

The Night Office: Loss, Darkness, and the Practice of Solidarity

DOUGLAS E. CHRISTIE*

What does it mean to enter the night? This question has long haunted the Christian mystical tradition. There, entering the night almost always means accepting uncertainty, insecurity, and loss as inevitable and necessary, part of what it is to come to know ourselves in God and in relation to one another. In our own time, amid increasingly acute encounters with loss, suffering, and insecurity, the language of darkness is taking on new meaning and significance. In this essay, I consider what it might mean to retrieve traditions of spiritual darkness as part of a transformative spiritual practice. How might such practice help us cultivate the courage and empathy to engage the profound loss and unknowing that has become so pervasive in our world and to stand in solidarity with those who suffer and struggle there? How might it help us become, in the words of Pope Francis, more “painfully aware”?

A dark stillness envelops everything. Slowly, carefully, I make my way along the path, mostly by feel, one step, then another. I know the way. I have walked this path many times. But it's more difficult at night. Much more difficult, especially on a moonless night like tonight. And I have forgotten my flashlight. I raise my hands and wave them in front of me—an awkward, slightly comical gesture that I employ to keep from running into trees. I take a few more tentative steps forward. Still, I feel disoriented, all sense of depth and direction and dimensionality gone. Where to put my foot next? I have no idea. I stop to listen: the sound of the creek rises up from below and a little

* Douglas E. Christie is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is author of *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford University Press, 1993) and *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and is founding editor of *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*.

to the left. Good. I am still on the path. I continue walking. My eyes begin to adjust and, looking up, I can just make out the faint outlines of oak branches overhead. Beyond, somewhere in the deeper darkness, are the giant redwoods. I cannot see them. But I sense their presence.

I am making my way, slowly, haltingly, toward the night office at Redwoods Monastery, a small community of Cistercian nuns in Northern California. In a few minutes, I will (I hope) enter the small cinder block chapel and take my place on one of the simple pine benches that comprise the monastic choir. But for now, I am making this passage—from the open meadow into the inky blackness of the woods and, with luck, out into the clearing beyond where the monastery chapel stands. It is not far. And I am certainly capable. But in this moment, I am a scared child groping in the dark, wondering: how am I going to find my way?

I smile to think of this now—at my own foolishness (bring a flashlight next time). And at my irrational fears (of running into a tree, or falling into the creek). But while it is happening, I am not smiling. I feel strangely agitated, bewildered. My usual confidence in being able to put one foot in front of the other, to get where I am going, to make my way through the world, is suddenly undone. And my fears, I begin to realize, run much deeper than what might happen to me tonight in these woods. Still, I cannot easily name or understand them. But in my momentary disorientation and helplessness, they come rushing in. I feel lost.

What I am describing here, I realize, may seem utterly insignificant. And in a way it is. A small hiccup in the night. Or simply an overactive imagination, like those awful moments in childhood when monsters lurking under the bed made sleep impossible. Yes, we smile at these things knowingly. They were never real, those monsters. And the soothing words of our parents (which we now speak to our own children) eventually brought us peace. In time, we outgrew these childhood fears. Still, years later, as adults, we lay awake at night struggling with other monsters. And we realize (something we always knew) that they were always real. And that they never really disappeared.

Encounters with the night often have this character: an abyss opens up before you. The way forward appears closed, or at least closed to you; you wonder whether you are going to be able to find your way out of this impasse. Your sense of bewilderment is no longer

an aberration, or an occasional shadow cast across a sun-drenched landscape, but the very world you inhabit, who you are. This darkness is all there is.

Sometimes it is possible to name and identify the source of this bewilderment, but not always. Often it is hidden, unseen: something vast and mysterious, something which most of us, if we are being honest, prefer to keep at a safe distance: the night itself, all that is and must remain unknown and unknowable, beyond language, beyond concepts, beyond any understanding. Suffering is part of it, but it is more than suffering. It is the stark sense of the void, the deep reaches of the abyss, the murky underworld, the dark margin that shapes our lives, maybe existence itself. Oblivion.

