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THE BIG PONDER

The Night

By Katie Marquette

[MUSIC AND POEM]

Often I gazed at you in wonder. I stood at the window
Begun yesterday,
Stood and marveled at you.
Rainer Maria Rilke.

[RAIN FALLS AND BABY COOS]

Katie Marquette: Every night, there is a thunderstorm. It is our baby daughter's favorite track on the white noise machine. The sound of artificial rain and far-off thunder echoes and booms in our dimly lit room. I rock this ever-growing, ever-changing child in my arms, nursing her to sleep. Although she doesn't fully wake up, I will hear her rustling in the dark around 3 a.m., searching for me, her mother, the place and home she knows best. It is in these middle-of-the-night nursing sessions – dream feedings, they're called – that the night feels very palpable to me, a place for big questions. Who will this baby be? At night, in the dark, anything seems possible.

[MUSIC AND POEM]

Ours is not to know the outcome
In the mad inner domain,
You appear out of our impediments
And glow like a mountain range.

[RAIN CONTINUES AND BABY COOS]

Katie Marquette: In March 2021, just a few weeks before my daughter was born, the German-language poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Poems to Night* were published in English for the first time. They seem like a special gift to me, a new mother in the trenches of sleep deprivation, forging a new and intimate relationship with the night. These poems were written in his own hand in Paris of 1913 and given to fellow writer Rudolf Kassner as a gift. The poems are untitled, sprawling. This is art that was created at – and for – the night.

[MUSIC AND POEM]

Overflowing skies of squandered stars
Splendor over grievance. Rather than into pillows,
Weep upwards. Here, at the weeping,
At the ending face,
Proliferating, begins,
The enraptured world space.

Katie Marquette: These poems aren't the only ones in which Rilke meditates on the night. Darkness was a frequent theme in his work. Included in his collection *Sonnets to Orpheus II*, 29 is the poem "Let this Darkness be a Bell Tower."

[MUSIC AND POEM]

Let this darkness be a bell tower
And you the bell
As you ring, what batters you becomes your strength
Move back and forth into the change
And if the world has ceased to hear you,
Say to the silent earth, I flow,
To the rushing water, speak, I am.

Katie Marquette: I think of this poem now, rocking the baby. [BELL RINGS] I am the bell. Back and forth, back and forth ... [VOICES OVERLAP] Move back and forth into the change. My back aches, my whole body aches ... What batters you becomes your strength. [VOICES OVERLAP] Move back and forth into the change.

Katie Marquette: I remember as a child being afraid of the dark. My mother decorated my room with glowing stars, but they seemed more sinister than magical as the night crept on. Even today, I don't like going to the kitchen at night for a glass of water. As I creep back to the bedroom I always feel as if someone, something, is creeping behind my shoulder. I pick up my pace.

[MUSIC AND POEM]

Does the night not blow cool,
Splendidly distant,
Moving across the centuries.
Raise the area of feeling.
Suddenly the angels
See the harvest.

Katie Marquette: I often think about how the hour when I am most often awake with the baby is what – since the 1700s, at least – is known as the witching hour, the hour between 3 and 4 a.m. This tradition may be even older, dating back to the 1500s when the Catholic Church forbade activity during this window, thinking it a prime time for witchcraft and demonic activity. 3 a.m., after all, was the inversion of 3 p.m., making it a mockery of the time Jesus is said to have died on the cross. I don't sense any foul play at this hour, but I remember even before the baby that this was often a time when I would wake thirsty, restless, insomnia hitting me as I looked with anxiety at the clock and thought about how few hours I had left until I needed to go to work. It turns out 3 a.m. is quite a common time to wake up – something to do with sleep cycles and REM sleep but also perhaps dating back to our ancestors, when sleep is thought to have happened in two distinct groupings. You'd even get up for a little bit in the middle of the night – tend to the fire, have something to eat – before going back to catch an extra hour or two before sunrise. I tell people I'm living a very traditional lifestyle these days.

