

SOME DEFINITIONS OF GRATITUDE

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On our ride home from my brother's house last Easter Sunday, having spent a few hours basking in our blessings of atonement and progeny, we pass an accident on the interstate. I say *accident*, though what we distinguish through the blur of cars and parked fire trucks is no fender bender, but a barely recognizable clump of metal embracing a tree like some sparkly trash blown to the roadside. There is a sudden awareness of fact like a sucker punch—*surely someone has died here*—that triggers the memory of our own close call almost eight years ago now: the moment I hung sideways, still buckled in the passenger seat of our crumpled car, listening for my children's screams that would let me know they were okay—still hungry, still terrified from floating into the median in a deluge, hitting a tree and careening sideways, an apocalypse their little bodies could only perceive but not comprehend—*Yes, they are crying! They are fine! We are both fine, we are all alive and fine—there is something protruding from my leg, but I am fine, I hear their voices praise heaven and all the possible names of God and every feathered angel!*

There is something about merit in that moment your mind wants to unravel—*why didn't we die?*—but the moments carry you forward into tasks: *call an ambulance, grab what you can from the car—please, my baby, you have to push the red button to release the car seat harness, please—thank you, no, I can't put weight on my foot—we'll need to call the insurance company, to call my mother, to cancel the vacation rental—let me try to nurse him before the ambulance comes, he's so hungry and scared!* There is a current to your life, carrying you through the temporary living arrangements and the gathering of things. It murmurs to you like the stream in a primary song—*of course*. It says *no other outcome*,

even if possible, is probable; it is a law of nature that carries you forward the way water buoys your blessed raft, swiftly toward a rock, and will inevitably skirt you at the last moment around it.

So when you talk back to this voice, when you tell yourself repeatedly that *God owes me nothing, I don't deserve this, survival surely isn't something that is earned*—you ponder whose hands have spared you— young and old, black and white, male and female, the swarm of people who stopped in the rain, in the dark, to gather you all up—God-sent people, no doubt, now departed for their various random destinations, whom you will now never have the chance to adequately thank. Is it enough, then, to quietly acknowledge God's hand? Still, a thought troubles you, like a sock bunched in your shoe, saying *This is woefully inadequate. What you ought to feel should be as vast as the space of your own vulnerability.*

Your mind nags you to go back, to return to the place in the woods where two paths diverged, to travel along that other road, notice all the side tracks, imagine every scenario that could have happened—*What if there was another car involved, another family's death? What if there were no other cars, no witnesses? What if this had occurred thirty miles sooner in the middle of the empty coastal Georgia plain where the radio stations amount to hiss and sputter?* It wants to name all the ways one or more of you could now be dead; surely this will summon the requisite feeling at which you have not yet fully arrived, the state of gratitude you believe is expected of you.

So in the months of recovery that follow—caring for your two small children in your parents' tiny house with the use of one good leg, your infant cycling through yet another round of sleep regression, his cries echoing through every chamber of that 1970s prefab home, so that your only hope for anyone's rest is to let him suckle to sleep in your arms every night, undoing all the previous months of effort to get him to sleep in his own crib—if some ecstasy isn't summoned, some daily sublime prostration does not occur before God, but merely

the knowledge of yet another debt you could never attempt to repay, does your knowledge of this chasm of indebtedness qualify as gratitude, when you know, had any other outcome occurred, you would have lost yourself in another chasm of loss? Is it even possible to feel a joy as profound as the grief and utter despair you would have felt if you had lost one of them, knowing that its bottom would have been far deeper, the pit of bodily torment exponentially darker than any puny relief you now feel that you are trying to label gratitude? Does standing at its edge and looking down into it, feeling its vertigo and infinite buckling—could this be called gratitude?

And if you could find the missing ingredient, could satisfy this need you feel to identify it—would this stave off the threat you feel, the fear that not having it would somehow ensure the hammer of God's justice the next time you came this close? This is what eats at you: that despite your awareness of this current of momentum of the living you know you are taking for granted, all your imagined prostrations still occur before a God who holds a hammer, a gavel, not one who, like the stranger whose face you can't remember, held out his hand to lift you, broken, from the car, carried you in his arms out of the downpour to safety.

So which is the face of God you want to believe in? What does it take to let go of this small obsession with surviving it the right way, this need for insurance, like the right papers in your pocket for the next checkpoint on the straight and narrow? Is it enough to settle into the daily joys and frustrations of nursing and napping and cleaning your children, knowing what could have been, rather than requiring yourself to place your soul on some other imagined altar of penitence for the feeling you think you lack? Would that lack not be covered by the mercy that stayed Abraham's knife?

As I watch my now seven-year-old boy move through his daily habits—leaving his afternoon cereal bowl on the table, milk pooled under the spoon that will surely gel into a sticky mess later, the bag

of cereal loose from the box, the milk jug's cap missing—aware of the rising tide in me that will not allow these small crimes to go unnoticed or unaccounted for, I am aware of the expanse of difference between my petty knee-jerk reactions to his sins and the infinite love I know defines our God, grateful—yes, I will choose to call it that—that He is something more than I could create from my own pitiful projections of fear and justice. That whatever capacity I have—or lack—to conjure up the awareness of His love, it can (I pray) be swallowed up completely by that love.

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