

## Small Kingdoms: A Notebook

N and I have been sleeping with the window open of late. Cooler nights, hints of autumn. Last night, we were jolted awake around 3:00 am by a heated domestic dispute in the road. Somebody named Steve was a deadbeat, asshole loser. He needed to be a man and pay his child support and provide for his children. The woman, unnamed, needed to mind her own business. There was horn blowing and shouting and threats. It was startling to be woken from a deep sleep, dropped right into the middle of this confrontation. But even more unsettling was the fact that when we looked out our bedroom window, the participants at the end of the block were out of our line of sight. Just disembodied voices reached us, as if we were taking in a play from obstructed seats in the balcony of some dark, decrepit theater. Or as if the gods had pierced the scrim of space and time with their own mundane arguments. Or as if the quarrels of the dead, unresolved after all these years, were bleeding through the night from the other side.

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The world is beautiful and absurd. Too many poets address the beauty and too few the absurdity. Even fewer still try to tackle both in the same poem.

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Watch a toddler with a crayon or pencil clutched in a fist scrawl on a piece of paper and then look at it, admire it. This is the magic of making a mark.

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Even after all these years of making—poems, collages, other things here and there—a feeling remains. My imagination is a little boat on a long tether, bobbing over the waves of a sprawling sea, but still lashed securely to a dock on dry, safe land. How to cut that rope? I still haven't figured it out. Maybe that's what death is—a kind of unmooring of the imagination to drift away on that vast sea.

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I keep my inner banjo tuned in a minor key.

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Time is an undertaker and a beggar.

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I am neither a smart, nor a complicated person. Sometimes I forget one or both these facts and try to take on too much in my art, my writing, my thinking, and then my psyche veers off its curvy two-lane road, crashing into a ditch full of bramble. Or worse, flipped upside down and smoking, a creaky wheel slowly spinning, the load of scraggly chickens I had in the back scattered and clucking in wild zigzags all over the road.

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My father's dementia is growing worse, and when I spend time with him, there is a phrase that keeps coming to mind—the name of before. I see his face grow taut, trying to hold it, this name of before. But it keeps slipping like silk through the loose folds of his thoughts.

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There is a peculiar division between writing and other arts. The raw material of writing—language—is used daily by everyone for the most pragmatic or banal communications, and in other ways (to control, to destroy, etc.) that are at total odds with the spirit and purpose of art. Thus, writers must elevate their raw material by fishing it out of the gutter or wresting it free from the enemy before they can even begin. Painters don't really have this problem. Nor do musicians. Or sculptors. Or film makers. Or dancers. It is a burden of the writer only. And perhaps the biggest burden is on the poet, who uses language in the most different, most intensified, most impractical way of anyone.

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Dream: W & J had another baby. It resembled an adult foot, the big toe being the head. W explained that it would grow out of this stage. I held it, and as I rocked it and swayed it, I was surer than ever that I was holding someone's foot with a smiley face scrawled onto the big toe. It squirmed and cooed like a baby, though, and I wasn't sure how to support its neck, or where its neck even was. The toe/head flopped and twisted like a baby's head and neck because I wasn't supporting it right. I was pretty sure I had killed it, so I gave it back to W & J and left in a rush.

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The body is a kingdom of rumors, skirmishes, laughter, quotidian tasks, war, death. It makes one promise—all empires crumble.

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For a poet, so much of writing is wandering the dark labyrinth of the mind with a candle, searching for the door into an inner room. Oddly, the door never seems to be in the same place twice. Or you find it, you think, but it's locked. You're searching all your pockets, the key nowhere to be found, the candle quickly sputtering down.

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Frank Stanford: “All of this is magic against death.”

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God is the snow filling an empty flower pot.

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I’m afraid it’s impossible to dig deeper into the mystical without severing ties with the political.

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My mother is ill in the ICU. Her sodium levels have tanked and she is experiencing some delirium. I sit with her and watch as she nods off, sinking through a deep bed of echoes and beeps. Now she is a fragile bird sleeping in a nest of wires. Now she is a girl again, somewhere in a desert. She lives with a gorilla. They play hopscotch and patty cake, but never hide and seek, for bad things lurk in the dusk. The gorilla hoots warnings, hurls rocks. But before bedtime all is quiet. All is soft. She brushes his fur. He licks his thumb, rubs the grime off her cheeks. He cradles her, gently. His snoring reminds her of the ocean, her father holding her up in the surf. Her father, the ocean—though neither exist now, in memory or dream.