[MUSIC]

Katie Marquette: But it's hard to shake night's associations with the otherworldly. Our fear of the dark is as primitive as those interrupted sleep cycles and while we try to chase away our fears with electric lights and buzzing screens in our hands the middle of the night still stirs our imaginations. I grow curious about this concept of the witching hour and start researching rituals surrounding nighttime and the supernatural. The first and most compelling ritual I discover takes me back to Germany: Saint Walpurgis Night, April 30th, when the coast and countryside is alight with bonfires, the light from the fires is said to drive witches away. The night's celebrations are named in honor of Saint Walpurgis, an 8th-century abbess who was particularly successful in combatting witchcraft in her era and is still called upon for intercession and protection against dark forces and the supernatural. It is on this night that witches are said to meet on Brocken Mountain, the highest peak of the Harz Mountains in North Central Germany, where they dance with the devil. In Goethe's *Faust Part One*, Mephistopheles conjures spirits on top of Brocken Mountain. Do you not long for a broomstick, he asks. By this road, we are still far from our destination. The mountain's associations with the eerie and otherworldly is partially thanks to a natural phenomenon known as the Brocken Spectre. A ghostly figure of a man will appear when the sun shines behind an observer who is looking down from a ridge, the optical illusion creates a shadowy, larger-than-life figure in the mist. The phenomenon can occur from any height, but the hazy mist of Brocken Mountain and its accompanying legends gave the spectre its name. [MUSIC] So as Germans dance into May, many others around the world also see night as a time to dance, to forget, to release.

[MUSIC AND POEM]

Out of me and the feeling
With which the flock, returned to the pen,
In acquiescence breathe out the immense black
No-longer-being of the world – me and every light

In the darkness of so many houses

Katie Marquette: Nightlife is the collective term for those activities best done after dark: pubs, clubs, discotheques, casinos. Places where the lights get dim, the booze flows steadily, and there's a loss of inhibition that can only come after the sun goes down. The sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the phrase 'third place' to describe those necessary places, where people can simply be without the obligations of work or homelife. Nightlife can look very different depending on where you live. I went to college at a rural liberal arts school. So, my nightlife was spent on the river – swimming, starting campfires, drinking, and laughing with friends. It feels like a long time ago now. Now, nighttime is dominated by lullabies and shushing.

[RAIN CONTINUES AND BABY COOS]

Katie Marquette: Our daughter's favorite lullaby is "Edelweiss," from the musical *The Sound of Music*. Every sleep consultant – a job you've probably never heard of unless you're a parent – recommends a consistent bedtime routine. So every night, we read her *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown, author of the even more popular *Goodnight Moon*.

["EDELWEISS" PLAYS ON THE GUITAR]

Katie Marquette: Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away, so he said to his mother, I am running away. If you run away, said his mother, I will run after you, for you are my little bunny. If you are a rock, I will be a mountain climber, and I will climb to where you are. If you are a fish, I will be a fisherman, and I will fish for you.

[RAIN CONTINUES]

Katie Marquette: Wiser older mothers tell me how quickly this time goes, how I won't remember these long nights when a teething baby wants to nurse every other hour or be held and rocked and hummed to, the white noise thunderstorm rolling ever on. The night means something different to me now. It doesn't necessarily mean sleep, but it does mean closeness and milk and a small hand reaching up to stroke my hair. [MUSIC] We live on a rural country lane, and the start of autumn has the nights growing cool. I open the windows, and a smoky breeze fills the room. The last hum of crickets in the distance, rustling trees.

[CRICKETS CHIRP]

Katie Marquette: A new family has moved down the way from us. They have three children, and they all love to visit our animals – our miniature donkeys, in particular. In talking with these new neighbors, I learn of their German heritage, and I wonder if these rituals of sleep and nighttime are very different for children in other countries.

Sonya Weber: Okay, I'm Sonya Weber.

Katie Marquette: The children's grandmother Sonya stops by to tell me about some of the distinctly German things she remembers from her childhood.

