just non-existence. So how does non-existence square

with my new baby Omnism (not to be confused, by the way,
with onanism, though I'm sure one could fruitfully stir that stew

of linguistic association till the cows come home). How do I teach
Marcus Aurelius, the Prince of death, or Norwegian explorer

Roald Amundsen, to hold that little bundle over their shoulder
and properly burp it? Maybe I could sell them on it as ritual, something

you don't think much about but just go about doing because it
provides existential structure to your spiritualism. I suppose I must

simply prostrate myself at Nothing's altar, pray to the god of Nada
who will, as I near my demise, draw me to her side, pull my head

to her shriveled bosom and onto her shoulder, where I'll cry out
my cries of joyful grief, my quiet heavings of laughter and of pain.

June Bugs

I remember as a boy in that time of year, early or mid-spring,
watching the hordes of them spread themselves out under
the streetlights at night. It was a small town in western Oklahoma
I grew up in called Clinton, named after Judge Clinton Irwin,
an Illinois lawyer of Irish descent, as am I. Clinton is 320 acres
bought in 1899 by two white men from four Indians: Hays, Shoe-Boy,
Nowahy, and Night Killer. My family's house was in a little development
on the western edge of town across the street from a nursing home,
a funeral parlor, and a flower shop. I would sit under the streetlights
after the sun had gone down and watch the bugs squirm and die,
hundreds of them, and wonder, who are they? Maybe they were
ghosts watching us under the light, watching me on the curb.
Maybe they were my dead grandparents and their dead parents
and grandparents, some of whom, I later learned, had tried
for decades to farm the drought-prone land in Washita county
a few miles west of Clinton and failed. Maybe one of them was
my great grandmother who tripped over a wagon tongue pregnant
with her seventh and bled to death before my great grandfather
could find a doctor, leaving my 16-year-old grandmother, the oldest,
to mother the others. She went on to birth ten of her own and I
came to know and love her. Or maybe they were the ghosts
of those who had been there for hundreds of years, the descendants,
I later learned, of those who'd migrated from Beringia, themselves
descendants of those who'd migrated from northern Siberia
in the centuries before. Some of those in Beringia went east
along the Arctic circle and settled as far east as Greenland,
and some went south and then, somewhere around what is now
Montana, split again, some going farther south and some east to
where I now live, in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York.
In the early spring here my wife and I like to drive north a few miles

to watch the thousands of snow geese on a break from their northern trek chat with one another while pecking for food

in the marsh where routes 89 and 31 meet, at a place called Muck Flats. We did this just last weekend and it's a stunning scene, a sea

of snow geese—one estimate I heard was 3 to 400,000. This is north of the Montezuma national wildlife refuge on Cayuga Lake. Cayuga,

“The People of the Great Swamp,” of the Haudenosaunee Nations. Haudenosaunee, “people of the longhouses,” whose social structure

was matrilineal, such that the women lived in single longhouses with their husbands (of their own matrilineages) in villages of a few

longhouses to as many as fifty. In 1778, George Washington ordered them driven out or slaughtered because they had sided

with the British and were still fighting alongside them with the loyalist Colonel John Butler, killing patriots and raiding European settlements

in New York and Pennsylvania and even taking prisoners. These raids forced settlements to be abandoned for a time, settlements

encroaching on land promised the Haudenosaunee by the British in 1701, in the Treaty of Albany, and later that same year by

the French as well. So from June to October of 1779, 6200 troops, led by generals John Sullivan and James Clinton, destroyed all

the major Indigenous settlements in the Finger lakes, over forty—Cayuga, Seneca, Onondaga—burning crops and orchards all the way

to the British fort of Niagara, where thousands of Haudenosaunee spent that winter starving in spite of attempts by the British

to supply them. Some escaped and dispersed to Canada or Ohio, and many were later moved to a territory called Oklahoma.

The Falls With No Name

A constant rushing that would carry you away in a split second
were you to venture into its inner turmoil, the *sanctum sanctorum*,

the colossal force created by the 150-foot width of Taughannock Creek
squeezed, bottle-necked, ever so gradually by way of incremental

narrowings into an anal point the width of, say, an Orca, the falls
having shrunk itself from Moby Dick stretched out lengthwise

at the top to Shamu swimming its way through the nether region,
an apt image if ever there was one, the falls spewing its way

forcefully through a singular portal like a giant fish, the entirety
of the cone manifesting a thick layer of white gush, one edge

of the falls slamming into the gorge wall and flipping over onto itself,
the ensuing noise the proper and fitting corollary to the force,

the most astonishing aspect of it being, in my mind, as I lean over
the bridge and contemplate what a thrill it would be to dive into

that tornadic swirl all those feet below, that this maelstrom of activity,
this god-like torrent of energy and fervor night and day, when we're

sleeping, when we're dreaming, when we're eating and cooking
what we're about to eat, when we're making love, when we're

thinking of nothing, when we're yearning for what we yearn for,
when we're watching the mindless drivel of everyday entertainment

we indulge in or the moving drama of tragedy or comedy sending us
down the road to tears, when we're tasting already the day's first

