

# DAVID BOROFKA



## UNDERLAND

ONE WEEKEND A MONTH, my wife goes away. She attends a course on the analysis of dreams, those latent symbols that, if Freud and Jung are to be believed, reveal ourselves to ourselves. The class is held in the hills overlooking Santa Barbara; when she leaves our home in the Central Valley, she drives through poor towns that have spent the past decades specializing in the refuse of agriculture—junkyards and the rusting hulks of forgotten and archaic equipment. In dry seasons, dust drifts across the highway. Eventually, however, the dispiriting trash of the rural is replaced by vineyards and orchards, which are in turn replaced by the golden hills of Paso Robles, and the coastline of San Luis Obispo, and the Mediterranean paradise of Santa Barbara itself. It is a journey of contrasts—either/or—that she makes, and it is preparation for the class itself, in its respect for the permeable

membranes that divide our conscious from our unconscious selves. She comes home each month with stories of visions and visitations: a hawk sailing over the highway, a flock of cranes in a marsh, the transcendent image she received one night of an orca rising above all our heads.

In the meantime, I fumble as best I can as father and homeowner; the grass needs to be mowed, my younger daughter needs her hair brushed, the television burbles Saturday morning cartoons. These are my visitations, my transcendental moments. It is precious time, usually, but not so this morning. Something lingers in the air, some weight or dark cloud that will not leave. I feel assaulted, threatened even by ordinary things: the sections of newspaper scattered like autumn leaves across the dining room table, the dishabille of the beds, the indolence of our newest cat lying in a spot of sun, my older daughter, her cheek creased by pillow and blanket, fuddle-headed with sleep, squinting into the morning light. Innocent pictures by themselves, but viewed through the lens of this nameless dread, they become the images of burden and oppression. A request for orange juice becomes a death march into the kitchen. Washing the dirty dishes is more than I can bear. A question becomes an inquisition. I snap at my daughters, turn up the volume on the television, and cover my head with my hands.

Later, having showered and dressed, I decide that such emotional sensations are the product of weakness, a temperament sensitized to the nuances of my wife's absence. Errands must be run—the bank, the grocery store, the dry cleaner. The everyday waits for no one's crisis of will; moving forward is the antidote to the doldrums.

We pile into the car, but the foreboding does not loosen its grip. My daughters fuss in the back seat while I stare into the glare of a harsh April morning. Walking across the parking lot to

the grocery store, pushing an empty cart, I nearly fall to my knees, crippled by the sense not so much that my life is coming apart as it is vaporizing atom by atom. My daughters' chatter, echoing as though in an empty room, is wasted upon a nonperson, a nothing in shoes. I am losing even the capacity for irritation. No surface has depth, no idea has substance, and I am prey to the thought that this is as it has always been. In the back seat, trapped in the rearview mirror, the girls lapse into silence; with the intuition of children they have realized that all is not right in the front seat and have fallen into a dependence on one another. Somehow we accomplish our list of things to do, travel home, put away our purchases, and stare into the maw of eight remaining daylight hours. My older daughter wants to read me a poem, the younger wants me to watch a tape, but I beg them both to leave me alone, alone, alone. I love my children, but right now I cannot stand to hear their voices. Like Wordsworth I yearn for "those shadowy recollections" of the divine and immortal, but the only voice that resonates for me is the plaintive bleating of Matthew Arnold: ". . . neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. . . ."

Everywhere I look, it seems, I am ensnared by such dualities—Santa Barbara and Fresno, dream and experience, transcendence and depression—and I am trapped on the "wrong" side of either/or.

In *Darkness Visible*, his memoir on depression, William Styron noted the difficulty, even for the artist, in describing the malady's torment for those unafflicted. The best metaphor of the illness, he writes, is Dante's, the opening lines of *Inferno*: "In the middle of the journey of our life / I found myself in a dark wood / For I had lost the right path." The journey of our life. For the

reader, bells go off, whistles shriek: metaphor a-comin'. Nothing new here. In most contemporary literature, however, transcendent moments are generally reserved for some sort of Joycean epiphany, couched metaphorically in the language of ordinary things. But Dante is different in Styron's reading, for here the supernatural, a man's descent into hell, is treated as the literal activity, while the language, by its suggestion, entices us to see this apparent spiritual journey as a metaphor for the everyday.

