Try to Praise the Mutilated World

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Elaine Scarry writes about how pain “exhausts and displaces all else, until it seems to become the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence.”

Pain staggers the imagination, in opposite ways for the sufferer and the bystander. At the end of October, The International Organization for Migration counted the year to date figure that 3,329 refugees had died attempting to cross the Mediterranean. At least 77 children had died since the September 2 death of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi. Imagination revolts at the prospect of comprehending the world of the drowning child, revolts at fathoming the world of the surviving parent.

In the softly luminous worlds in which I am writing and you are reading, it is almost Thanksgiving. What to reach for but gratitude? Adam Zagajewski wrote, in Clare Cavanagh’s translation:

Try to Praise the Mutilated World

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June’s long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of rosé wine.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You’ve seen the refugees going nowhere,
you’ve heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.

Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

Perhaps for you, as for me, even after the routine news of disaster at sea, even after Paris, in the daily flow of life, consistently, the gentle light returns.

It is a miracle to be able to spend each day helping bring the work of visionaries one step further into the world. To spend my days constantly in the company of people who are alight with building something together. To be afforded the time and space to find patterns in how people advance enterprises of many kinds and to make those patterns of use to others. To move between the worlds of possibility in which I am privileged to work, and the jewel-like home our eleven-month-old daughter has recently learned to walk the length of.

In this mutilated world, this fragile and abundant world, what is there for Thanksgiving but to try to comprehend, to try to build, to try to praise?