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Small Wonder



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On a cool October day in the oak-forested hills of Lorena Province in Iran, a lost child was saved in an inconceivable way. The news of it came to me as a parable that I keep turning over in my mind, a message from some gentler universe than this one. I carry it like a treasure map while I look for the place where I'll understand its meaning.

I picture it happening this way: The story begins with a wife and husband, nomads of the Lori tribe near Kayhan, walking home from a morning's work in their wheat. I imagine



them content, moving slowly, the husband teasing his wife as she pulls her shawl across her face, laughing, and then suddenly they're stopped cold by the sight of a slender figure hurrying toward them: the teenage girl who was left in charge of the babies. In tears, holding her gray shawl tightly around her, she runs to meet the parents coming home on the road, to tell them in frightened pieces of sentences that he's disappeared, she has already looked everywhere, but he's gone. This girl is the neighbor's daughter, who keeps an eye on all the little ones too small to walk to the field, but now she has to admit wretchedly that their boy had strong enough legs to wander off while her attention was turned to—what? Another crying child, a fascinating insect—a thousand things can turn the mind from this to that, and the world is lost in a heartbeat.

They refuse to believe her at first—no parent is ever ready for this—and with fully expectant hearts they open the door flap of their yurt and peer inside, scanning the dim red darkness of the rugs on the walls, the empty floor. They look in his usual hiding places, under a pillow, behind the box where the bowls are kept, every time expecting this game to end with a laugh. But no, he's gone. I can feel how their hearts slowly change as the sediments of this impossible loss precipitate out of ordinary air and turn their insides to stone. And then suddenly moving to the fluttering panic of trapped birds, they become sure there is still some way out of this cage—here my own heart takes up that tremble as I sit imagining the story. Once my own child disappeared for only minutes that grew into half an hour, then an hour, and my panic took such full possession of my will that I could not properly spell my name for the police. But I could tell them the exact details of my daughter's eyes, her hair, the clothes she was wearing, and what was in her pockets. I lost myself utterly while my mind scattered out, carrying nothing but the search image that would locate and seize my child.

And that is how two parents searched in Lorena Province.

First their own village, turning every box upside down, turning the neighbors out in a party of panic and reassurances, but as they begin to scatter over the rocky outskirts it grows dark, then cold, then hopeless. He is nowhere. He is somewhere unsurvivable. A bear, someone says, and everyone else says No, *not* a bear, don't even say that, are you mad? His mother might hear you. And some people sleep that night, but not the mother and father, the smallest boys, or the neighbor's daughter who lost him, and early before the next light they are out again. Someone is sent to the next village, and larger parties are organized to comb the stony hills. They venture closer to the caves and oak woods of the mountainside.

Another nightfall, another day, and some begin to give up. But not the father or mother, because there is nowhere to go but this, we all have done this, we bang and bang on the door of hope, and don't anyone dare suggest there's nobody home. The mother weeps, and the father's mouth becomes a thin line as he finds several men willing to go all the way up into the mountains. Into the caves. Five kilometers away. In the name of heaven, the baby is only sixteen months old, the mother tells them. He took his first steps in June, a few weeks before Midsummer Day. He can't have walked that far, everybody knows this, but still they go. Their feet scrape the rocky soil; nobody speaks. Then the path comes softer under the live oaks. The corky bark of the trees seems kinder than the stones. An omen. These branches seem to hold promise. Lori people used to make bread from the acorns of these oaks, their animals feed on the acorns, these trees sustain every life in these mountains—the wild pigs, the bears. Still, nobody speaks.

At the mouth of the next cave they enter—the fourth or the hundredth, nobody will know this detail because forever after it will be the first and last—they hear a voice. Definitely it's a cry, a child. Cautiously they look into the darkness, and ominously, they smell bear. But the boy is in there, crying, alive. They move into

the half-light inside the cave, stand still and wait while the smell gets danker and the texture of the stone walls weaves its details more clearly into their vision. Then they see the animal, not a dark hollow in the cave wall as they first thought but the dark, round shape of a thick-furred, quiescent she-bear lying against the wall. And then they see the child. The bear is curled around him, protecting him from these fierce-smelling intruders in her cave.