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I've become more convinced that a shorter poem is always trapped inside the long poem.  
Like a movie trailer that's more satisfying than the movie itself. The essence distilled.

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Elegy

My heart  
never stopped  
being  
an ouroboros  
of hurt.

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I've reached a point as a poet where language often feels like an encumbrance.

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The Self is a crowded room.

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An artist of any stripe must give themselves permission to fail, and then embrace those failures with curiosity, without embarrassment.

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Lyric is the wild songbird smuggled into captivity. Narrative is the cage. Sometimes you have this overwhelming desire to smash the cage and set the bird free.

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End Times

The resurrected  
rode off  
through the rain  
on empty bicycles.

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When asked why he never wrote symphonies, Frédéric Chopin reportedly said, “My kingdom is a small one, but I am king there.” I love this idea. We need our writers and artists of the small kingdoms, past and present (and I count myself among them), going about their lives, their business, mostly unseen. Not the grizzlies or lions or eagles. But the midges and pill bugs, the mice and rabbits, the subterranean moles and earthworms and beetles in their cool, dark

labyrinths. One must know their place and accept it and get on with the work. The work is no less important because it doesn't bring fame, because it exists in the margins and has a smaller audience. And let's face it—there's nothing more ridiculous than a worm trying to be a lion.

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Dream: N threw me a birthday party and somehow got Michael Trent and Carrie Ann Hearst, the husband and wife duo of Shovels and Rope, to come by. We were hanging out, showing them around our property, trying to convince them that they need to stay at the Air B-n-B next door. Out back of our house was an ocean. It came right up to us, lapping at the sliding glass doors.

The party kept getting more and more crowded. Michael decide to give himself a shower using a water hose and bucket in the middle of the living room. Dolly Parton was there, and she was laughing and having a good time. She found a tape recorder that had Lee Ann Rimes' first recordings on it. She thought that was a hoot, was carrying it around with her, making everyone listen.

Someone came and told me that my parents were there. I go out into the front of the house, which was a cramped and poorly lit Brooklyn apartment. Mom and Dad were there as a surprise, and they had brought the whole family. B, G, the girls, Uncle M and Aunt S, Uncle J and Aunt E, cousins M and S. They all looked miserable, sitting around in folding chairs, cramped, unable to manage a smile or happy birthday, limply shaking my hand, not looking me in the eyes. It was like I had shown up to my own wake.



On an old couch, crammed in between some cousins, Madonna (c. 1980s) sat, chewing gum, sneering, looking totally bored.

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My mind in middle age needs the focus, the compression, the distillation that the short lyric brings. The cosmic lyric sweeps and flows of my youth—my imagination is no longer a strong enough swimmer for those swift currents. It likes to float on its back for hours on the placidity of a lake.

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The nobility of poetry. It's an idea that all poets buy into. Perhaps some too much.

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I remember being 7 or 8 years old and leaving church on a Sunday afternoon in spring. Our church was located on the shabbier side of our small Appalachian town. Across the street was a block of turn-of-the-century Victorian homes, once stately, now in various states of crumble. Paint blistering and cracking, shingles curling back from roofs, the yards gone to dirt or crowded with weeds. But still loved, lived in, homely. I remember flower boxes in some windows with petunias and geraniums, and on this day, the windows thrown open, the curtains fluttering in the breeze.

When we stepped out of the church, a woman somewhere in one of those houses was singing opera. Her voice floated over the parking lot, over the tops of the cars shining brightly in the sun, the congregation in their finest clothes, some stopping to listen for a moment in wonder. I didn't really know what opera was and had probably only heard it parodied on cartoons. But I sensed something in that moment more spiritual, mystical, sublime than anything I had ever experienced in church. The body of God hovering over us, shaped by a human voice.

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Nostalgia

The night ran  
barefoot as a boy.  
Stars stamped  
in darkness  
still burn.

