

The Lord God Returns



The day my friend died the ivory-billed woodpecker was maybe seen in Arkansas, a bird long-thought extinct. Some say it's an image of loss returned as an image of hope, but I don't know. I'm not saying there was any correspondence, just an interesting coincidence I noticed when loss seemed everywhere. That was the same month a woman rescued a pair of red-billed ducks and their fifteen ducklings from six lanes of Main Street and herded them into a pond behind the Faculty Club. Such odd birds that mate for life, the male and female looking exactly alike. All that afternoon I watched them in the pond, the father perched on the concrete edge flapping his wings as if to warn us away, and the babies circling and circling behind their mother in perfect formation, always avoiding one small dead bird face down in the water. *There is grandeur in this view of life*, Darwin wrote. She was only forty. I don't think she believed in that High Church Episcopal God her parents buried her by, but I don't know what she believed exactly. I believe the Lord God has returned to Arkansas, a bird that got its name because our ancestors shouted "Lord God!" whenever they saw it, a bird the size of a small child, its jackhammer beak, a wingspan as long as a tall man's arm. In 1837, when Audubon came here to Houston, he saw ivory bills nesting up and down the banks of Buffalo Bayou. Now it's all sludge and skyscrapers. In his famous painting, the only place anyone has seen the bird for sixty years, the male cocks his red head, seems to cast his beady, yellow eye toward the painter as if to say, "Don't count me out!" Of course, the birds were dead when Audubon painted them.

Later, all over the South, they flew out of the nineteenth century and
disappeared
in time. But I like to think of my great-great-grandmother and her daughters
fleeing over the Ozarks, how they might have stopped
to rest their horses and heard an ivory bill *BAM-bamming*
in a tupelo tree, *kent-kenting* like a tin horn, and shouted “Lord God!”
when they looked up and saw it. Maybe they thought it was a sign
they were bound for better things when all they were bound for
was Texas, the poverty of a small town, its sharp gasps
and held breaths. Still, they were alive, the big house burned
behind them, the land burned, the husband and father,
the Welshman Cawthron, dead somewhere with the First Missouri—
Pea Ridge, Vicksburg, Nashville—gold plates and silver bridles
in the sacks of the carpetbaggers. Or that other ancestor,
my Cherokee great-great-great-grandmother, who wandered off the Trail of
Tears

and onto a sharecropper’s farm, her only possession a Cherokee Bible
she couldn’t read. Maybe she stood in the dirt of that dirt-poor farm
and exclaimed “Lord God!” when her tow-headed husband
pointed to the woodpecker in the loblolly pine.
Did it remind her of the home she’d left behind, this bird
whose beak her tribe fashioned into coronets to crown its princesses?
Or maybe it was just a distraction in her ragtag life, the worry
of babies dying before they were two, of cotton crops gone up in drought.
She couldn’t see me down the trail of years writing this poem
and maybe she wouldn’t have cared if she could.
But I’m here, aren’t I? At least for now. Don’t count me out.
There is grandeur in this view of life.
Funny how we hunker down in our little canoes
in the middle of the scummy green swamp and wait and wait
for hope to appear, for ghosts to die and come back as bodies.

Decalogue: Thin Ice



When the boy finds a dead dog, he's sad
and wants to know why we die, what God is.
His aunt hugs him and tells him God
is here, in their embrace. Life,
she says, is a gift, though I'd have to say
sometimes it's a gag gift, like a huge flower
that squirts water at you when you put your nose
right up to it to smell it or the whoopee cushion
you sit on, unsuspectingly, in your favorite chair.
And maybe sometimes the joke turns cruel, so that
the boy's father calculates the strength
of the ice, but his math is wrong,
it won't hold up and the icy lake won't either,
won't hold up the boy and his flashing skates
just this once. It's too simple to say
the movie's director wants us to believe
the ice cracks and the boy dies to appease
some jealous Old Testament God
who's angry because the father worships science
instead of Him, or that he wants us to believe
the young man with the implacable stare, the one
who tends a fire on the lake shore,
is some kind of avenging angel. Maybe
he's God himself, impotent as anyone,
who looks on but can't change the world
he's set in motion. A philosopher might call what happens
the intrusion of the Meaningless Real. As a parent,
I'd call it The Thing You Must Not Name.
It's the break in the ice we all fear most and secretly
believe we deserve, that if God were just

he would rain down punishment on us
for all our little failures of attention,
for every time we were too tired, we were
too busy, every time we lost our tempers
and yelled, lost our tempers
and slapped. And not just any punishment,
but This One. We all have our little gods, of course—
the little god of self, for example, its ooze
and shine, its groan and moan—I've known
that kiss—and what of those of us whose sins
were huge, what of us, The Ones Who Left?
Nothing terrible happened. Pain, of course,
like anyone, but sometimes they grew up to be
productive, reasonably happy, while my friend,
who stayed married all those years, her son died
in a hit-and-run. Does that mean anything?
I don't think so. I suppose there might be
a certain comfort in believing in divine retribution—
at least you'd have a reason for why
things turned out the way they did. But I don't
believe in it any more than I believe in Providence, the kind
my father believes in, that God looks after him personally,
so that He made my father's car break down in front
of a gas station and not somewhere else. The way I see it,
they're both ways of feeling important. I mean,
that just leaves too many unanswered questions.
So every time something bad happens to you, are you
supposed to think it's because you were bad?
Or if it's good, is it because you were good? No,
I believe in meaningless coincidence—coincidence
that happens even to those who seem to live
in some dream of perfect happiness. Take this,
for instance: One summer night a young mother
bathes her children and puts them in the car and drives