I don't know what happened next. I hope they didn't kill the bear but instead simply reached for the child, quietly took him up, praised Allah and this strange mother who had worked His will, and swiftly left the cave. I've searched for that part of the story—whether they killed the bear. I've gone back through news sources from river to tributary to rivulet until I can go no further because I don't read Arabic. This is not a mistake or a hoax; this happened. The baby was found with the bear in her den. He was alive, unscarred, and perfectly well after three days—and well fed, smelling of milk. The bear was nursing the child.

What does it mean? How is it possible that a huge, hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than rip him into food? But she was a mammal, a mother. She was lactating, so she must have had young of her own somewhere—possibly killed, or dead of disease, so that she was driven by the pure chemistry of maternity to take this small, warm neonate to her belly and hold him there, gently. You could read this story and declare “impossible,” even though many witnesses have sworn it's true. Or you could read this story and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places, think of the unconquerable force of a mother's love, the fact of the DNA code that we share in its great majority with other mammals—you could think of all that and say, Of course the bear nursed the baby. He was crying from hunger, she had milk. Small wonder.



The story of the child and the bear came to me on the same day I read the year's opening words on the bombing campaign in Afghanistan. I sat very still at the table that morning while my coffee went cold and my eyes scanned one sentence after another, trying to absorb the account of explosives raining from the sky on a place already ruled by terror, by all accounts as poor and war-scarred a populace as has ever crept to a doorway and looked out. My heart was already burdened by grief; only days had passed since I sat in this same place, at the same time of day, and listened to a report that unfolded unbelievably, numbingly, into a litany of unimaginable terror and assault on this country that holds my love and life. I could hardly bear more. But now my mind's eye ran away to find women on the other side of the world who were looking just then from their children up to the harrowing skies. What would they make of this message, whose retaliatory import seemed so perfectly clear to us? I read that the bombs had taken, among others, four humanitarian-aid workers in the small office in Kabul that coordinated the work of removing land mines from the soil of that beleaguered nation. My heart's edge felt as dull and pocked as an old shovel as it scooped low to take on this new weight, the rubble and grief of war. And so when I came to the opposite page in the book of miracles, I cleaved hard to this other story. People not altogether far away from Kabul—wrapping themselves in similar soft robes, similar hopes—had been visited by an impossible act of grace.

In a world whose wells of kindness seem everywhere to be running dry, a bear nursed a lost child. The miracle of Lorena is genuine. If you venture onto the information highway with a good search engine and propose “Kayhan, Iran, bear,” you will find this tiny, remarkable note in the human archive. You may also find, as I did, a report written by Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, telling how he and eleven other Iranian students heading home after a rally were arrested and tortured for protesting against government oppres-

sion. His story comes up in the search because he also lived near Kayhan, and buried deep in the text are the words of an officer who told him during one of his strenuous torture sessions, "We can milk roosters here, bears lay eggs here, you? You're just a human being. In the course of one hour we can make a bear confess to being a rabbit." Another small footnote in the human archive. God is frightful, God is great—you pick. I choose this: God is in the details, the completely unnecessary miracles sometimes tossed up as stars to guide us. They are the promise of good fortune in a cloudless day, and the animals in clouds; look hard enough, and you'll see them. Don't ask if they're real.

I elect to believe that the Lori men didn't kill the bear. For years to come I will picture the father quietly lifting the boy from her belly, wrapping him in the soft cloth of his shirt, and reverently leaving the cave of his salvation. Leaving a small pile of acorns outside the lair of this mother, this instrument of Allah's design, as a sacrament.

