

The Kind of Brave You Wanted to Be

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Prose Prayers and Cheerful Chants against the Dark

Brian Doyle



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*For my friend Martin Joseph Flanagan
of Launceston, Tasmania, with gratitude
for years of friendship and laughter and
storytelling and storycatching. Deartháir
go raibh maith agat, cousin.*

Maybe that's the true power of words —
to show us how puny they are in the face
of everything they attempt to say.
And maybe that's why poets write,
to show the power of our powerlessness
in a storm at sea.

Roger Rosenblatt

I keep writing about the ordinary
because for me it's the home of the extraordinary.

Philip Levine

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That's the Kind of Brave You Wanted to Be

All I ever wanted to be when I was a little kid was a fireman. I was a kid a long time ago when the word wasn't firefighters. Yet and there were no such beings as firewomen. All firemen were cool. They were quiet and friendly and strong. It didn't seem then that they were all young, perhaps because we were younger than they were. There were legends about the unreal food they ate and how they were all better chefs than the best chefs in the city. We used to talk quietly about how tough we would have to be to face a fire. Fires could roast you in a few seconds. You would be ashes and splinters of bone. Your dad could not even identify you. Even your teeth would be burnt. Who could be that brave? Not to mention falling and carrying dead people and burning people and having walls fall on you. Who could be that brave? Yet they were cheerful and friendly. That's the kind of brave you wanted to be, the kind where not anything made you quail. Bullets were awful but a fire, man, that was what hell was made of, fire was the sneer of Lucifer, if a bullet hit you flat you wouldn't even know you were dead but you would know every instant of pain when a fire ate you. Yet they were efficient and affable and they played basketball with us behind the firehouse. Today I get it that they were tall kids themselves, mostly. And most of them surely volunteers. Who could be that kind of brave? One thing I know now, after many years of paying attention, is that there's a lot more brave than we know, or notice, or imagine. There's way more brave than craven. Sure, I know the evidence is everywhere against, but you know I am right, and you know really great exemplars of why we're right, and there they are, in your local firehouse.

Astigmata

My lovely bride shows me her palms yesterday,
Holy Thursday, and indeed there are cuts on her
Palms, and she says cheerfully *These are paper-*
Cuts from work but for an instant I wondered if
I had astigmata like Jesus, and I started giggling
And couldn't hardly stop for a while, but then it
Hit me that the poor guy had the sharpest vision
Ever inflicted on a human being. What an awful
Relentless load that must have been, you know?
To see everything that would happen to you way
Into the future: that would be unmistakable hell.
It would. You know what I mean. Maybe he was
Seven years old when he had the first intimation,
When he had a vision clear as could be, of Pilate,
And the olivewood cross, and Malchus's ear wet
In the dust in the garden at night. Man—the poor
Kid, to *not* be astigmatic. You wish he had some
Days he forgot, maybe, or his buddies made him
Laugh so hard he could hardly stop; some weeks
When he was just a kid, a gawky sneery teenager,
A shy calm young guy everyone called Yeshuah!
As they ordered carpentered things from the shop.
They tease him as they leave and he is snickering
As he fills out the work order and then his future
Smashes in again on him. The poor guy. We wish
He did have days when he didn't see too well, am
I right? How weird to say that. But if he was truly
Us, which I think is the genius of the whole thing,

That he wasn't some superstar but an illuminated
Us, which means we're him and he's us somehow
In a way that means he didn't die, that he's a verb:
Then you feel for him. A young guy, hardly older
Than the soldiers blown up every day in our wars.
You wish he had a day sometimes when he didn't
See well, when he couldn't focus, when he forgot.

Holy Thursday

Friend of mine tells me this story, scratching his head
In an ancient gesture which means I know this is hard
To believe but I am just telling you what happened, &
I have no idea what it means either. It's after the Holy
Thursday service in the chapel, right after the Blessed
Sacrament has been paraded to the altar of repose and
Incensated, don't you love that word? Everyone sings,
And then some people stay all night praying. Keeping
Vigil, really, like the old days of Nocturnal Adoration.
So a few of us had decided to stay up all night praying
For a friend who is having it real hard. We figured this
Was as good a chance as any to do something together.
There's about ten other people in the church and seven
Of them leave after midnight. So there's four of us and
These other three folks. So along about three o'clock it
Isn't easy to stay awake—you *think* you can stay up all
Night but actually *doing* it is really hard—and the three
Other people are sound asleep, one of them snoring like
A horse, and my boys and I are dozing a little, and then
There's a ... stab of light in the air. Like a lightning bolt
That didn't shut off, you know what I mean? About six
Feet long and maybe two inches wide. It was just *there*.
Yes, everyone woke up. Nobody said anything. Wasn't
Hanging over the altar or anything. It was roughly eight
Feet above the pews. It wasn't buzzing or anything. Me,
I stood up to eye the fuse-box, thinking maybe something
Shorted out, but as soon as I stood up I knew to sit back
Down again. I can't explain any of this. We just sat and

Stared at it. You basically couldn't take your eyes off it. After maybe seven minutes it vanished. One of my boys said later he thought it winked out like a light winks out when you close a door. Like maybe someone left a door open and realized a few minutes later the door was open and they shut the door quietly. So then it was dark again with nothing but candles. Still, no one said anything. I'll always be happy that no one said anything. The first guy into the chapel at dawn was a young priest getting things ready for Good Friday service. He was happy to see lots of people, as he said, had spent the night in silent prayer. We shook hands with him and said hello, but no one said anything about the stab of light. What's there to explain? It just was there, is all I can say. What it means, or where it came from, or who left the door open, I have no theory. All I know is that there it was, and seven of us saw it, and the snoring guy fell back asleep and snored like a grizzly bear the rest of the night. Me, I admire that guy. He snaps awake, sees what maybe is a miracle, and then goes right back to sleep. Got to get your beauty sleep, and maybe he sees miracles daily. Maybe that man has the right attitude, you know? There are lots of miracles, but sleep's the best.