Sonya Weber: My mother – we spoke German at home – I had all the German nursery rhymes and songs and just German books for children. One of them was *Struwwelpeter*, and it has all these awful little moral tales. Like if you suck your thumb, some tailor came to cut off your thumb. And, you know, if you played with matches, you'd burn to a crisp. Things like that. And the *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, which are similarly gruesome. But I remember my mother saying to me, you know, it's time for the Sandman. And then, we would go up, and she would say, he's going to sprinkle sand in your eyes and you're going to close your eyes and relax and then you're going to have wonderful dreams. That's the main thing I remember – that the sandman makes you dream good dreams instead of bad dreams. But that was kind of a small part of my memories in the United States. But when I would go over to Germany – and I lived with my relatives there – they would watch TV. And every evening, there would be a little Sandman program, and it was basically the sign for all the kids to go to sleep now, you know, to go to bed. It wasn't a cartoon. It was kind of like stop animation, like *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* is, which was kind of a new thing back then. I haven't seen it lately, but I'm sure it's fairly primitive. But it was like a little doll that moved. So, there would be little adventures and things like that. It wasn't very long, I think it wasn't even five minutes long, and then, he would tell all the children to go to bed and close their eyes, and he would be there shortly.

[SANDMÄNNCHENTHEME SONG PLAYS IN GERMAN]

*Kinder, liebe Kinder, es hat mir Spaß gemacht.
Nun schnell ins Bett und schläft recht schön.
Dann will auch ich zur Ruhe gehen. Ich wünsch' euch gute Nacht.*

Katie Marquette: Children, dear children, that was fun. Now, quick to bed and sleep tight. Then, I will go and rest. I wish you goodnight. The Sandman, I've learned, is a loveable puppet featured on German television since 1959. There was originally an East German and West German version, but the East German version ultimately proved more popular. Episode reruns are still airing today.

[SANDMÄNNCHENTHEME SONG CONTINUES IN GERMAN]

Katie Marquette: This theme, originally the soundtrack to the East German version of the program, was composed by Wolfgang Richter and is one many adults will still remember ringing in their ears as nighttime approaches.

Katie Marquette: Did it work? Did you have good dreams?

Sonya Weber: Mm-hmm, pretty much. Hardly ever had a bad dream. Not like now. Back then, I was, you know, young and pink and hopeful. And now, it's just like ...

[LAUGHTER]

Katie Marquette: The Sandman is one of the more benevolent figures of Sonya's childhood imagination, it turns out.

Sonya Weber: It was "Maikäfer flieg." It's not really a lullaby, I think it's just a children's song, but my mother used to sing it to me at night. And *Maikäfer flieg, der Vater ist im Krieg*, so it's 'fly, May fly – May bug or June bug – your father is in the war, your mother is in Pommerland,' *Deine Mutter ist in Pommerland*, which is what's now East Germany, somewhere. *Und Pommerland ist abgebrannt*, 'Pommern has been burned down,' and then 'fly, June Bug, fly.' And she would sing that to me, and I would be like, ok ... You know, I was like I'm imagining this city in flames. It was just really weird.

Katie Marquette: Send you off to those good dreams with the Sandman.

[MUSIC AND LAUGHTER]

Katie Marquette: Evidently, no matter what your cultural background or traditions, children's books and stories are full of violence – of dead and lost mothers, of runaway children and orphans. Sonya also recalls the darkness and strangeness of the famous *Grimm Fairy Tales*. And the Sandman himself is based on a literary fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Ol Lokoy is a rather morally ambiguous figure. He takes children to sleep and, depending on how good or bad they were, shows them various dreams. In the story, he visits a particular boy every night for a week and tells him stories. At the end of the week, Ol Lokoy shows the boy a rather terrifying sight. I will show you my brother, he says, he is also called Ole-Luk-Oie, but he never visits anyone but once, and when he does come, he takes him away on his horse and tells him stories as they ride along. He knows only two stories. One of these is so wonderfully beautiful, that no one in the world can imagine anything at all like it, but the other is just as ugly and frightful, so that it would be impossible to describe it. Then, Ole-Luk-Oie lifted the boy up to the window. There now, you can see my brother; he is also called Death. You perceive he is not so bad as they represent him in picture books; there he is a skeleton, but now his coat is embroidered with silver, and he wears the splendid uniform of a hussar, and a mantle of black velvet flies behind him over the horse. Look how he gallops along. Of course, the idea of sleep being a rehearsal for death is nothing new. This is one of the central tenets of Buddhist meditation, which sees the perfect meditative state as an opportunity to enter the stillness and perfection of death. In Greek mythology, the goddess of night, Nyx, is the mother of two brothers, Hypnos, sleep, and Thanatos, death. [MUSIC] Sonya's recollection of wartime lullabies and the Sandman's close associations with death has me wondering about the stories