I have been thinking about such boundaries quite a bit lately, prompted in no small measure by my brief glimpse into that darkness, and in retrospect, I can trace my dilemma of that weekend to a similar inversion: the events in Rancho Santa Fe that headlined the news throughout that week and the emotional chords that thrummed as a result. The suicides of the Heaven's Gate cult reawakened certain dormant impulses within myself: a yearning to know what is quite possibly unknowable and a certainty, bordering on arrogance, that one already knows it, driving the otherwise rational mind to acts that, according to an objective or simply indifferent outsider, seem desperate and horribly misguided.

There was something of the literalizing impulse behind their suicides, it seems, some refusal to welcome or tolerate metaphor. Instead of seeing in Hale-Bopp an emblem of the divine, they saw in its shadow a spaceship, come to take them home. Metaphor literalized in a manner worthy of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's peasants, their literal journey, as in Dante, had a supernatural itinerary. But instead of a celestial destination, they arrived in yesterday's headlines, a cautionary tale: Don't believe everything you hear.

There was a quality of group-think unbearable to us on the other side of Heaven's Gate, some sort of mass hysteria, at once inexplicable, wrong-headed, and unfair, reminding us once

again of the fragility and frailty of groups, whether in Waco or Jonestown, Oneida or Bethel or the Kingdom as proclaimed by Matthias. Each community obeyed the teachings of a charismatic figure; they heard a siren call inaudible to outsiders—to those chained in the dark of an earthen cave—and they declared it fit only for the ears of other true believers such as themselves. But lest those of us watching the news on television be too smug—having escaped the fate of Marshall Applewhite's disciples, or those of David Koresh, John Humphrey Noyes, or Wilhelm Kiel—we are reminded of Jesus' words to his own: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Who has missed the boat? Then again, how does one know whether a boat—or a spaceship, for that matter—exists in the first place? The Kingdom of heaven, we are told, resides within a community of hearts of those who believe, and yet is it not disturbing to think that such faith might be nothing more than a communal dream: a wish reinforced by others of similar desires?

I know something of groups. For seven years I was part of such a community, an extended family that wielded tremendous influence over the behavior of its members. In this hothouse of religious fervor, Jesus may have been Lord, but the interpersonal dynamic of the group was Master. Individual decisions regarding career or education were offered up for collective debate, members offered to the community at large their most personal confessions, and it was expected that all parts of all lives were open for inspection. We were a large family living in a small house with all the injuries and insult attendant to a lack of privacy.

There were bound to be gaffes, of course, produced by ignorance, denial, or naivete: depression and eating disorders treated solely as though they were crises of the spirit; past incidents of

incest and rape that were thought to be resolved through forgiveness alone. (We were hardly original, of course; at the community of Oneida, it was believed that mutual criticism and confession were responsible for the cure of anything from earaches to diphtheria.) And yet as misguided as such formulaic, too-simple analyses might have been, a certain comfort was derived by the intimacy—in knowing as well as being known.

More insidious, perhaps in retrospect, was my own loss of appreciation for the subtle hints, the whispered intimations of God. More consumed with hermeneutics than with aesthetics, I mocked the Pharisees as I surely became one. It became terribly important to know whether or not Scripture could be interpreted analogously or allegorically, whether or not the arguments for a second Isaiah or the book of Q were sound, whether one were pre-, post-, or a-millennial.

Hair-splitting, as any lawyer will tell you, is quite tiring (not to mention tiresome to those in the immediate vicinity). It is even more so when undertaken by well-meaning amateurs. In my own case, the net effect of such catechistic wrangling was the elevation of the abstract and a diminishment in importance of the emotional and sensory: of soulful, ineffable, and private experience. My abstraction took the form of an arbitrary and sporadic asceticism. Now and again I fasted, and once I deprived myself of sleep on the grounds that it was time wasted, a belief that lasted only until I nearly fell from a roof.

Yet, as religious as I was and we were, I can remember feeling only that some essential experience, a feeling of spirituality, was being denied me. Frankly, aside from those universally defining moments such as a first kiss or the sight of one's newborn child, I have enjoyed moments of more metaphysical consequence while engaged in some sweaty activity: the feeling of connection when a forehand drive in racquetball comes back a rollout, or

better still, a magical moment during a high school tackling drill, when I put the top of my helmet into our fullback's chest, felt my back bow and my hips drive forward. I stood him up, then drove him onto his back: an instant of crystal clarity and grace that never occurred in quite the same magical way during the chaos and ambiguity of an actual game.