I believe in parables. I navigate life using stories where I find them, and I hold tight to the ones that tell me new kinds of truth. This story of a bear who nursed a child is one to believe in. I believe that the things we dread most can sometimes save us. I am losing faith in such a simple thing as despising an enemy with unequivocal righteousness. A mirror held up to every moral superiority will show its precise mirror image: The terrorist loves his truth as hard as I love mine; he has a mother who looks on her child with the same fierce pride I feel when I look at my own. Someone, somewhere, must wonder how I could love the boys who dropped the bombs that killed the humanitarian-aid workers in Kabul. We are all beasts in this kingdom, we have killed and been killed, and some new time has come to us in which we are called out to find another way to divide the world. Good and evil cannot be all there is.

Lately we've had to consider a new kind of enemy we can

hardly bear to behold: a foul hatred bent to the destruction of all things precious to us—to *me*; I'll shudder here and speak for myself as someone who loves her life as it is, a woman whose spirit would surely get itself stoned to death if forced to submit to the order of such men. The horrors they've wrought have reduced me at times to a pure grief in which I could only cross my arms against my chest and cry out loud. I can't pretend to understand their aims; I can barely grasp the motives of a person who hits a child, so I surely have no access to the minds of men who could slaughter thousands of innocents and die in the process, or train others to do those things. I presume they want us to become more like themselves: hateful, self-righteous, violent. I expect they would count themselves victorious to see us reduced to panic under their specter, to fall into factions of difference and censor or attack our own minorities, to weaken and let go of the ideals of equality and kindness that first brought our country onto the map of the world. So I hold my own heart fast against the fulfillment of this horrific prophecy, and I hope that the men who constructed it can be made to live out humiliated ends in prison—a punishment that would inspire fewer followers, I think, than dramatic death in battle.

But even that would not be the end of the story. This new enemy is not a person or a place, it isn't a country; it is a pure and fearsome ire as widespread as some raw element like fire. I can't sensibly declare war on fire, or reasonably pretend that it lives in a secret hideout like some comic-book villain, irrationally waiting while my superhero locates it and then drags it out to the thrill of my applause. We try desperately to personify our enemy in this way, and who can blame us? It's all we know how to do. Declaring war on a fragile human body and then driving the breath from it—that is how enmity has been dispatched for all of time, since God was a child and man was even more of one.

But now we are faced with something new: an enemy we can't

kill, because it's a widespread anger so much stronger than physical want that its foot soldiers gladly surrender their lives in its service. We who live in this moment are not its cause—instead, a thousand historic hungers blended to create it—but we are its chosen target: We threaten this hatred, and it grows. We smash the human vessels that contain it, and it doubles in volume like a magical liquid poison and pours itself into many more waiting vessels. We kill its leaders, and they swell to the size of martyrs and heroes, inspiring more martyrs and heroes. This terror now requires of us something that most of us haven't considered: how to defuse a lethal enemy through some tactic more effective than simply going at it with the biggest stick at hand.

Something new is upon us, and yet nothing is ever new. Two thousand years ago, the Greeks understood this enemy. It inhabited their imagination in a favorite tale of heroic adversity, the story of Jason and the Argonauts, where it took the shape of a particular dragon. When this creature was slain and its corpse fell to the soil, each of its teeth germinated and instantly grew into a new enemy, fully armed and born full-force to the battle. In all of his picturesque predicaments, Jason never faced one more impossible than this field of foes, each with its own mouthful of teeth aching to germinate. For once he couldn't fight his way out; it took a woman to save him. Medea, who loved Jason and tried to protect him, whispered in his ear a simple truth: Hatred dies only when turned on itself. This force could not be extinguished by the sword, she told him; only a clever psychological strategy could vanquish it. Jason took her advice but went about it in his own way, by throwing a rock cryptically and inciting an internal riot of rock throwing in which the dragon's-tooth warriors destroyed one another.

Later on, Jason encountered another dragon. Unbelievably (but of course, heroes being only what they are, predictably), he again drew his sword, ready to kill it. Medea stopped him with a

quick, gentle hand on his bicep. This time, rather than allowing a new field of hatred to be sown and reaped, she moved quietly to the mouth of the sleeping dragon and gave it an elixir of contentment so it would remain asleep as she and her lover passed by.

