

“Sometimes Beauty is the Only Thing That Matters”

--from Wim Wenders' *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? What would Wenders say, or Kahlo, or Gauguin? I think the most beautiful thing I've seen are flocks of birds in flight, perhaps the most striking example being starlings weaving their shapes over Rome because, as researchers tell us, cities are warm and Rome's tropical temperatures accommodate them. We're told their pirouetting is the way they decide where to land for the night, testing the air, 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 terse images of cicadas and frogs. There's certainly beauty in some phrases, such as Montaigne's "every metaphor limps." What a rich trope, a double-pirouette, a turn within a turn. I picture him in his castle having seen someone beautiful 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. Its beauty is its simplicity, 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 at dusk over Rome.

The Falls with No Name

A constant rushing that would swallow you whole were you to venture into its inner turmoil, the *sanctum sanctorum*, the colossal force of 150 feet

of Taughannock Creek squeezed, bottle-necked by incremental narrowings, into a point the width of, say, an Orca, the falls descending from

Moby Dick stretched out lengthwise at the top to Shamu swimming its way through the bottom, an apt image if ever there was one, the falls

a giant fish, the cone a thick layer of white gush, one edge of it slamming into the gorge wall and flipping over onto itself, the noise a fitting corollary

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

all those feet below, that this maelstrom of activity, this god-like fervor night and day, when we're sleeping, dreaming, when we're 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 entertainment we indulge in or a moving tragedy manifesting tears, when we're tasting already the day's first sip of beer

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,

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 reading of 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 resting in an easy chair we've slipped into the pocket of a noiseless afternoon, the silence noticed

when the faint buzz of an airplane breaks it, when we're changing a diaper astonished by its package or rolling out or dragging the garbage to the curb,

when we're watching our two-year-old giggle at the tabby on the floor
chasing its tale, her breakfast lunch or dinner smeared across her face,

when we're pouring ourselves a scotch, a first or second, or third, opting
not to interrogate the consequences, the waters with no name, house-sized

ice-chunks on the gorge face overlooking it, or no ice-chunks, just the face—
layers of shale wet and placid above the roaring waters in late April, May, June,

day after day, night after night, hour after hour—the rushing with no name,
forever mindless of all that is not itself, explodes off the edge and into the gorge.

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 remind 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." That is, don't worry because you'll soon be dead, and death for Marcus Aurelius, we must remind ourselves,

is final. Maybe I was thinking Amundsen could've been thinking of a Marcus Aurelius quote and was encouraged by it to save

the idiot in the dirigible. That flips the script, making Norwegian Roald Amundsen not only *not* an arrogant dare-devil, 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 that coos and caws and gurgles
in my arms? I even love its throw-ups, the little yogurt puddles
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 a soul-crunching death? And why not,
it's a beautiful vision, the undiscovered country, as Hamlet calls 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 imagine it. Then again, looking into
the eyes of my new baby, I can't help but think somewhere
somebody has envisioned a heaven of nonexistence, 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 burp it? Maybe I could sell them
on it as ritual, what you don't think about and just go about
doing because it provides you with an existential structure
to your life. I suppose I must simply prostrate myself at Nothing's
altar, pray to the god of Nada who will draw me to her side,
pull my head to her shriveled bosom and cry out along with me
my cries of joyful grief, my quiet heavings of laughter and of pain.

On the Easing of Tensions

We're told Gautama achieved his first yogic state when he was a boy after witnessing the carnage of a plowed field.