Less magical is the memory of several years later when my yearning for some such experience in a religious context led me to a small church and an altar call where I strained to speak in tongues. I tried desperately, I even tried to mutter something that might have been mistaken for a Phoenician dialect, but the message was all too dismal and clear: They also serve who only stand and wait, and in my case I was also supposed to be very, very quiet.

Retreating then into the interpersonal and mistaking it as the exclusive domain of the spiritual, I took comfort from being a part of this group family in which the first unwritten rule was dependence upon one another. Ultimately, though, we wearied of one another, like children cooped up on a day of rain. Tired of self-discovery, communal criticism, and the deferment of professional aspiration, we exhausted one another in all senses of the word—we became burnt-out cases, resigned to breed, pay our bills, and live the rest of our lives like our parents. By the time I left—and in order to pry myself away, I needed a pretext that was two thousand miles distant—I knew that I was forfeiting the most significant relationships of my life, the standard, nearly erotic in its intensity, by which I would measure subsequent connections and the loss of which I would always mourn. But I also knew—to put it in the vernacular—that I needed to get the hell out.

I did leave, but I suppose the shadow of that former life was bound to catch up with me sooner or later. I read the newspapers and watched the televised reports of the Heaven's Gate suicides, but I was unable to call them crackpots or fools. Deluded by a madman, they remained true to a collective conviction, blinded by a splendid vision only they could see or understand. Their bodies, grave reminders of dependence taken to an extreme, left the mansion in bags. When my wife and I left our community, it was with a psychic dislocation no less final. During our first weeks of freedom, we called weekly and wondered if we had made the greatest mistake of our lives. Is it so surprising that in the days and weeks following the suicides, there were others who, after separating from the group, chose to follow anyway? Watching the news, I felt a square of purple cloth cover my eyes.

That Saturday afternoon, my unacknowledged disturbance claimed its due: I grew deathly tired. After a brief nap that did not produce sleep so much as a viscous stupor, I knew that things were not at a good pass. I could call my parents to watch the children while I drove to the emergency room or I could set the living room on fire. We worked a jigsaw puzzle instead, my daughters and I—Alice in Wonderland sitting down to tea with the Mad Hatter and the March Hare—and before it was time to fix dinner I had the sense that the nameless ogre hammering upon my faculties had begun to lose interest; while still cracked and splintered, the pieces of my psyche were already beginning to reassemble themselves, a restoration that would take the balance of the weekend.

By the time my wife returned, my sense of equilibrium, at least in part, had returned as well. Except for the shadow of what I remembered feeling—or rather not feeling—I almost felt “nor-

mal." But what, I wonder, is "not-normal"? And where, or what, is the line that divides the two?

I am beginning to understand something of this new boundary: that I suffer from mild yet periodic visitations of depression, a melancholy brought on by the understanding that what I was convinced to be true is not altogether so. Through the passage of time, those periodic symptoms may grow into something truly troublesome. Believing that exercise may serve some prophylactic function better than Prozac, I swim laps and hope to keep the demons at bay. One night, the underwater light at the shallow end burned out, and the threadbare imagery of light and darkness was made new again. How odd to be swimming in the dark! Odder still were the transitions of light to dark and back again while in the same pool, the same water. The clarity of one end was magnified by the murk at the other, a flip-turn becoming an existential enterprise. In the shallow end I was prey to all kinds of neurotic foreboding—heart attack, aneurysm, drowning, my body left undiscovered until morning, my poor dear children!—while at the deep end in the light I could swim forever.

Is it not also possible that without a certain level of depression, it may be difficult to experience a measure of joy? Transcendent moments, after all, are difficult to measure or appreciate without their concomitant opposites: Wonderland must have its Underland. As metaphor cannot exist without a literal correlative, and the literal becomes dry without the imaginative infusion of metaphor, so too are heaven and earth offered to us as complementary entrees on the same plate. Without one we are perilously close to becoming like the followers of Heaven's Gate, so in thrall to the prospects of literal otherness, a literal abstraction, that we forsake the metaphor offered in the here-and-now.

Or, as in my own case, we become so apprehensive about listening to anything other than the sound of another human voice,

we fail to notice the few transcendent, personal moments available in any one lifetime. We run the risk of seeing God in the face of a child only to notice the dirty face and the uncombed hair. Or we respond to a burning bush by fetching the garden hose. Is it any wonder that the notion of grace can apply to God's mercy as well as to a perfectly executed tackle? The wonder is that we try so hard to separate the two.