At a time when the modern imagination seems fully engaged in discussion of swords of every length and breadth, there's little room for other kinds of talk. But I'm emboldened by Medea to speak up on behalf of psychological strategy. It's not a simple-minded suggestion; her elixir of contentment is exactly as symbolic as Jason's all-conquering sword, and the latter has by no means translated well into reality. The strategic difference is the capacity to understand this one thing: Some forms of enemy are made more deadly by killing. It would require the deepest possible shift of our hearts to live in this world of fundamental animosity and devote ourselves not to the escalating exertion to kill, but rather, to lulling animosity to sleep. Modern humanity may not be up to the challenge. Modern humanity may not have a choice.

The miracle of Lorena Province haunts me as I consider this predicament. I catch glimpses of that bear pacing restlessly on the periphery of everything I thought I could be sure of. We are alive in a fearsome time, and we have been given new things to fear. We've been delivered huge blows but also huge opportunities to reinforce or reinvent our will, depending on where we look for honor and how we name our enemies. The easiest thing is to think of returning the blows. But there are other things we must think about as well, other dangers we face. A careless way of sauntering across the earth and breaking open its treasures, a terrible dependency on sucking out the world's best juices for ourselves—these may also be our enemies. The changes we dread most may contain our salvation. And the stinging truth that we aren't entirely loved for our ways in this world? Like the bear, this thing could eat us up or save us. We will see.

There are many angles on the miracle in Lorena: for one, that a

bear was in the cave at all. Bears are scarce in the world now, relative to their numbers in times of old; they're a rare sight even in the wildest mountains of Iran. They have been hunted out and nearly erased from the mountains and forests of Europe, much of North America, and other places that have been inhabited for thousands of years by humans, who by and large find it difficult to leave large predators alive. Bears and wolves are our fairy-tale archenemies, and in these tales we teach our children only, and always, to kill them, rather than to tiptoe past and let them sleep. Maybe that's why I'm comforted by the image of a small child curled in the embrace of a mother bear. We need new bear and wolf tales for our times, since so many of our old ones seem to be doing us no good. Now we're finding that it takes our every effort of will and imagination to pull back, to stop in our tracks as hunter and hunted, to halt our habit of killing, before every kind of life we know arrives at the brink of extinction.

Some days you have to work hard to save the bear. Some days the bear will save you.



*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun. . . .*

In his poem "Mending Wall," Robert Frost invokes the image of his neighbor walking the fence line intent on constant survey and repair, here and there raising up a boulder between his hands, "like an old-stone savage armed," to put it back in its place, determined to keep this boundary intact, though it restrains only trees. (*My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.*) "Good fences make good neighbors," is the only

rationale the neighbor will offer, as his father said before him. The poet is baffled at so much resolute effort.

And so we all might well feel baffled, as we awaken this morning to find the greatest part of our ways and means invested in the walls our nations have built between ourselves and those whom we wish to keep out. Throughout our modern history we have taken each step in the construction of defensive borders with few doubts in mind, from stones to bricks and mortar, to rifles and barbed wire, to missiles and tanks and the firestorm contained in an atom. And now here we are, devoted to the efforts of surveillance, repair, and dread.

Borders crumble; they won't hold together on their own; we have to shore them up constantly. They are fortified and patrolled by armed guards, these fences that divide a party of elegant diners on one side from the children on the other whose thin legs curve like wishbones, whose large eyes peer through the barbed wire at so much food—there is no wall high enough to make good in such a neighborhood. For this, of course, is what the fences divide. Probably we began with more theoretical notions of ethnic purity—the wish to keep the apples out of our pines—and for most of the last century we rationalized our walls in terms of ideology, but the Iron Curtain has now dramatically fallen. Now we have fashioned from the crumbling boundaries of the Cold War a whole new shape of division, fundamentally between rich and poor. That chasm keeps growing; a quarter of the world's poor are now poorer than they were fifteen years ago, having struggled only to lose ground.