we tell our children before they sleep. I open *The Runaway Bunny*, a story I know by heart now – a good thing because I will often whisper to her the comforting, rhythmic refrains when she wakes with a start. In this tale, a little bunny wants to run away from his mother, but she assures him she will always find him again. The story ends with a chagrined little bunny conceding: Shucks, I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny. Have a carrot, the mother bunny offers as a consolation. In a story like this, children are assured they are never far from their parents' embrace and protection. They are allowed to imaginatively rehearse the worst-case scenario – losing their mother – but they are also dreaming and anticipating the day when they will be truly on their own, out of their mother's arms. I distinctly remember spending many a recess hour looking out across the cornfield behind the playground. Children are always dreaming of the day they will leave. I have always been the child in the story, the heroine striking out on her own, but now I am the mother, and my arms ache in anticipatory loss.

["EDELWEISS" CONTINUES ON THE GUITAR AND POEM]

The dark embraces everything,
Shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
People, nations, just as they are.
It lets me imagine a great presence stirring beside me.
I believe in the night.

["EDELWEISS" CONTINUES ON THE GUITAR AND BABY COOS]

Katie Marquette A baby in the womb has fully developed hearing at four and a half months gestation. Eyesight develops much later. A newborn baby's vision is hazy and blurry, and they can't see very far, only about 30 centimeters from their face. And it's not until about six weeks old that a baby will start to learn the difference between day and night. [MUSIC] I think about this, how in the dark, my daughter and I are falling back into an old rhythm, heartbeat and shushing and rocking, these are what she knows from the womb, from her earliest beginnings. For weeks and weeks, night meant nothing to her. Daylight was an aggressive, blinding light, something we shielded her from as we wrapped her close on our daily walks. Sound and warmth, back and forth, back and forth. This is what she knows and what she still seeks out in the middle of the night. What is night? We don't come into this world knowing it. We have to learn the night. And now, I am learning it anew.

[MUSIC]

Katie Marquette: Night – darkness – has long held associations with psychological struggles. The author William Styron borrowed a phrase from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to describe his depression: 'Darkness Visible.' Darkness Visible – it's a captivating phrase. In the middle of the night, the shadow of a tree outside the window looms immense, the bookcases look like hollowed-out squares against the wall. It's a disorienting time. Rilke repeats in my mind: Have the stars survey me more ardently for I am fading.

[MUSIC AND POEM]

As you ring, what batters you becomes your strength
Move back and forth into the change
And if the world has ceased to hear you,
Say to the silent earth, I flow,
To the rushing water, speak, I am.

Katie Marquette: But when I look at my daughter, it is another poet's words that come to mind. Sylvia Plath's. While Plath is perhaps best known now for her infamous suicide, and many of her poems express a desire for an escape from the repetition and exhaustion of motherhood, she also referred to her children as the quote redemption of her life. These tender poems to her children touch me deeply. In her introduction to the poem "Nick and the Candlestick" on the BBC, she said: In this poem, a mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world's ills, does redeem her share of it. In the poem, she tells her son he is: the one solid the spaces lean on. You are the baby in the barn. I look down at my daughter, it's the middle of the night, and it feels like just the two of us in the whole world. I let the whole of night, its darkness, its void, its death and resurrection, its ghosts and storms, rest – tangled up in my love for this child. [RAIN CONTINUES] She is the one solid the spaces lean on. She is the baby in the barn.

["SILENT NIGHT" PLAYS ON GUITAR AND BABY COOS]

Katie Marquette: I'm Katie Marquette, and you've been listening to THE BIG PONDER.

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