

William Pruitt

Miracle at St. Ann Four Screen

*Now I a fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And three fold in soft Beulahs night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newtons sleep
William Blake*

The girl was in tears, the boy was walking away. The teacher gripped the girl's arm as she glared at the boy, as if both were culpable.

It was after school. I was coming out of the store across the street with a new pack of Topps baseball cards when the tableaux arranged itself. I was in third grade, but these were sixth graders, suddenly dangerously mature. The girl's tears came from a kind of hurt that was new to me, that I felt without knowing what it was.

More than a playground spat, it had something to do with boys and girls.

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The summer before fourth grade there was a girl I couldn't get out of my mind. I knew we would be in the same class and I imagined Katie's face before me, delicate upturned nose and green eyes below her bangs, a soft light from the near future. For the first time I looked forward to being in school.

The teacher changed the seating every month and in April I got to sit behind Katie. Once I pulled on her pony tail and she turned around slowly, brows raised, not smiling or frowning, but with pretend annoyance, as if the beam of her eyes was a searchlight that theatrically swept her field of vision for the intruder. Next day she came up behind me after I had gotten a haircut— a flat-top it was called then— and tapped her fingers on top of my head a few times before she sat down. I felt extended, light-headed. Like I had goose bumps on my brain.

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I used to go to church three times a week with my parents. There were stories of death angels, manna from heaven, pigs gone crazy that ran off cliffs. Our preachers never asserted anything without Biblical citation.

I had a black friend whose church I went to once. Their pastors preached in chant, like God was speaking through them in long arcs of feeling, spreading joy and warning in sung shouts, as if the Word had been written down only till it might be freed by the human voice.

Not in our church. Our preachers spoke scripture in stylized inflections-- which included stretching single syllable words into two-- which did not sound like speech. As if being written was what made it truth.
The NA-ume of the LO-ord, shall NOT BE TA-kun IN VA-un. Exodus Chapter 20 verse 7.

Everything that mattered was in this unwieldy box we were schlepping around they said was our soul, inside of which a war was being waged between good and evil. The actual world we lived in was less important,

like a ramshackle stage with ratty curtains, behind which God or the devil would wave, but not step through, since the Age of Miracles was gone. The only miracle these days was the leap of faith.

But I carried a box inside that other box. I knew miracles were real and I would consider the freckles on a girl's arm or watch the wind lift her hair to confirm that I had already leaped.

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One day near Easter I got on my bike and decided to go to Katie's house. She lived on Ravenwood, the other side of Bircher. This was an adventure. Even though I'd lived there all my life, I didn't even know anybody on my street except for our next door neighbors. At the top of the street, I coasted down to Bircher. Then I turned right. The next block would be Ravenwood.

The image in my mind of me with Katie began to falter. What if her parents were cold? What if her brothers were threatening? What would I say when I got there, anyway?

I turned around and went back to my street. There was a corner market my mother spurned after the owner implied she hadn't paid for something. Now on my own, I defiantly went in and bought a pack of baseball cards. I went outside by a little stream behind the store. I opened the pack and smelled the flat wafer of pink bubblegum. I looked at the players' pictures and read their stats on the back.

our streets slammed into each other at odd angles
old two-story streetcar station now a corner ma & pa
had circus peanuts & bulk twizzlers behind glass
Walking home, I often came across unfriendly strays

in the dirt I shot catseyes clearies peewees swirls
with Mark and Terry and Wayne, flipped
baseball cards on blacktop, my Hobie Landrith
could take your Mickey Mantle if it landed right.

shadows of buds on sycamore bark
cardinal announce sky is open again!
it's the time for loose gravel underfoot, kick soft dirt
smell of lefty first baseman's mitt new-seamed

sunlight refracted by moving water
a loose lens screw tightened it to clear
fierce inexplicable joy came
with redwing blackbird cattail call

I got back on my bike and continued my ride to Ravenwood. When I got near Katie's house, she was out on *her* bike. We rode to an old quarry and threw rocks all afternoon.

It was like this big framed picture of myself that I'd been trying to hold upright in my shaky hands while steering my bike just slipped away. I had a friend, not a frame.

My parents grounded me when I got home. I'd been gone too long, I'd ridden too far.

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My uncle came to stay with us for a while when I was twelve. I didn't know him too well except he lived in Florida and had a family there. There were some problems with keeping a job. It was all kind of vague, my mom spoke about his past in dark tones that discouraged questions. He was different from anyone else in my family. I knew what melancholy was-- I recognized it in him-- but there was a trait I didn't know the name for then: a sense of irony. Stories of misfortune came with a rueful laugh from the gut. After a few months it was time for him to leave, and we took him to the bus station. Before he boarded, he handed me a book,

—Here, he said, read this some time if you're feeling alone. It was a small book that fit in my jacket pocket easily.