The hard boundary between the haves and the have-nots is still defended with armaments, but now it is also bridged by a dancing, illusory world of material wants. Passing through every wall are electronic beams that create a shadow play of desire staged by the puppeteers of globalized commerce, who fund their advertising each year with more than a hundred dollars spent for this

planet's every man, woman, child. "This world of inequality is also a world of solitude," writes Eduardo Galeano, in which multitudes of the desperate are led "to confuse being with having." And condemned to have not.

In the name of God and all the fishes, a hundred dollars for every human alive, solely to lure them all into want! To consider this material tyranny is to begin, surely, to understand why protest against the global corporate order throws itself down weeping in the streets from Seattle to Genoa to Pakistan. Imagine how it looks from the other side, where undulating female bodies sell soft drinks to the likes of the nomads in Lorena Province. This omnipresent shadow play ignores the genuine differences of culture that legitimately distinguish us, pretending instead that we are all of one mind and share in an equal and endless pocketbook. But in truth, it relies on other kinds of fences, ever-increasing fortifications of the heart and treasury. Global commerce is driven by a single conviction: the inalienable right to earn profit, regardless of any human cost. No one argues that this is untrue. It is also proving unassailable. When Guatemala passed laws intended to encourage low-income mothers to breast-feed rather than use imported infant foods, for instance, the world's largest baby-food manufacturer circumvented these rules by threatening to invoke GATT and other trade sanctions. When Europeans favored importing bananas from the Caribbean and Canary Islands over buying fruit grown where working conditions are worse, they were similarly thwarted. The laws governing international trade render it more difficult each year to inject moral considerations into the marketplace, frustrating the many nations and individuals who still wish to balance economic motives with compassionate ones. Indeed, international trade laws increasingly restrict access to the very information that makes any such concession possible—witness, for example, the endless battle for accurate labeling waged by U.S. consumers who prefer their food organically grown

and not genetically modified. The profiteering drive of commerce owns no malice or mercy, is incapable of regret, and takes no prisoners; it is simply an engine with no objective but to feed itself. And it is a Goliath: A decade ago, the combined sales of the world's ten largest corporations exceeded the gross national product of the world's hundred smallest countries *put together*, and the gap is growing.

Inevitably, hungry souls and angry hands rise up against that amoral giant, and ever-higher walls of armaments are required to keep them at bay. These walls create among us a huge class that the French author Jacques Attali has named the "millennial losers," for whom the fantasy of prosperity promoted by the media is both a continuous allure and an endless slapdown. The siren's song calls them toward Paris and New York, glittering Emerald Cities walled off by inaccessibility. In his 1991 book *Millennium: Winners and Losers in the Coming World Order*, Attali observed with a chilling prescience that particularly among those in the Middle East who'd suffered repeated humiliations by the West, the fiercely absent presence of worldly affluence tended to inspire fervent cults of frustration and outrage.

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down. . . .*

We who are alive in this moment didn't build these walls, nor did we ignite the fury that has smoldered for eons and hurls itself at us now as a burning question. But we have inherited the urgent necessity of answering it. And possibly we will succeed.

It isn't only the insane rage of the dispossessed that burns against these walls. It is also, from inside the house of privilege, the indignation of the children of mercy who laid themselves down in the streets of Seattle to bring the World Trade Organization's autocracy to a halt. It is the shaken hearts of those who gathered at



Ground Zero in Manhattan and begged for an end to the killing fields. It is surely every person's animal soul, and the DNA code shared perfectly between every two humans alive—a genetic truth inside our cells that leaps back and forth across continents. That code insists on my kinship with both the elegant diner and the child with the wishbone legs, with the Lori nomad and even, perhaps, with the bear. Roosters give milk here, bears lay eggs. The lion could lie down with the lamb. A frozen groundswell just beyond our senses heaves and buckles, daring the world to dismantle these walls of enmity and use the stones to build ovens for baking bread. It would be the death of something, and the life of something. Somewhere there must be a door through. The alternative is only to construct higher walls, and the higher they grow, the harder they will fall. It's hard to imagine a more frightening time than this.

