

Innocence · *William Kittredge*

IN JANUARY, 1992, Annick Smith and I were in Umbria, visiting at their home in the hilltop town of Todi with the poet Jorie Graham and her husband, the poet and writer, James Galvin. All this, to me, was very exotic (their threshold was a paving stone laid down by Romans).

So my sensibilities were open when Annick and Galvin and I spent a day in Assisi, wandering the narrow streets with Franciscans in their brown robes and studying frescoes depicting the life of St. Francis painted by Giotto in the cathedral. But mostly I was confused. I sensed these things should add up, and they wouldn't.

In the outback high desert country of southeastern Oregon, I went to school with the children of Irish Catholics from Cork, and have no great love for that church. I understood that Francis had thrown down the trappings of his inherited wealth to embrace a notion of universal love, and that his friend Giotto had broken with the stylized traditions of medieval painting to depict humans as he actually saw them in their physicality, but I couldn't connect their striving to mine. The example of their work seemed only exotic, and the day like a tourist excursion, another trip to the cultural zoo.

Back in Todi, when I complained about my thick-headedness, Jorie said, "They were reinventing innocence. It's what we're all trying to do, isn't it?"

Jorie grew up in Italy. I've learned to have deep respect for her opinions, particularly about matters European. But I couldn't see what the hell she was talking about.

Reinventing innocence? Was that what I was trying to do? Was that our work?

Lately I think it is. We are in the midst of a self-aware grassroots movement toward reinventing ourselves, and the first step involves admitting our desire to do good, make a positive effect in the world.

We are, I think, and I see these aspirations in my students all the time, trying to reinvent possibility. Jorie was saying St. Francis and Giotto broke the spell of an institutional mind-set which lay over their times, and that everything, through the centuries from then until now, was changed. She was saying, as I understand her, that the power of innocence, seeing to what

is actual, was the power which drove the renaissance, and the romantic movement, and that it is the only thing which will drive our own will to reinvent the possibility of a more compassionate and responsible society.

She was saying we were all engaged in the rediscovery of that power, driven by our animal need to love one another and nature, the only place where we will ever be able to live.

Imagine if I, a man from the American West, never east of Denver until middle age, befriended a well-off couple from New York City. At their home, from a balcony looking down on Central Park, into our second martinis, we talk about how we've used our lives as we come to the threshold of what we've always thought of as old age.

"People from out West, like you," my new friend might say, "think they can set the world straight. It's not going to happen. Look around. The world isn't interested in being set straight."

There wouldn't be much I could say. People like me, who have dreamed out their lives in the half-empty spaces of the American West, often do seem to think they can persuade the world to realign itself according to some model. Below that balcony in Manhattan the world would be going on about its business with what looked like irresistible momentum.

Or, I tell myself, not. If we changed our notion of what we want the momentum would begin to collapse. We would be off the treadmill in a few decades.

On a cold January noontime in 1994, on a walk north from my hotel on 38th Street in New York City, looking for warmth and quiet, I stepped inside a Japanese bookstore which was for at least that moment, as I searched through picture books showing Zen gardens, mossy immaculate greenery and tiny bridges and raked paths, a version of the good place.

Then I went on to visit a successful woman in her office above 56th Street. Behind her, through a great window, was a view of Central Park. "Understand," she said, in her firm way. "We yearn for nature as much as you do, out in the West, where you have it. Why wouldn't we?"

In late sunlight on a hot May afternoon, I wandered (sauntered) down Broadway toward Prince in the Soho district of Manhattan, and I was struck by happiness.

The streets were crowded by people at least metaphorically representing every possible racial mix and every continent and subcontinent, all coming on to one another, many of them talking in tongues so far as I could tell, sometimes singing in one of a multitude of languages I couldn't place at all.

So much humanity and the old boy of myself idling among them in the maze of ornate brickwork walls and other lives, heat rising from the reach of Broadway to the south—I wanted to think a silver-haired young couple in matching lavender shorts might be Icelandic—maybe they had come to this empire city in search of hope. Or sin—maybe they'd had enough of silent glorious icefields.

In the 1950s, as I grew up in the backlands of the American West, we didn't believe in escape to cities. Our people had gone West looking for some version of freedom, and that death of possibility which is called purity. We were taught to despise cities, the native homes of injustice so we understood—and look at me—I was at ease in myself, in this mix.

What had I found in that crowding and diversity, such complexity? Each story, we know, is an addition to what's real in that stock of metaphors which is our actuality. Which is why our lives seem so anyway double-and-triple-hearted. At least that many hearts, so many stories.