At home, I took it out and looked at it in my room. An old brown leather cover had the title embossed with Arabic-style lettering in muted purple and gold. There were quatrains and brilliantly colored night landscapes on facing pages.

*Awake! For morning
In the bowl of night...*

*Dreaming when Dawn's
Left hand was in the Sky...*

*Ah Love! Could Thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire...*

I read the whole book on my bed and cried. So it was true.

* * * *

One Sunday night when I was thirteen, a visitor from Colombia came to church to preach a sermon, delivered in a continuous blistering wail, entirely about Hell, and the tortures that awaited us there if we didn't accept Christ as our Lord and Savior right now,

It wasn't just the graphic description of the everlasting slow plucking of fingernails, the gradual flaying, the repetitive disembowelment, the cortege of excruciating pain, so that it was clear in the reality he wanted us to see that was just around the corner, having a body was to *be* in pain.

Nor was it the infinite shame *just* short of blinding us to our transgressions, so we *could* see, in every boiling laceration, in every severance of bone from muscle, of bone from bone, how clearly we were responsible for this *almost* unimaginable suffering.

No, the most remarkable thing about this unending monologue of torture porn was that it was inarguably *true*.

I went home as if awakened with a blunt instrument. This was the fate that awaited us. We had been pretending, with our lust and gluttony and intellectual aspirations, our high hats and our favorite tv shows. With central heating, you could even watch shows you didn't like. This was all a pleasant dream which a thinking person knew would someday end. How clearly he had brought it home. The clock was ticking. The body was not just a liability. It was the enemy. It was every man for himself. O fool to think there was enough time!

I was ready to go up and be baptized Wednesday night— I didn't want to wait till Sunday, you never knew— but on Tuesday afternoon my junior high school class went on a field trip downtown to see a matinee performance of *Inherit the Wind*. We hadn't read it, but I knew it was about a real event.

But as the drama of the small town invaded by the world stage unfolded, I recognized its inner contours. I knew these townspeople, this jury that would decide the guilt of a teacher for telling his class about evolution. I had been through half a dozen preachers. This was a constellation I could identify. But Darrow and Mencken were new stars.

I went home confused I didn't know what I thought. I felt a shifting.

That night I had a clarifying dream. Wind was turning pages of a book. I was sitting in a jury box. Clarence Darrow was haranguing us and pacing the floor. *We* were the ones on trial. He was dressed like an old Testament prophet, Isaiah in robes and a long beard, pounding a staff on the courtroom floor.

—Oh, I can throw your words back at you, he declared, his fierce eyes boring into ours. I can mimic your scornful rant, your chapter & verse shouting fist pounding rostrum-shaking blaming and shaming! As he spoke, he shouted or sang, mimicking our palsied gestures.

—Your hand on the shoulder of the tearful penitent, you pretend to look into her soul, exploiter of human suffering! Your holy book answers make the devil laugh knowing the right questions will not get asked. Ha!

But where do you make the difference, where is it your shameless barbs hit home? Where does this love-starved wincing sect that says it is not a sect, this papier-mâché cringe and obey representation of the *Way Things Are*, this abominable denomination that says it is the one, the true church, “the rock on which I shall build,” get its power?

There was a hush, as if the world had been inhaled, and the answer came slowly, in a deep rumble, building in volume as it oscillated dangerously in pitch.

—The way it justifies holding back. No hand-clapping, no speaking in tongues! Hushed hymns, no gospel shouts! No expression of feeling in thought that is not from the Bible! Primary emotions passing as feeling, choked and frozen by the gorilla in the room: God between every two souls!

We know each other only as our heavenly father’s broken reflections! *So we know ourselves only as broken reflections!* You’re nothing as a man, you’re less as a woman! Human passion is all dicks and cunts, like

trashy nature, it is fallen and false! Nature matters only when it reminds us of our heavenly provenance! But woe to the tree before the chainsaw, for it shall come down! Woe to the woman who looks fuckable, for she shall be damned!

The judged banged his gavel and said —Order in the court! and I woke up.

* * * *

I never got baptized. I got my driver's license and took out girls in my parents' new Galaxy 500. This was before bucket seats. We'd go to St. Ann Four Screen drive-in on St. Charles Rock Road and sit close. If we didn't like the movie we chose, we would check out what was showing on the other screens, or just get out and walk under the stars.