I know, someone has said that already. People said it a thousand years ago, and they've said it about nearly every minute that has ever gone by since. My generation's parents said it during the Cuban missile crisis, and *their* parents said it after Pearl Harbor. Mothers said it as they watched their sons ride off to fight in the Civil War, and they said it a hundred years later when black-skinned children had to be escorted by armed officers through the doors of an all-white school. The day Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, or Gandhi, or Jesus, or Monseñor Oscar Romero, or the day the Buddhist monks immolated themselves in Vietnam while the stunned world watched—all of these were the worst there could ever be. Scholars of history are fond of pulling up statements of dismay from time immemorial to prove to us that there is nothing new under the sun: The wolf was always at the door, and people have always been hell-bent on pulverizing one another, exactly as they are now.

The historians are right, it isn't new, this feeling of despair over a world gone mad with heartless and punitive desires. It isn't new

that both sides rush to the fundamentalist presumption of themselves against the evil ones. It isn't even new that the world could fall apart and become permanently uninhabitable in a matter of minutes—that's what the Cuban missile crisis was about. What is new is that we now know so very much about the world, or at least the part of it that is most picturesquely exploding on any given day, that we're left with a desperate sense that *all* of it is exploding, *all* the time. As far as I can tell, that is the intent and purpose of television news. We see so much, understand so little, and are simultaneously told so much about What We Think, as a populace polled minute by minute, that it begins to feel like an extraneous effort to listen at all to our hearts.

I try with all my might to duck under this wire, not to believe in polls or allow the TV bluster anywhere near my face. At moments I have to stop taking in more news so I can consider what I've gathered so far and pay attention to my own community, since that is the only place where I can muster a posse to take on our own local disasters of the day. Sometimes I have to make a simple, straightforward effort to do just that, so I will feel less like a screen door banging in a hurricane.

And that is what is really new since time immemorial: the sense that the problems are so vast in scope that we've lost any hope of altering the course of things. During previous eras of conspicuous doom—the Black Death, for example—people surely felt that the world was ending, but the end they probably pictured was smaller in scale, consisting of themselves, their neighbors, and God. They couldn't imagine a wreckage so appalling as the end of humankind on a planet made squalid by man's own hand; I doubt they had yet grasped the magnificence of our history, or the infinitude of our foolishness.

The feeling I dread most is not fear but despair—the dim, oppressive sense that the more things change, the more they stay the same; that each of us with a frozen heart “like an old-stone

savage armed" will continue to move in darkness, lifting boulders, patrolling the firmaments of divisive anger. I do not go gentle into that particular night; I burn and rave against the dying of all hope. I concede that there is mounting evil in this world, and that some hearts are so hardened already that they cannot possibly be appeased. Some walls grow higher each year, it's true.

But others crumble. The people who said the sky would fall and God would weep if their sons and daughters had to sit in the same schoolroom as black-skinned children were wrong: The sky didn't, and whether or not God did is a matter of personal opinion. The earth has shifted beneath our feet, time and again, as the stones of our paradigms fell hard on the dust. Irrevocably, humanity inhaled a new era in 1772, when Lord Mansfield declared that slaves were free the moment they breathed the air of England; sixty years later that promise was extended to the air of the whole British Empire, and thirty-odd years after *that*, following a monstrous sacrifice of earnest belief on both sides, to the air of the United States. In the *next* century, at the end of which the women of Afghanistan fell from full citizenship to a nation of silent, peering eyes, there were many other countries—including mine—where women fasted and marched and fought for and gained the right to own property, then to vote, then to sit on a jury of their peers and be counted as fully human. Apartheid fell step by step in the United States and in South Africa. Mate choice and romantic love have come to be regarded, at least in some places, as private and sacrosanct privileges, limited only by the congenital rules of a complex human chemistry, even if the romance should cross lines of class or color or contradict the common presumptions of gender.

