

Heartsick

When the other children play, I watch from my window. The oak tree obscures their actions, but children never sit still long enough to be lost from my view. The only child who sits still very long is me. Yet I see myself most often, because the glass reflects me like a ghost. By simply adjusting my plane of focus, I can either see me or erase me. I take great comfort in this ability.

But I take more comfort in the children. They seem to invent rules as their games progress, never following any, but insisting in language I do not hear that they follow them all. Thus, one boy dodges the advance of another and the assailant cries foul play. A third child, usually a girl, steps between them as referee. She waves her arms, indicating the irrationality of their mounting hostility. The boys argue across her body, transforming it into the object of their dispute, it seems to me. Finally, the girl stamps her feet and tries tears.

I once did the same. The result was immediate attention from my older sister, who soothed me, drawing my large head against her bosom and stroking my hair. I remember the soft stream of her words, meant to comfort me as I sobbed. They passed over my head like the gentle sheep of a child seeking sleep. Yet I was ardently awake, aware of the strange double rhythm of my sister's strong heart, which seemed to mock mine and its oppressive frailty.

But my sister has gone to college, where other men will flock to her embrace. They will be athletes and poets and flatter her with commentary about whatever qualities in themselves they find or force also in her. She will be amused, laughing indulgently at their attention, while thinking how young they all are. And so, I will not have my sister, but by such means, she will manage to have me. I

will exist in the others as the sum total of their neediness, and fill her nostalgic longing.

Such, at least, are my speculations. Few have honored as much time for the exercise. Yet how else to pass these days, which pile up against my window like swirling flotsam around a pier? I could, for example, find an indoor activity, such as drawing or music. But to brood helplessly within those mediums seems to me a terrible violation of their spirit, which soars like an eagle among lofty mountain retreats. Nor does their lust of life come easily, nor at all, to a child of my circumstance. I must first grow up to know such transcendence. Yet I will not grow up to know anything.

That claim is not stubborn defiance, but the professional opinion of the myriad doctors to handle my ribcage like an unconvincing Christmas goose. Is it any wonder my heart beats weakly? They give it little encouragement to do otherwise. Let one of them maintain eye contact with me, ask me how I'm feeling in a tone that permits the possibility of a resoundingly positive reply. I will give it that reply. I will stand on my head and flap my legs like flagpoles in the parade of a marching band. I will bear my chest as if stating my conviction about universal brotherhood and good will, instead of undressing like a whore.

So we reach my imagination's greatest task for the future, for I know in advance I will experience absolutely nothing of interactive human sexuality. Thus, I must conjure and suckle the image of the opposite sex as it desires, permits, and gratifies me. Over this responsibility to myself, my diction falls short immediately. My depression escalates. I look beyond myself in the window and sulk at the hints

of growth in the breasts and shoulders of the neighborhood girls and boys. These children evolve toward a common compatibility, in which I have no part. Nor will my voyeurism as easily find accommodation.

I have considered this contingency, and asked my parents for a single gift, reminding them, to buffer the expense, that a car and nice clothes do not belong to me in this life. Instead, I require a telescope. Yes, the moon and stars entice me. They appear before me for exploration as though to balance the depths I have already seen into myself. There is a universe without and within. Yet my longings are less abstract than all that, and reveal more accurately a coveted wish to follow the children I know and ascertain from the window as inevitably they broaden their horizons and forget me.

You may be wondering do they know me at all so as later to forget me? I tell you emphatically they do. Should you ask them, they may deny their knowledge, as all illicit or strange knowledge provokes denial and discomfort, mixed with nostalgia for prior innocence. Yet the children do see me, and occasionally make an effort to. I have seen them cooperate more than usual in a game I find charming. They break into two groups, and while one group strolls slowly away from the other, it waves its arms and shouts to draw my attention. This decoy allows the other group to sneak into the thicker foliage dividing my house from the one next door, and also to maximize the obstruction of the oak by my window without altogether losing a clean view of me.

At those times, I gaze into the clouds, as if pensive, allowing the children to see me. I imagine myself a special figure in their life, such as their high priest or

king. As they spy on me, I assume however much divine grace I can manage, which is surprisingly plentiful. I know, because my frail heart engages in a lively rhythm and the veins in my arms and temples lightly throb. A terrific warmth suffuses my thin body and a flattering pinkness enters my skin. Eventually, I lose my breath and fog the window in my efforts to stay near the glass and maintain the performance. But that fog is like the tangible manifestation of my spirit within the frame that has always defined it, and I am pleased. I depart easily into unconsciousness, where I dream of falling leaves.