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I've turned into an undisciplined writer and artist. Though maybe I've always been undisciplined and out of some deep anxiety about that, attempted to be disciplined. But now, no anxiety. What will be written will be written. What will be made will be made. In its own sweet time. There's no reason to burden art with the language and ideas of armies and corporations. Does a child need discipline to draw a picture of a robot with markers or write a story about the adventures of a mouse? Then neither should I. So, I create when the cisterns are full, and when

they're not, I think and read, lazily, in no hurry, nodding off when I feel like it. I look out the window and watch the crows, or putter around the house, or fart away a whole afternoon drinking beer and watching baseball.

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Wonder has its genesis in the mind/imagination of the child. Thus, at its foundation is a purity, an innocence. Any attempt to manipulate or complicate wonder—politically, aesthetically—betrays this innocence and purity and wipes the wonder out, or at least diminishes it. Wonder exists in this most pure state, or in an attempt to get back to it.

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*Befuddled.* I love this word. How I would like to write a poetics of befuddlement or dedicate myself to a philosophy of befuddlement.

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Perhaps one of the reasons people dislike poetry is its frivolity. Let's be honest, poets aren't exactly workhorses. There is something mystical about writing a good poem. It's not discovered or developed through hard work so much as daydreaming. Prose writers are workhorses, pounding out 500-1,000 words a day to create a brick-like novel. Poets stare out the window, waiting, not

even sure for what. Yes, they work in revision, but even then, there are so few words and so much white space, and the work of revision is often as much about cutting than building out. Poetry goes against our deeply engrained Puritan work ethic.

I'm also reminded that people don't like fuddy-duddy talk. (And by people, I mean Americans.) They want straight talk, simple and to the point. Or truths that are stripped bare and without nuance. Poetry is not that, even in its most accessible manifestations. Dickinson tells us that poetry tells the truth, but tells it slant. It's in that slantness of the telling that the truth of poetry picks up its richness, its complexity. Truths that are rich and complex are sometimes hard to digest.

Thus, poetry readers in America will always be a niche group. It will never be read by the masses or even a respectable fraction of the masses. That's okay, I think. It's an art that functions best in intimate quarters. A handful of solitary readers, each in their dark house lit by one lamp. Or a few weary souls who have trudged through a snowstorm to a bookstore for a poetry reading, stamping their feet, looking for something to sustain them through the darkest night of the year.

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Dream: Donald Trump extended his Presidential powers to make himself Pope of America. I was at a service where he was in a gold suit and was preparing to lead Mass. I was horrified that he was going to consecrate the Eucharist. He kept bragging that he made the best Eucharist ever. You could taste Jesus in it.

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The End of the West

A secret clotted the mouth.  
A glint of gold distorted the face.  
Rust fastened a chain to Power  
half-buried in the sand.

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The practice is more important than the product. How many times I've forgotten this over  
the years?

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At the end of you, I saw the color drained from music.

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Go into time softly. Your name lives on God's lips.

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When I sit down to write, I'm trying to cast a spell on myself. The world conspires against such magic, such nonsense. There's a long to-do list, or troubles at work, or sick friends, or turmoil in the political world that leaves me terrified and worried, or drowning in self-doubt, or squirming with a general restlessness that makes sitting still a chore. The world resists, the mind resists, and the longer it's been since I was under said spell, the harder it is to conjure again.

Thus, I've surrounded myself with all sorts of ingredients for the potion, all sorts of things that will hopefully lure the mind into the dark forest of the imagination. A chair with a large ottoman where I can lounge, often with a Labrador retriever curled up snoring between my legs. This chair and ottoman are essential, as sitting at a desk to write makes it feel like work, not dreaming while awake. If I sit at a desk to write, I might as well be a banker or lawyer.

Other things. Certain books that trigger wonder. A certain shade of blue on the wall. Art, art, and more art. Animal skulls. Stones. Feathers. Silence that brings with it a necessary feeling of emptiness, of absence. This notebook. A pen.

And even with all of these tools, the spell can be elusive. The left side of the brain can't be beaten into submission. One tries another day.