Some of these changes I've witnessed in my lifetime. I began first grade in a segregated public school, in a state whose anthem—which we children doggedly belted out each morning—contained the line "Tis summer, the darkies are gay!" That unset-

ling declaration would be quietly revised many times, for many reasons, over the next ten years. Time and again, the bear they had sworn would rip us limb from limb was begrudgingly allowed a place at the table, and behold, it used a fork and a spoon. The natural laws we have believed in and taught our children have sometimes been found to be not natural laws at all, but rather fearsome constructs of our own making, undermined by the evidence. And among those mistakes there is this: All of the promises of politicians, generals, madmen, and crusaders that war can create peace have yet to be borne out.

With these startling honesties glinting up at us from history's broken mirror, it strikes me that this is worth shouting from the rooftops: We could be wrong this time, again. The enemy may not be exactly what we think. It may be a force that resides in many quarters, including inside our skin, in our very words, the questions we frame, the things we love most, the things we can't live without. Our greatest dread may be our salvation. We are in no position yet to declare the moral of our story.



"But how," a friend in New York has asked me, "do I live with the anger? On my street, where every night I smell the incinerated towers as I walk the dog, there is inescapable pain and rage. In this city we bear the brunt of the struggle to figure out what it means to have our hearts cut away by hateful violence that the whole country somehow engendered."

I hardly know how to answer that for myself, let alone for anyone else, and yet that struggle is for so many of us the currency of everyday survival. Most of us can't know how it feels to live in the shadow of those murdered towers. But nearly all of us care, because we ourselves know what it means to have our hearts cut away by life: We've borne physical assaults, lost those we loved

best, lost our own souls, our physical wholeness, the future we were counting on, had days we could not see how to get through. I understand that we'll have lost everything if a hateful enemy can crush us and reconstruct us in its angry image, but what other door may lead out of this dark room? I've felt outrage I was sure would burn me alive. Some nights I've lain awake wondering how to keep on living while someone, somewhere, despises me and wishes so many of us dead because of our faith or nationality, assigning to us transgressions I can scarcely grasp. I wonder how to stay calm with so much beauty at stake, being scorched from my line of sight as trees fall and sacred places are ground to dust. I find it insufferable to bear silent witness to the flesh-and-bone devastations of war, and bitterly painful to be cast sometimes as a traitor to the homeland I love, simply because I raise questions. I find myself in a strange niche, reviled by some compatriots because I can't praise war as the best answer, and reviled everywhere else because my nation does. Each of us inhabits his or her own strange niche, I suppose; we've engendered animosity for many things that most of us never contrived to do, perhaps never even knew about. Many of us can't fully believe in all the imperatives that have been pronounced the will of our people. One problem with democracy as it plays in our country is that the majority rules so hard; we seem bent on dividing all things into a contest of Win and Lose, and declaring that the Losers are *losers*. Nearly half of us are routinely asked to disappear while the slim majority works its will. But the playing field is the planet earth, and I for one have no place else to go.

The closest my heart has come to breaking lately was on the day my little girl arrived home from school and ran to me, her face tense with expectation, asking, "Are they still having that war in Afghanistan?"

As if the world were such a place that in one afternoon, while kindergartners were working hard to master the letter *L*, it would

decide to lay down its arms. I tried to keep the tears out of my eyes. I told her I was sorry, yes, they were still having the war.

She said, "If people are just going to keep doing that, I wish I'd never been born."

I sat on the floor and held her tightly to keep my own spirit from draining through the soles of my feet. I don't know what other mothers say at such moments; I suppose some promise that only the bad men are getting hurt. I wish I could believe in that story myself. But my children have never been people I could lie to. My best revenge against all the dishonesty and hatred in the world, it seems to me, will be to raise right up through the middle of it these honest and loving children.