We are of course creatures evolved to live with other creatures, ants, mushrooms, calling birds, the great charismatic animals, lions and gorillas and grizzly bears and each other. We find our most vivid and compelling metaphor for the glory of what we are and have in life amid multiplicity. What I had found was our ancient, thronging situation. I was happy inside a downtown version of our native home.

But the frogs and the sixty million North American buffalo and thundering herds of wildebeests and elephants and the entirely lost passenger pigeons—consider this an attempt at the start of a poetic listing—are dying out. Thousands of species have vanished forever, more are going every moment that passes (maybe we should mount a great electric sign down the side of a skyscraper in New York, the names of species in lights as they cease to exist).

It's our fault. Too many humans, too many conflicting needs, heedlessness—we all know those are the reasons why. In a branch of The Nature Store, just down Broadway from Prince, I saw an Eocene fossil which looked like some kind of long-tailed batfish preserved in orange sandstone which was at that time selling for \$2200.00, and a beautifully

detailed little carved elephant which was selling for \$595.00 (the white rhino was \$495.00), and spiral Ammonite fossils, and crystals inside the halved remains of the rough boulders where they lived in nature—and glossy books and maps and telescopes and star charts.

In an at least partways unconscious effort to feel good about ourselves, we try to replicate multiplicity, one of our prime metaphors for connection to glory. The Nature Store understands.

As a Westerner who walks in forests any time he wants, I'm tempted to dismiss such merchandise as virtual and unnatural. But my response is a way of feeling superior. The Nature Store, I suspect, helps some of us answer our hunger for connection to natural life, and at least in the way it helps us imagine, for that reason, is valuable.

Across the street there was a market where tables flowed with mangoes and glowing blood oranges and Spanish lemons and Shitake mushrooms and Holland Orange bell peppers. Display cases were loaded with Portuguese Linguica sausage, Black Forest hams and double-smoked sides of bacon and old fashioned brine-cured belly lox and extra-aged farmhouse English cheddar (dark and moldy and waxy brown) and catfish and Manila clams—guilty pleasures. How can we disdain civilization when it brings us such things to eat?

A monk in reddish robes sat on a stack of what I took to be prayer rugs, fanning himself in the heat in a tiny Tibetan store which sold singing bowls, brocade Bhutan wool fabrics, and seemed to specialize in hats made of fox fur with a crown of raw silk, elegant enough to be chic on uptown streets in the winter. I wondered if he was a practiced dreamer yearning to pass from life into the energy which is light.

All the stories in the world surround us, as they do the citizens on Prince Street. They make things happen, we all have to deal with metaphors loose in the streets near Broadway and Prince. It's possible to think of them as part of our good fortune.

Theodore Roethke, writing about the garden beside his house in Seattle, says

It is neither spring nor summer, it is Always,
with towhees, finches, chickadees, California quail, wood
doves,

With wrens, sparrows, juncos, cedar waxwings, flickers,
With Baltimore orioles, Michigan bobolinks,
And those birds forever dead,
The passenger pigeon, the great auk, the Carolina parakeet,
All birds remembered, 0 never forgotten!
All in my yard of a perpetual Sunday,
All morning! All morning!

Images of flight and water, in my versions of the right life, accumulate.
How do we imagine heaven on earth?

The creature we are began its evolution wandering the grassland
savannahs of central Africa. Would we be happier if we lived more like that,
thinking of our lives as extended travel? How do we name what we need?

Taking care, of the world and one another, must be our most necessary
preoccupation. How to proceed is the question. Well, I think, start with
Whitman.

The sun and stars that float in the open air. . . . the
appleshaped earth and we upon it. . . . surely the
drift of them is something grand;
I do not know what it is except that it is grand, and
that it is happiness,

or

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and Sun and the animals, despise
riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning
God.

or

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass, and white and red morningglories, and white
and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the March-born lambs, and the sow's pink-faint
litter, and the mare's foal, and the cow's calf,
and the noisy brood of the barnyard or the mire of
the pondside . . . and the fish suspending themselves

so curiously below there . . . and the beautifully
curious liquid . . . and the water-plants with their
graceful flat heads . . . all became part of him.

Old Walt, perfect reading for this aging child of the American backlands,
so utterly willing to reveal all he knew of his true self, revering himself as
part of things. Octavio Paz says Whitman is “the only great modern poet
who does not seem to experience discord when he faces his world.” Maybe
we could make our days into ongoing Walt Whitman festivals.