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When I'm faced with death, I'd like to be able to say that I owned my artistic life outright, that I did exactly what I wanted to do, what I felt compelled to do, that I followed my imagination, my obsessions without compromise and without regard to what was in vogue, what might bring me recognition.

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Laugh against the future.

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Leave the sheets messy and untucked so that the imagination can toss and turn.

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At a party of existentialists, one got tired of all of the angst in the room and invited some comedians to come over. They showed up with their noisemakers, lugging their sacks of black humor. In this mingling, absurdism was born.

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What does it truly mean to be a serious artist? Artists are dismissed all the time because they are not serious. Meaning that they haven't studied technique or art history; meaning that they aren't engaged in moving art forward in some way; meaning that they might be regional; meaning that they might not be "ambitious." Is obsession not enough? Is some sort of unified vision, whether or not it conforms to the art of the day, not enough for an artist to be considered serious?

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When I look at a piece of art and say, “I don’t get it,” I don’t mean that I don’t understand it intellectually. I mean that it doesn’t trigger something in me—emotion or wonder or intellectual curiosity. That is to say, when I *get* a piece of art, it doesn’t mean that I know the art equals X. It means that I feel it deep down inside. It reverberates emotionally or scratches a certain itch or launches my imagination into reverie. It means the art is complex and complicated. It bears looking at again and again to explore all the nooks and crannies of feeling that I have for it. To immediately understand a piece of art on first look—to understand it either intellectually or emotionally—is to me terrible. It’s like solving a crossword puzzle. There’s no reason to revisit it, so I toss it in the trash.

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I’ve written a bit of late of this feeling that poets face, this burden of renewing the language before you even begin, or in the process of writing, as language, the poet’s raw material, is worn and misused and by the pragmatic and the banal, by politicians and corporations and courts and small talk. But I want to acknowledge that is also one of the purposes of poetry—this renewal of language, this recovery of language. Poetry not only defamiliarizes the world for us so that we stand before it to see it in some new light, but it also wins the language back from the clutches of tyrants and bureaucrats to show us once again what it can do, what it is capable of.

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December 31—What's left to do on the last day of the year but kill time?

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The dream of trafficking in fragments. Words scribbled in the dark, obscure novels shredded for the dump, the dead and forgotten repurposed, stuck together with paste or yellowing tape.

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Does an artist or writer have to be recognized—seen—in order to fully be? That is—is being inextricably linked with being seen? With not being invisible? Artists like Henry Darger and Vivian Maier suggest not, but they, and other outsider artists like them, may be the extraordinary exceptions.

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There's a kind of vapor trail that a poem or a piece of art leaves behind after you've finished making it. It hangs in the air and makes it hard to immediately move to a new piece. You bask in it, find it intoxicating, or you simply can't see through its haze to something else. So, you wait for it to dissipate. Or you change your altitude to escape it. That is, you work on something that is different in tone, intensity, scale.

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The poet sits and waits. And in that stillness and waiting you never know what will get there first—the next poem or death.

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*Metastasize* is the ugliest word in the English language.

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God out there somewhere, alone in the silent dark, wide-eyed and disheveled, crying out to us, wondering if we exist, and if so, why we never answer him.

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Any “understanding” of life’s great mysteries flattens those mysteries, makes them one dimensional, hollows them out. Only dwelling in uncertainty brings depth and complexity to our lives.

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Life is a splendid dream that death makes a secret forever.

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Let poetry squeeze you into the narrow passages between facts.

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Once again, this feeling—a desperate feeling, almost—of wanting to disappear, crawl into a cave and never come out. What would you make if you were the last person on earth? If you were just making to please yourself?

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Newly published poems in journals: a cloud of flickering fireflies, pulsing for attention. And then, with time, they recede into the distance, their glow becoming softer, their flickering slowing in pace, until eventually the majority fade into the darkness.

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I try to hold in mind at all times the following contradiction. On the one hand, everything I make in art and poetry is dust. It's not going to change the world. None of it will ever be considered "great." Eventually, all of it might end up in a box, or yellowing on a shelf or, more likely, moldering on a trash heap. *So, Brian, don't take yourself too damn seriously.* On the other hand,

when I'm not making, something essential is missing from my life. A profound emptiness opens inside of me. I feel mired in a spiritual torpor. Thus, even though what I make is dust, I must make it. It keeps me from falling into the Abyss. And in this perfect contradiction—something that is worthless and priceless at the same time.

