

For Things Unseen

Golden-snouted Il Porcellino stares back at me. I fish out the only coin in the abdomen of my backpack, 20c. There's no water in the fountain so I drop it directly into the thin aperture, wondering where it opens up to. I only pray for a few things. Touch his kind nose. Make it brassier. In high school, there was a girl who knew how to read palms. I remember nothing of the fate she called out for me, but there was an intimacy in attempting to read each other's futures, and I remember the PDHPE lesson that sighed on in the background, the stale air in the demountable, the downtrodden grass between this section of the school and the real brick buildings. Now, my good friend tells me she went to a fortune-teller over video call. My other good friend is trying to convince us all to learn how to pull tarot cards. Must be something about being twenty. Guillermo Del Toro speaks about a 'sublime confusion' in your twenties; this despair that everything is over, and you have ruined it all, and you are much too behind to ever return, and then you turn thirty. I think of the sublime — that great fear, that great awe, I think of transcendence and overwhelm. I am overwhelmed by the prospect of the rest of my life, and I really do hope to be overwhelmed by it all, over and over again.

I'm fasting for Ramadan, so I spend the lunch break perambulating. I leave the Sexual Health Centre. This is where I am beginning my research project. No, I am lying. The final copyedit for my novel is due in a few weeks and I have spent the whole morning on a marked up Word document. The PubMed tab is still open though. I've developed a habit of visiting the library because they don't cheap out on the air conditioning. People are singing hymns outside Parliament House. I take my earphones out to listen. I see their big sign. Pray to Stop Abortion. I put my earphones back in.

A man walks by with a huge sandwich. Truly, an absurd thing; the sundried tomatoes spilling out onto the street and the basil catching on the edges of his large mouth. I think I am okay with the hunger. I think I manage it well. I ate a bowl of microwaved broccoli and air-fried chicken nuggets for suhoor. I started writing this version of the novel in Ramadan, three years ago, and there was something about the hunger that was always propulsive. There is something bracingly mortal about being in a state of discomfort for things unseen. A gratification so delayed that I must die before I feel it. Though I don't like too much talk of the afterlife. Rabia Basri spoke of the wish to burn down heaven and extinguish the fires of hell. I would love for my worship to be this whole. I would love for my worship to be without any expectation or any protection. I do not want to want like this. And so I don't imagine anything waiting for me. This discomfort is mine to feel.

I struggle to return to the mindset I had when I wrote that first draft. I had never written a novel before, I had no idea where the writing would take me, I had no proof that anything would come of it. I suppose I still struggle to believe that anything will come of it, though I'm hurtling towards the book release. The ideas of unknowing and uncertainty have compelled me so much throughout this process. I have thought extensively about the vulnerability of publishing at my age, but the novel deals with an enormous scale of unknowing; memory is simultaneously suffocating and porous, everything and nothing at all. I am writing from a position of weakness and naivety and I think the novel is better for it. The book is about bewilderment because I am constantly bewildered. Ibn Arabi says "knowledge of God is bewilderment, and knowledge of creation is bewilderment". I think of it as a precious state. I think I am okay with the hunger.

I walk by the anti-abortion singers again. There are two children in the small group. Isn't it a school day? I want to ask their parents what these kids could possibly understand about

abortion. What do they know of biology? Though I know I won't say anything of the sort. I pass them quickly; earphones in, head down. I scold myself.

I read a few research papers when I get sick of editing. I try to be diligent with note-taking for the literature review. I need to stare out into the distance intermittently, or I'll become more myopic. There are black swans sculpted into the fountain.

On my way home, a woman on the street says "if I was God, I'd kill all mosquitoes". I find myself interested in people speaking on the non-religious God, the lowercase-g god, the imperfect god, the necessary god. Weeks ago, I heard Gigi Perez perform live. In 'Twister', the refrain "Are you looking for God? Are you looking for God? Are you looking for God? Are you looking for God? Are you looking for God?" migrates from the question of something to blame to the question of any presence at all. In the end of \$0, I understand an implicit irreverence in Cameron Winter's "God is real, God is real, I'm not kidding, God is actually real, I'm not kidding this time, I think God is actually for real", but each time I hear it, I still feel a well of belief. Perhaps it is something about the desperation with which it is said. There has always been a desperation to my faith. I think of all the times I have laid my head on the ground today. I think I am okay with the hunger.

I finish my re-read of Joan Didion's 'The Year of Magical Thinking' on the train. The closing line "No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that" has remained with me since I first read it, and hits me again, two stations from home. I turn over the phrase that Didion transformed: "His eye is on the sparrow." Do I believe God's eye is on the sparrow? I believe everything is known. I don't know. I want my eye to be on the sparrow. I have always been concerned with the details of the world around me. Two months ago, I was in Melbourne and I was transfixed by a sparrow. It seemed impossibly small against the train station platform. And

then, an impossible disappearance. I didn't know where it went. I hadn't been paying enough attention. I scolded myself. I think about reverence. I laugh at everything but I don't think I am irreverent, though I love irreverence in others. No, I seem to hold a reverence for everything. But I think that's okay. I don't want us to yield to misanthropy and apathy. I want to be earnest. I want everything to matter.

Two friends pick me up for dinner. We drive to a restaurant that doesn't exist. We park at the side of the road and steal a poster from an underpass. Midway through pulling it down, I realise it is Maghrib. I take a date out of a ziploc bag in my purse and pray. I drink my friend's water and my friend's pack of dried fava beans. We roll up the poster and throw it in the boot of her car. We drive to an Indian-Mexican fusion restaurant, where we pick up one more friend, and share a trough of nachos. Then we walk through Little India, where we pick up another friend, and land at a petrol station food truck for dessert. We discuss pregnancy as a physiological stress test. All my mother's health conditions first emerged in her pregnancy with me. I feel a spasm of guilt and try to bury it. What could those kids on the street outside Parliament House have known about this? We discuss the future, more broadly. We listen to Sexxy Red with the windows rolled down.

I want everything to matter. But maybe my wanting is irrelevant. Everything matters. The poster ends up in my garage. I will scrape off the extra layers with a letter opener, cover it in clear contact and hang it up in my room. I scratch at a mosquito bite on my thigh. I open a Magic 8 Ball website and ask if the book will go well. It says "without a doubt". I ask if I will be satisfied. It says "better not tell you now". I don't think I am yet the kind of person who will be satisfied with anything. I think that is okay. Must be something about being twenty. I will save the comfort for later. I am okay with the hunger.