He felt intense sorrow for the lives he saw destroyed—insects, young grasses, other plants—and then an ensuing joy in

recognition of his own being. He sat in the shade of a rose-apple tree in the asana position, straight back, crossed legs,

and it was said the shade stayed with him the whole day, a miracle. He remembered this state of ecstasy years later

when he was near death from his yogic fasting, and the memory made him realize he needn't fight his body to achieve

a joyful release. Karen Armstrong tells us the prime insight of the axial age is that the sacred is an inherent aspect of

the self and yet, she wrote, practitioners—yogis & other Hindus—found the eternal self difficult to access. The premise here

regarding my own sorrows is the recent shootings we in this country are unable to avoid. A new one just yesterday,

children in a small Texas town. How deep the rage for someone to take it out on children. I don't know if I find the sacred

difficult to access, but with these tragedies I'm not sure what or where it is. We have the word *agnostic*, connoting

an ambivalence regarding a belief in the sacred or a higher being, but some agnostics are more proactive in their

proclamations. Agnostic theists hold that the sacred cannot be known. I ask, can it not be known and nonetheless

felt in the body, which can be a fickle instrument, as we know—you're hungover or in a foul mood because of a recent injury,

a strained ligament in your shoulder or knee and it's achy and throbbing, or you've had a tiff with your spouse and

want your life to be free of such vexations. You feel them in your body and can't help projecting them onto the world.

Yet maybe you can be conscious of them and let your psyche
smooth them out. So much depends on what you deem important.

I was walking a trail yesterday in a state park, a beautiful spring
morning, and the couple ahead of me was walking a dog who

kept looking back at me, a yellow- and black-spotted boxer.
The couple seemed in the middle of an intense exchange,

but the dog seemed more interested in me, the look on his face
when he turned around sad and solicitous, a reflection of its

grief perhaps. If that perception is accurate, well, I say the feeling
was mutual and I stopped for a spell to give us all some distance.

Norms of distance are important, especially for dogs perhaps,
as they're more likely than we are to be in touch with their bodies.

On Discovering Place & Time

... it was here in the Tivoli [theater] that I first
discovered place and time, tasted it like okra.

Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

Sometimes I feel like I've just woken up and that my
sixty-odd years of life have been lived while asleep.

My wife woke me early this morning to ask if we could
drive to the lake to swim since it was to be a hot day

and was sticky and warm already. We drove to the lake,
but there was an algae warning so we drove back and

now it's late afternoon and I feel I had dreamed that drive
and all of my life before it. I remember the years clearly

enough, but only as we remember dreams. Such as
the time as a dutiful boy I pruned the tree in front of

our house, but apparently to excess and was shocked
that my parents were shocked by it, but didn't know

how to defend myself or what defending myself might
feel or sound like, or the time my teenage friends and I

rode our bicycles across the railroad tracks to break
into a warehouse and got in trouble for it but never

knew why since we hadn't stolen anything, and the time
as an altar boy I was pouring wine for the old priest

during mass and he kept whispering more! more! and
sure enough a few minutes later he stepped from the lectern,

stumbled, and hit his head on the corner of the wall
and that was it for him, DOA, or just D. Or the time

in high school I was making out with my girlfriend on
the couch when my mother walked through the front door

and caused a psychic confusion in me I still think about.
And there was the evening of the first time I came home

from college, stoned from the pot someone on the ride
home kept passing me and when I walked into the house

my mother and father greeted me enthusiastically, walked
right into my space to hug and kiss me and, stoned,

I felt ashamed. And there were happier times, such as when
my first live-in girlfriend and I moving from Norman to

Boulder drove separate cars and I had our pregnant cat
named Hilda with me, and somewhere along I-70 between

Hays and Limon, in the midst of a landscape flat as the back
of my hand and the soles of my feet she pushed out nine kittens

onto the floorboard. Surely that was a dream. As I'm sitting
in my backyard now, late afternoon, the day having been

hot indeed, I'm watching as a breeze moves all the branches
above me in unison, as if several conductors standing together

had decided to lead the orchestra synchronously, the branches
enacting the conductors' long arms, the leaves singing in

response. I'm next to one of them, one of a half-dozen
eighty-year-old silver maples planted at the same time

around this house, and this one's been in my dreams all
these years, and in my dreams it goes straight up to the sky,

as it's doing now, like sometimes I do in my dreams when
I'm lucky and start flying above buildings and other people

and towns and never want to come back down but know
that I must before whatever magic has fueled me dies.