sip of beer while packing ourselves young and old alike shoulder
to shoulder in the cab of a pickup truck after a day of hammering

or digging ditches or slaughtering, our clothes filthy with sawdust
and dirt or grease and oil and gasoline, or blood, guts, and feces,

when we're slipping out of our corporate stupor into our third cup
in the middle of the afternoon, when we're crying in the shower

first thing in the morning stunned by the pain of a recent divorce,
when we're mindlessly reading about the latest atrocity halfway

across the planet, the 77-year-old Ukrainian shot off his bicycle
by a Russian soldier, his bag of potatoes spilled out on the ground

beside him, or about the Black man in this country released after
twenty-five years who'd been mistaken in a line-up for a murderer

with the same name, when, lying on the couch or resting in an
easy chair we've slipped into the pocket of a noiseless afternoon,

the noiselessness noticed when the faint buzz of a far-off airplane
breaks it, when we're changing a diaper astonished by the remarkable

package it's holding or when we're rolling out or dragging the
garbage can to the curb, when we're watching our two-year-old in her

high-chair giggle at the tabby kitten on the floor chasing its tale,
her breakfast lunch or dinner smeared across her face, when we're

pouring ourselves a scotch or vodka, a first or second, or third,
opting not to interrogate the consequences, during all those lapsed

or significant moments, the falls with no name, house-sized ice-chunks
on the gorge face overlooking it, or no ice-chunks, just the face—

layer upon layer of shale, geologic strata wet and placid above the roaring
waters in late April, then May, then June July August September,

day after day, night after night, hour after hour—the falls with no name,
forever mindless of all that is not itself, is crashing furiously down.

The Beach at P. J.

Psychologists call knowing your life's meaning "presence." People low in presence don't bother searching—they're "stuck." Those high in presence but still searching are called "seekers." Presence is highly correlated with well-being, but search seems to have no bearing on it, and pondering your meaning in life too much could even lead you to dissatisfaction.

Arthur Brooks, "The Meaning of Life is Surprisingly Simple," *The Atlantic*

I skipped to the end of the article and read that some (Albert Camus, for one) think there isn't any meaning to life at all and that that

conclusion makes everything possible. My wife and I walked along the beach yesterday here where we're visiting in Port Jefferson,

Long Island. She grew up here and wanted to revisit the feeling of a morning walk on the beach, which is very rocky, the beach,

and I couldn't help but marvel at how much variety there was among them—sizes, colors, shapes—and no two alike. It was

a beautiful morning and the rocks were wet even though the tide was coming *in*. A mystery to me, but my wife seemed unpuzzled by it.

She has more presence than I, I'm sure, whereas I'm still searching, or stuck, not sure which, which may mean the whole

project is hopeless for me. I wondered why, for example, rocks when wet take on a different look. They glow. It's as if they

come alive. My wife picked up a couple and skipped them across the still surface of the bay. A crossword puzzle clue today,

it just so happens, was "alternative to rocks" and it turned out to be "neat." A bit of a trick there, changing the context, but—

it occurs to me—isn't that life's meaning? How you'll be humming along thinking everything you're thinking in one context and

the context changes on you. You're on a car trip worrying about gas and your tire blows, or your child in the back seat

starts choking or your spouse starts talking about some plan she has for you next year that you hadn't expected at all. Now,

are you lucky if the context in which you live is forever the same? Maybe not, maybe it makes you think the context is the same

for everyone, or should be, which is worse, thinking you know what the best reality is for all. You might live in one little town

your whole life, for example, and expect that town to be the steady-as-she-goes life for you and everyone you know,

but that doesn't keep your friends alive, you healthy, your spouse, if you have one, loving and faithful. Shit happens in small towns,

too, we all know that. I remember witnessing my father—we lived in a small town—breaking down crying after hearing

that our dentist, who lived in a small town near us where my dad's mother lived, took a shotgun and shot himself in the heart.

That was a shock to my father. I wouldn't have thought so given he'd been a combat soldier in WWII in Italy, wounded twice.

But this was a different context: years later, small town back in the states, peacetime, and—maybe most different—suicide.

I could be wrong, but I doubt my father saw many suicides in combat. So even experience doesn't always prepare us for these

shifts in context. Camus wrote that suicide is the only philosophical issue worthy of our attention. An interesting and appealing idea—

much merit to it—but, again, it might not be *my* issue, or *yours*. Maybe instead it's cancer, or emphysema, which recently got

one of my oldest and dearest friends because, probably, he'd smoked a lot. He loved life so was likely in no danger of

killing himself. Camus, in turns out, ain't no Solomon after all. No one is, it seems, because you can't foresee the next context.

It might not even be health, nor a spiritual or emotional issue. Maybe it's educational—just read that NBA star Stephen Curry

went back to the books to get his undergraduate degree. Guess he felt that despite being the best shooter in the game he didn't

know all he wanted to know, which makes me think that's a different rock altogether. Will it glow in his hands his whole life, like those

beautiful wet ones I picked up on the beach this morning? Probably not. They dry fast. Then again, anyway, he might want his next drink neat.