

Another Letter to the Soul

1.

The mule deer, when they spot me on the still-bare ridge, line up in single file at the fence, disappearing into earth-tone with snow-patch on their rumps, invisible until the first one leaps. Thought: a small moment. We are made and unmade. The bone smuggler thinks fossils are just rocks. Why should we claim paleontology as so important? Wind crosses in front of me, jangling the gate, making the tree caught in another's limbs moan and shift, igniting a flare down the road. I love winter, have loved so many winters. At this point, my life seems overlong. The ruffed grouse that startles into its loud twig-snap flight leaves me with its heart-thunder below. What is left when spirit flees us and the soul is decomposed? Forked feet and belly-drag of her curious chain-link track. *Suicide bomber* and *drone* added to the Webster's.

2.

Soul stress: the clanging of a bell in the strong winds of the eastern front or an avalanche in the snowmobile exhaust's wake. The weather un-chaining, a slow coming apart. Hairline cracks widening in the vase. Over the phone, my friend's breathing sounds ragged, evaporative. As if it he were thinning to air. My soul is dizzy, he says. What to call this? Precarious structure, like the soil, disintegrating in the rain? Weakness? Pathopsychology? There is horror in what humans do, and the sensitives, those like you, whose hands sometimes tremble, who have no spleens, having lost them in the accidents of childhood, suddenly see auras and must sit down. Just beyond the normalcy of everyday life: *the flammable face of the world*. The mind, at the edge, just an organ. Its bluster and dying down. Its retina, a shattered piece of glass.

3.

Where in the body is the soul today? "Anatomy," not "astronomy." Look this morning at the deer, sleeping on its side in a pile of leaves. Put yourself there, under the stars, i.e. the heart. Protected, really, from nothing. Having to trust the air. Or gray solitaire on the bare branch of the extreme cold. Where outside the body is the soul today? It will seem as if it is happening all around you. As if the sun had moved into a new phase. Pale, breathless, a bottomless blue, a sentimental crochet of clouds at the edgework. The woman who made her friends promise not to parade her in public after she lost her mind found such joy in the choir that they were torn. Which is a feeling you have forgotten. Hope, one might say. The tilting that is change on the axis. If there is someone in the wind, there is someone in the mountain. If the soul is back there, in the child that was harmed, it is also in the older girl who takes her hand. Leading her through the burning trees, which breathe out emeralds.

4.

Asked to describe the soul, some will say a flame, some an orb. No one mentions the basement apartment. No one says the sickroom, its artificial light. Soul, being a journey, which sometimes gets stuck in place. Barreling or feeding like a silkworm through space, outgrowing itself again in its fifth instar. How to facilitate this, so death comes not as tragedy but as if ministered by girls, whose hands move over the belly, the thighs, adjusting the nightclothes. Their hearts, which might be most alive when broken. Poor, agitated pupa. Crawling out of its skin. Spared: only those who dwell most inland. There is a film flickering from a crack in the earth that those, who are caretaking, witness. Splashed with it, irradiated, their focus shifts. Bring back the dying to ice water in tin cups, butter their dry faces. And if this discomforts—the soul bulky, even obscene, as if it were wearing something intimate too large—sit like a god would and watch them go through it.

5.

Hung on a frame under the tent of healing, we walk and the vials tinkle like a hundred jostled bells: ginger for the tender stomach, Oxycontin for the tender soul, and buckets of Ambien for the sleepless. It is safer, it seems, wiser, to encounter one's friends above the earth. To remember also the restorative power of silence. A river that has frozen over can still carve a narrow stream where a colloquy of polytheism can be spoken. A literature can permeate, like water does, the hidden regions where human influence does not extend, past the ancestral suburbs, under and through touch. Something we might call a change of heart. So many days of caretaking—building fires, making ice, slipping the brandy stoppers under the tongue—even the most hardened criminals are softened by the proof of good within them. A feeling which might begin in the form of rain.

6.

Welcome, first snow, I speak into the dark. There is the early morning shuffle of its apparel. The slide of buttons, as of a coat slipped off. A friend tells me, if we could see spirit, it would be this flame-blue. I used to think so, too, but then I dreamt it. If spirit rises long-tailed, a magpie with iridescent wings, does soul sink back to be melted and molded and made new again? The soul, then, as under construction? We are in a bed in the upstairs of a house in the making. It is the reading season. No one on the road. The towns seeming further away. And the young? Are we less interested in what they're doing? *Tell me which infinity attracts you*, Bachelard writes, *and I will know the meaning of your world*. I am afraid of the ocean, and now fire, and, though I would like to know the sky, I am drawn to the infinity that is earth. Rock, its own shape, own meaning, not ours. The weight-bearing, sun burnt character of its slopes.