to the airport to pick up her husband. They're a little late because the younger girl couldn't find her "blankie" and so they had to look everywhere, finally finding it at the bottom of a basket of laundry, and maybe the mother is impatient, scolds her daughter for still having to carry the blanket with her everywhere so that the child cries, sobbing in the backseat all the way to the airport. When they arrive, her husband is already waiting at the curb. It's been a long week in Boise, and he's so happy to see them he doesn't care that they're late and promises to stop for ice cream on the way home. He's telling his wife what a jerk the client, Hopwagon, is and the kids laugh about the name, and she's thinking how much she missed him, how she can't wait to get the kids to bed so they can make love, and just then, as they round a curve on the overpass, a truck traveling in the outside lane, the trucker on his way home to see *his* wife and kids in El Paso, maybe he's had a couple of beers, maybe he's going a little too fast, or maybe nothing at all, there's no reason, he just loses control, and the semi, this huge tractor-trailer, topples over onto the family's little station wagon, which, of course, bursts into flames, but not before someone pulls the mother to safety. Everyone else, the father and three kids, are trapped, and the rescuers have to hold onto her, she keeps trying to go back for them. "They were screaming and there was nothing we could do," the fireman said. "She kept saying she didn't want to live." I couldn't imagine why she would. Oh, and don't try to tell me this is beyond our understanding, that it's all part of God's plan, because the god who'd plan this, he doesn't even deserve the name.

The Soul Bone



Once I said I didn't have a spiritual bone
in my body and meant by that
I didn't want to think of death,
as though any bone in us
could escape it. Maybe
I was afraid of what I couldn't know
for certain, a thud like the slamming
of a coffin lid, as final and inexplicable
as that. What was the soul anyway,
I wondered, but a homonym for loneliness?
Now, in late middle age, or more, I like to imagine it,
the spirit, the soul bone, as though it were hidden
somewhere inside my body, white as a tooth
that falls from a child's mouth, a dove,
the cloud it can fly through. Like bones,
it persists. Little knot of self, stubborn
as wildflowers in a Chilmark field in autumn,
the white ones they call boneset, for healing,
or the others, pearly everlasting.
The rabbis of the Midrash believed in the bone
and called it the *luz*, just like the Spanish word
for light, the size of a chickpea or an almond,
depending on which rabbi was telling the story,
found, they said, at the top of the spine or the base,
depending. No one's ever seen it, of course,
but sometimes at night I imagine I can feel it,
shining its light through my body, the bone
luminous, glowing in the dark. Sometimes,
if you listen, you might even hear that light
deep inside me, humming its brave little song.

Decalogue: What If



I want to tell her not to
do it, the sick man's wife who's pregnant

by her lover after she and her husband
have tried for years. She's trying

to decide: if her husband lives,
she'll have an abortion; if he dies,

she won't. And the lover
wants her too, of course, since this is

the softening light of the movies. She'll break his heart,
he says, but he knows she has to choose.

Another problem for an ethics class.
What would I do? What did I?

My problem wasn't so complicated, only
a man I didn't want, a man

who didn't want me, my own sad history
of motherhood. Still, sometimes I think

about her—I know it would've been
a girl, a second chance, the one

I'd never slap or turn away from, certainly
never leave. When she learned to read, she wouldn't

keep it from me because I'd wanted it so much,
wouldn't hide the plump-lipped vowels,

the bony consonants under her tongue
like forbidden candy. She wouldn't think I'd take

everything from her, the way my mother took
everything from me. She'd be turning

twenty-one this year, November, just now
when the Chinese tallow tree outside my door

shakes its gold curls. Spendthrift, it spills
its purse of gold coins on the ground.

Now she'd be bowing her own gold head
over the book of her life she'd just begun to write.

But I know it's sentimental
to think this way—to idealize the unknown—

when I made the only choice I could. I wouldn't
change it, not really. And it's foolish to think

I could've changed myself, become the maker of delicate
smocked dresses, shiner of patent leather shoes. I never told

the man, the father, who'd cried once, telling me how much
he wanted a child. Whatever happened to him?

And what about the woman who's trying to decide?
It's too late for her now, while sunlight elaborates

the scars on the lengthening day. Beside her husband's bed,
a jar of fruit she's left him, cherries perhaps.

Over this vast sea of fruit, a wasp struggles
up the silver pole of a spoon. It slips

and falls, then pulls itself back on the spoon
like someone scrambling for a lifeboat. This happens

again and again, until I almost give up hope.
Finally, it reaches the rim of the glass, pauses and looks

around, compound eyes taking in the broken world.
Then it shakes the bloodred fruit from its wings and flies away.