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The body is the ultimate erasure poem. And memories.

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I imagine my father's mind in dementia as a frozen pond. When he tries to walk across it, he falls, sprawled in darkness. He stares into a thorny tangle of stars. The moon droops, a bent spoon. Everything is made of shadows that sway, each shushing the other. In our world, he looks at us. He looks at us. He moistens his lips into the shapes of sounds. Not to speak, but to stand back up.

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My father is not himself, but a secret he glimpses in the distance occasionally.

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God continues—a long pause, a deep silence.

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Dream: N and I were in a large house playing a board game with Tom Waits. It was a traditional board game—cards to draw, a board—but in the middle was a video screen and certain actions were followed through videos of Tom telling a story or singing a song. N and I loved it, but TW seemed kind of bored. I asked him where it was made, and he said California, and that he had never made a dime off it. The director/developer convinced him to do it for a percentage of sales. He said this kind of game was going to be the next big thing, but it ended up a huge flop.

It was Tom's turn to go and from beneath the table he pulled a hand of regular playing cards. "Straight flush!" he shouted, slamming them down on the table. "I win! Now, can we do something else?" About that time, a gaggle of drag queens paraded through the kitchen, headed to the den. They carried a Christmas tree and were singing carols. Tom jumped up and joined them, and we followed into the other room, where we found him, his arms slung around two queens, belting out "Deck the Halls."

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There are so many Brian Barkers inside of me, I often don't know which one I'm talking to.

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The desire to give up desire is also a desire.

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Depths as a kind of feeling. The mixture of wonder, mystery, presence, the vastness of time, the lingering dead I feel when communing with some old object or book or paper document.

“Mama, I got the depths! I got the depths!”

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4 is too square of a number, too complete, sunk into its blockiness. 3 and 5, on the other hand, are full of possibility. 3 is aswirl, always circling back, refusing a definitive statement. 5 has left the stolidness of 4 behind and stepped off into thought.

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The poem demands subject matter, a beginning, and an end. Poetry, however, is at its purest without these. Subject matter is a tyrant.

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Is the poetic fragment the purest form of poetry? The fragment invites us into its silences. Those silences feel like sacred space to me. I feel God dwelling there.

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Trouble can't afford the wages of time.

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I like writing that begins with an "I don't know" and ends with an "I don't know." That ending, or closing, "I don't know" is changed from the beginning one. It might be more nuanced or textured. It might be more open, full of new corridors that need exploring. There may be a new light in some corners, but dark shadows blooming out of others. That "I don't know" is a space that opens to the reader and invites them in. It acknowledges that the writer, the words, the reader are still, and always will be, *becoming*. Nothing about the experience of being a human is definitive. Nothing about human experience can be exhausted, given a final answer.

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Dream: We were living out in the country when a stray dog showed up, a chubby little terrier. We called the phone number on the tag and a man, then a woman, told us they no longer wanted the dog. The dog was sweet, and N and I thought we might keep him or foster him, but we

wanted to talk to the people first about their decision. They agreed and gave us the address, and we drove over. Their house was small, a little peeling clapboard, the yard cluttered with stuff, and when we went up and knocked on the door, we could see an African American lady in a coffin as for a wake, laid out in some liminal space between the kitchen and the cramped quarters of the rest of the house. The woman who came to the door was white, as were her husband and the three kids. Several other small dogs ran around yapping. Anyway, they just had too much going on and one less dog might help their financial strains. Things had been tough since Mrs. Haley had gotten sick. An accordion door opened to a small, cluttered back bedroom, and an old black man stepped out wearing a pair of overalls, skinny as a broom. He nodded hello. The kids and dogs chased one another. The dogs scurried and yapped, the children squealed and fought. And Mrs. Haley lay there at peace, it seemed, as the chaos and silences of that house swirled on around her.

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## Afterlife

The mirror went on  
quietly in the end  
master of  
its own reflection.