Inland in Eden on the Indiana Dunes with Nuclear Reactor

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My daughter Eleanor insisted
on taking our dog Sally, now 13 years old, with us to the Indiana
Dunes to let her walk,

at least once before she dies, the white sands of Lake Michigan.
Its shallows show
milky green as absinthe, which sounds a lot like absence.

They deepen
to the color of the turquoise in my nonagenarian mother’s tarnished
silver Navajo bracelet.

Absence or absinthe, the great lake extends to the horizon’s honed
straight razor and beyond.
Those tiny towers that rise out of the scintillant water to the west —

sheet of gold
hammered on the anvil of the earth’s curvature by setting sun
until each wave

becomes a dimple or dent in the precious metal — are all
that is left
of Chicago. The whole day has been a parenthesis, held breath

in the calendar
of our regular respirations. The three of us, Eleanor, Kyler,
her gay roommate,

and I — no, wait, with Sally, the four of us — stretched out
on the sand, sunbathed,
swam in the absinthe. We took long walks with Sally,

photographed ourselves
next to a huge driftwood stump with splayed roots bleached
to the whiteness of bone.
It was the tailfin and vertebrae of some Pleistocene whale. All the while we ignored the nuclear reactor only a quarter mile down the beach. Its squat concave cooling tower, emitting steam erratically, reminds me of a white castle standing alone on the back row of my dead father’s chessboard. It probably powers the whole of Chicago. I can’t stop thinking of the chain reactions happening so close to us, how uranium atoms bombarded by neutrons split apart, release more neutrons, gamma rays, and three million times more kinetic energy than the same amount of coal. It is like Eleanor’s mania. Ten months ago the doctor on the psych ward told us that despite sedatives they couldn’t get Eleanor to fall asleep — “That girl could power all five boroughs of New York City!” After three days, they brought her down with Klonopin, which works like a reactor’s control rods pushed deep into the core to absorb neutrons and slow the chain reaction. The smokestack keeps hiccupping steam. I rub after sun lotion with aloe onto Eleanor’s raw shoulders and back. My palms feel the braille of her brown birthmark, the size of a nickel, which had been bright raspberry when she was young. For 21 years I have applied sunblock to that birthmark.
and can pretend no longer that she is a child, though she is still and will be always my daughter. As I slather on more lotion, she’s telling me of her plans to become a midwife, to deliver babies bloodstained and screaming to this life

where nuclear reactors and couples kissing among sand dunes coexist so easily. I think of the meltdowns — Three Mile Island,

Chernobyl,

and Fukushima Daiichi. How one firefighter at Chernobyl joked, “There must be an incredible amount of radiation here. We’ll be lucky if we’re all still alive in the morning.” They waited two days to announce the disaster.

The Soviet radio stations interrupted their regular programming and played classical music before broadcasting news of the “accident.” As soon as people heard the Beethoven, Shostakovich, or Prokofiev, they knew something was wrong. Or perhaps it was Ravel’s Piano Concerto for the left hand. Ravel composed it for pianist Paul Wittgenstein whose right arm had been amputated during World War I. I’ve been listening obsessively to it, a mere 19 minutes of music, over and over all summer long.

It begins with the faintest featherings of bows against bass viols’ strings, and then the contrabassoon
like our dog’s warning growl at the back of her throat. Meager motif
taken up by cellos
and violins that twine around each other. I keep seeing scraps of fog
wrap gauze bandages
around uprooted, mortar-struck trees at Verdun and the bodies
of the dead, slumped

like sand bags in the mud. It crescendos to the kettle drums’ barrage,
stops short. Piano cadenza —
hail on a corrugated tin roof, staccato stutter of machine gun

fire, deeper register
of distant 42-centimeter howitzers. Ravel wanted the cadenza
to sound as if

the pianist were playing with both hands. But even his descending
glissandos can’t
hide history, soldiers waiting in flooded trenches “to go over

the top” and be
mown down. I always hear Paul Wittgenstein’s phantom limb, fingers
ghosting over the white notes

on the keyboard’s far right end. That silence an absence no absinthe
can allay.
After Paul read the score, he suggested changes to Ravel,

claiming, “I am an old
hand at the piano.” Ravel replied, “And I am an old hand
at orchestration.”

The concerto survived intact. Not one note of the last century
will be changed
to make it easier to play. And, of course, Paul’s younger brother

was Ludwig,
imperious philosopher. In 1929, when Ludwig returned to Cambridge,
the economist John Maynard Keynes
wrote in a letter to his wife, “Well, God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15 train.”
In his *Tractatus*, God reduced the universe to seven propositions.
“The world is all that is the case” is the first. The final one says, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” In silence I should pass over Verdun, the nuclear reactor at the north end of the Indiana Dunes, and my daughter’s bipolar disorder. Ditto my desire for Kyler, most beautiful of young men with his orange-and-white-striped towel wrapped around his shoulders, tangled wet brown hair that I will never wake to and muss some more, goose flesh over intercostal muscles, swimmer’s tanned body, wide brown eyes in which I would dissolve. All this I cannot speak about. “Look,” says Kyler, “the sunset…” and points. “It’s like, like…a bleeding heart!” We all laugh at the kitschy picturesque he makes us see. But he’s right.
The sky has parted its blue-gray cloud robes to reveal molten glory, a million trillion hydrogen bombs exploding — fusion, not fission, the heart of matter — nuclear reactor eight light minutes away. For one moment I see Dana pushing with legs raised, cervix opening wide as Eleanor’s head crowns, black-haired and bloody —
sunrise, not sunset — as the sun sinks into the now almost black lake, into absence, into absinthe, into absence’s sweet absinthe.