

ESSAY WRITTEN AT 2 A.M.

STEPHEN KUUSISTO

I have decided to write while lying in bed.

Mark Twain used to do this though he did it by day and I'm doing it in the middle of the night while my wife sleeps on her side of the bed.

As near as I can tell the chief merit of writing while flat on one's back in the dark is that you get to imagine you're a half dead Englishman who has awakened in his or her tomb in London's Highgate Cemetery and you're pulling on the rope that rings the bell outside so that presumably a man who is cutting the grass will hear your alarm and come running.

I once visited the tomb of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and sure enough there was a bell on the roof.

I saw six ravens standing beside Coleridge's bell.

They were congregating with the same easy indifference you see in street cops.

They were there out of habit.

I pictured Coleridge in his barrel vault pulling the string and only the ravens within earshot.

I could see why the ravens liked their perch.

The tomb was atop a gentle hill and they could look out in all directions.

The first time I read Coleridge's poetry I was nineteen and I thought that being influenced in imaginative terms by an approaching storm was exciting.

The Iowa Review

Nowadays I see that the storm never ends and that old poem offers a false triangulation of rising and falling action.

Say what you will: bad weather and successive ravens are an unbroken and codeterminate chain and saying so won't make you feel any better.

I know that my will influences nothing in nature. The only thing I can cause by thinking is the accumulation of dust. I am good at this.

I have just now asserted that dust isn't a natural fact and that's foolish.

Poetry carves a topiary garden out of dust.

In a short while I shall abandon this business of writing in the dark and I'll switch on the radio and listen to the BBC and hear more about my country's foreign policy, which as far as I understand it is simply to kill as many civilians as we can. We kill them by arming their neighbors and by more direct means.

249

My country's chief exports are tears and dust.

"What about blood?" you ask. "Surely that's one of America's chief exports?"

O.K. Blood.

Please understand: I'm flat on my back in the middle of the night and I'm pulling the string for all it's worth.

Of ravens I have not heard tell of any save that I know they are standing perfectly still on my roof and yours.

Stephen Kuusisto

Now is the time of night for recalling past journeys.

In Lapland once I peered through a bus window with my blunted eyes
and saw sparks imposed on the glass.

I thought of evening prayers in Khartoum and the silence of communal
life after the day has gone.

I saw them, old men, long in their friendship, smoking as night filled
their alley.

And there in my dark bus I imagined that one man had a child's toy:
a wooden top that was likely a gift for his granddaughter. He set it
spinning. It moved over the worn stones giving off a light that no one
could explain.

250

It seems I am less of memory more of dream. That's how it is after fifty.

I remember (inexactly) a boat ride with other children, summer in
Finland, long ago.

There was a sickly boy seated at the bow.

An adult whispered the word *leukemia* but none of the children knew
what that was.

It was the solstice, there was sun on water, a song about strawberries
was going around.

Oh yes. I'm flat on my back and pulling this string for all it's worth.