

INLAND IN EDEN ON THE INDIANA DUNES WITH NUCLEAR REACTOR

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My daughter Eleanor insisted
on taking our dog Sally, now 13 years old, with us to the Indiana
Dunes to let her walk,

at least once before she dies, the white sands of Lake Michigan.
Its shallows show
milky green as absinthe, which sounds a lot like *absence*.

They deepen
to the color of the turquoise in my nonagenarian mother's tarnished
silver Navajo bracelet.

Absence or absinthe, the great lake extends to the horizon's honed
straight razor and beyond.

Those tiny towers that rise out of the scintillant water to the west —

sheet of gold
hammered on the anvil of the earth's curvature by setting sun
until each wave

becomes a dimple or dent in the precious metal — are all
that is left
of Chicago. The whole day has been a parenthesis, held breath

in the calendar
of our regular respirations. The three of us, Eleanor, Kyler,
her gay roommate,

and I — no, wait, with Sally, the four of us — stretched out
on the sand, sunbathed,
swam in the absinthe. We took long walks with Sally,

photographed ourselves
next to a huge driftwood stump with splayed roots bleached
to the whiteness of bone.

It was the tailfin and vertebrae of some Pleistocene whale. All the while
we ignored
the nuclear reactor only a quarter mile down the beach. Its squat

concave cooling tower,
emitting steam erratically, reminds me of a white castle standing alone
on the back row of my dead

father's chessboard. It probably powers the whole of Chicago.
I can't stop thinking
of the chain reactions happening so close to us, how uranium

atoms bombarded
by neutrons split apart, release more neutrons, gamma rays,
and three million

times more kinetic energy than the same amount of coal.

It is like
Eleanor's mania. Ten months ago the doctor on the psych ward

told us that despite sedatives
they couldn't get Eleanor to fall asleep — "That girl could power all five
boroughs of New York City!"

After three days, they brought her down with Klonopin, which works
like a reactor's
control rods pushed deep into the core to absorb

neutrons
and slow the chain reaction. The smokestack keeps hiccupping
steam. I rub

after sun lotion with aloe onto Eleanor's raw shoulders and back.
My palms feel the braille
of her brown birthmark, the size of a nickel, which had been

bright raspberry
when she was young. For 21 years I have applied sunblock
to that birthmark

and can pretend no longer that she is a child, though she is still
and will be always
my daughter. As I slather on more lotion, she's telling

me of her plans
to become a midwife, to deliver babies bloodstained and screaming
to this life

where nuclear reactors and couples kissing among sand dunes
coexist
so easily. I think of the meltdowns — Three Mile Island,

Chernobyl,
and Fukushima Daiichi. How one firefighter at Chernobyl
joked, "There must be

an incredible amount of radiation here. We'll be lucky
if we're all still alive
in the morning." They waited two days to announce the disaster.

The Soviet radio stations
interrupted their regular programming and played classical music
before broadcasting

news of the "accident." As soon as people heard the Beethoven,
Shostakovich,
or Prokofiev, they knew something was wrong. Or perhaps it was

Ravel's Piano
Concerto for the left hand. Ravel composed it for pianist Paul Wittgenstein
whose right arm

had been amputated during World War I. I've been listening
obsessively to it,
a mere 19 minutes of music, over and over all summer long.

It begins
with the faintest featherings of bows against bass viol's strings,
and then the contrabassoon

like our dog's warning growl at the back of her throat. Meager motif
taken up by cellos
and violins that twine around each other. I keep seeing scraps of fog

wrap gauze bandages
around uprooted, mortar-struck trees at Verdun and the bodies
of the dead, slumped

like sand bags in the mud. It crescendos to the kettle drums' barrage,
stops short. Piano cadenza —
hail on a corrugated tin roof, staccato stutter of machine gun

fire, deeper register
of distant 42-centimeter howitzers. Ravel wanted the cadenza
to sound as if

the pianist were playing with both hands. But even his descending
glissandos can't
hide history, soldiers waiting in flooded trenches "to go over

the top" and be
mown down. I always hear Paul Wittgenstein's phantom limb, fingers
ghosting over the white notes

on the keyboard's far right end. That silence an absence no absinthe
can allay.
After Paul read the score, he suggested changes to Ravel,

claiming, "I am an old
hand at the piano." Ravel replied, "And I am an old hand
at orchestration."

The concerto survived intact. Not one note of the last century
will be changed
to make it easier to play. And, of course, Paul's younger brother

was Ludwig,
imperious philosopher. In 1929, when Ludwig returned to Cambridge,
the economist John Maynard Keynes

wrote in a letter to his wife, "Well, God has arrived. I met him
on the 5:15 train."

In his *Tractatus*, God reduced the universe to seven

propositions.

"The world is all that is the case" is the first. The final one says,
"What we cannot speak about

we must pass over in silence." In silence I should pass over Verdun,
the nuclear reactor

at the north end of the Indiana Dunes, and my daughter's bipolar

disorder. Ditto

my desire for Kyler, most beautiful of young men with his orange-and-white-
striped towel wrapped

around his shoulders, tangled wet brown hair that I will never wake to
and muss some more,
goose flesh over intercostal muscles, swimmer's tanned body,

wide brown eyes

in which I would dissolve. All this I cannot speak about.

"Look," says Kyler,

"the sunset..." and points. "It's like, like... a bleeding heart!"

We all laugh

at the kitschy picturesque he makes us see. But he's right.

The sky has parted

its blue-gray cloud robes to reveal molten glory, a million
trillion hydrogen

bombs exploding — fusion, not fission, the heart of matter —
nuclear reactor

eight light minutes away. For one moment I see Dana

pushing with legs raised,

cervix opening wide as Eleanor's head crowns, black-haired
and bloody —

sunrise, not sunset — as the sun sinks into the now
almost black lake,
into absence, into absinthe, into absence's sweet absinthe.