I asked her, "Do you really mean that? You wish you'd never known Daddy or me or your sister? That you'd never gotten a chance to hug us, or have us read books to you, or tuck you in at night? Never gotten to take care of your chickens and gather their eggs, never seen a rainbow?"

Of course she said, soon enough, that she was glad to be alive. And I'm sure that's true, as I watch her throw her heart and limbs into a mostly unburdened life. But I understood that day that we are all in the same boat. It's the same struggle for each of us, and the same path out: the utterly simple, infinitely wise, ultimately defiant act of loving one thing and then another, loving our way back to life.

It used to be, on many days, that I could close my eyes and sense myself to be perfectly happy. I have wondered lately if that feeling will ever come back. It's a worthy thing to wonder, but maybe being perfectly happy is not really the point. Maybe that is only some modern American dream of the point, while the truer measure of humanity is the distance we must travel in our lives, time and again, "twixt two extremes of passion—joy and grief," as Shakespeare put it. However much I've lost, what remains to me is that I can still speak to name the things I love. And I can look for safety in giving myself away to the world's least losable things.

My parents, before raising me, first had to spend every day of their lives from infancy to early adulthood coping with a great depression and then a war. As a consequence, they reared me under the constant counsel to trust spiritual values ahead of material ones, and to look to the land for shelter. "A house can burn down," they said, "but a piece of land will always be there." These words came back to me profoundly on the bleakest day, when we watched those two shattered towers billow smoke.

I've internalized my parents' message in a way that is not precisely personal; after all, ownership of farms per se provided no safety for the Japanese Americans removed to concentration camps during World War II, many of whom lost everything. But I understand what they meant, and have spent a lifetime learning to believe in things that can never burn down. I can invest my heart's desire and the work of my hands in things that will outlive me. Although it grieves me that houses are burning, I have fallen in love with a river that runs through a desert, a rain forest at the edge of night, the right of a species to persist in its own wild place, and the words I might assemble to tell their stories. I've fallen in love with freedom regardless, and the entitlement of a woman to get a move on, equipped with boots that fit and opinions that might matter. The treasures I carry closest to my heart are things I can't own: the curve of a five-year-old's forehead in profile, and the vulnerable expectation in the hand that reaches for mine as we cross the street. The wake-up call of birds in a forest. The intensity of the light fifteen minutes before the end of day; the color wash of a sunset on mountains; the ripe sphere of that same sun hanging low in a dusty sky in a breathtaking photograph from Afghanistan.

In my darkest times I have to walk, sometimes alone, in some green place. Other people must share this ritual. For some I suppose it must be the path through a particular set of city streets, a comforting architecture; for me it's the need to stare at moving water until my mind comes to rest on nothing at all. Then I can go

home. I can clear the brush from a neglected part of the garden, working slowly until it comes to me that here is one small place I can make right for my family. I can plant something as an act of faith in time itself, a vow that we will, sure enough, have a fall and a winter this year, to be followed again by spring. This is not an end in itself, but a beginning. I work until my mind can run a little further on its tether, tugging at this central pole of my sadness, forgetting it for a minute or two while pondering a school meeting next week, the watershed conservation project our neighborhood has undertaken, the farmer's market it organized last year: the good that becomes possible when a small group of thoughtful citizens commit themselves to it. And indeed, as Margaret Mead said, that is the only thing that ever really does add up to change. Small change, small wonders—these are the currency of my endurance and ultimately of my life. It's a workable economy.

Political urgencies come and go, but it's a fair enough vocation to strike one match after another against the dark isolation, when spectacular arrogance rules the day and tries to force hope into hiding. It seems to me that there is still so much to say that I had better raise up a yell across the fence. I have stories of things I believe in: a persistent river, a forest on the edge of night, the religion inside a seed, the startle of wingbeats when a spark of red life flies against all reason out of the darkness. One child, one bear. I'd like to speak of small wonders, and the possibility of taking heart.