None of this is new. We have long struggled with the night, long wondered whether we could find a way to resist its awful power, or perhaps learn to live within it. These concerns have shaped profoundly those traditions of thought sometimes described as negative philosophy and theology. In the Christian tradition, the works of figures as diverse as Evagrius of Pontus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, John of Ruusbroec, and John of the Cross express a great respect for the vast unknown and the unknowable, for emptiness and silence, as well as a sense of their utter necessity to our lives. Attending carefully to the darkness is part of what it is to be human, part of what it means to open ourselves to the endlessness of the worlds within, around, and beyond us. And to open ourselves to what some describe as the very darkness of God.¹

Still, in our own time, our sense of the night has taken on a different and sometimes more sinister meaning. Increasingly, we have come to associate it with the horrors of our age, with our own cruelty, and with our own incapacity to live with genuine regard for our fellow human beings and for all living beings. The mid-twentieth century works of Maurice Blanchot, Fernando Pessoa, Simone Weil, and Edmond Jabès, among others, for whom the realities of silence, darkness, and

¹ The increasing attention given to apophatic thought within philosophy, theology, and literary criticism during the past twenty-five to thirty years has been astonishing and impressive. See, for example: Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014); Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Ray L. Hart, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

the desert are so fundamental, have helped remind us how severe the limits are regarding what we can know or say—about the world, about our own path through the world, about God.² Here, the language of silence and darkness becomes a means of expressing respect and awe at the immensity in which we move, and humility before a reality that we know radically transcends our capacity to grasp or understand. It signals also a willingness to face and respond to the depths of suffering and loss that have become such an inescapable part of our experience of the world (in which we ourselves are so often complicit), including the devastation we are visiting upon the natural world.

And so we find ourselves increasingly resorting to the language of shadows and darkness to describe the social-environmental crisis unfolding in our midst, referring to a “Dark Ecology” or “The Dark Night of the Planet,” or “The Cloud of the Impossible.”³ We sense, intuitively, the need for language and imagery potent and capacious enough to help us face and respond to both the mystery of our fragile but still-beautiful world and the unspeakable losses—of species, places, cultures, and peoples—that are such a big part of this crisis. We no longer possess the confidence we once did that we are standing on solid ground, or that the way forward is clear. The very possibility of meaning—or, in religious terms, of the presence of a benevolent God—seems to be disappearing altogether. In its place there is emerging a deepening anxiety and uncertainty, a sense that we are being plunged into an impenetrable darkness, or a desert, or a void.

How should we understand the increasing prevalence of such images and feelings within contemporary experience? What sense of reality do they express? Despair? Loss too deep for words? The need for a more honest way of thinking about our ultimate longings and commitments? The hope for a renewal of spiritual thought and practice? It is not easy to say. The images themselves defy simple

² Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. Maria José de Lancastre, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991); Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Marion von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2004), especially “To Accept the Void”; Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Resemblances, Volume 2: Intimations The Desert*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

³ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

interpretation, and this of course is part of their appeal and their power. Whatever it is that has befallen us, we recognize that it cannot be fully explained or understood. We are moving through a deep darkness. The only question is whether we can learn to face it with honesty and courage.

There is a strange paradox here. Facing the night means accepting uncertainty and insecurity as inevitable and necessary. There is undeniable loss in this. Still, in this loss there exists the potential for the emergence of a powerful and transformative spiritual practice, well suited to this particular historical moment: a practice that can tolerate, even embrace, uncertainty and ambiguity, that is receptive, attentive, and open to mystery. A practice that can help us discover the courage and empathy necessary for entering into those places of profound loss and unknowing that have become so pervasive in our world and standing with those who suffer and struggle there. A practice that Pope Francis describes as becoming “painfully aware.”⁴ Here we glimpse the possibility of a spirituality of relinquishment and solidarity born of the night.

Further, Elsewhere, Nowhere: The Wandering Life

What does it feel like to enter the night?⁵ Often it is pure bewilderment, an experience Fanny Howe describes as “an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability.”⁵ But what kind of enchantment is this? Where do you end up when all reference and reconcilability has collapsed? Dislanguaged. Lost. Wandering through an unknown landscape, struggling to find your way home. It is worth pausing to consider the texture and shape of such experience, how it feels to be lost. David Ferry does this beautifully in his poem “That Now Are Wild and Do Not Remember,” part of a book-length rumination on the experience of bewilderment.

Where did you go to, when you went away?
 It is as if you step by step were going
 Someplace elsewhere into some other range
 Of speaking, that I had no gift for speaking,
 Knowing nothing of the language of that place

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, §19.

⁵ Fanny Howe, *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 15.

To which you went with naked foot at night
Into the wilderness there elsewhere in the bed,
Elsewhere somewhere in the house beyond my seeking.
I have been so dislanguaged by what happened
I cannot speak the words that somewhere you
Maybe were speaking to others where you went.
Maybe they talk together where they are,
Restlessly wandering, along the shore,
Waiting for a way to cross the river.⁶

The ache of loss here is intense and sharp. So too is the sense of disorientation. The beloved (or perhaps it is your own self) has gone away. The one you seek is “elsewhere somewhere . . . beyond [your] seeking.” Nor is there any way to reach across the divide that separates you from this other land. There is, you sense, some possibility of communication there: “Maybe they talk together where they are.” But you yourself have “no gift for speaking,/ Knowing nothing of the language of that place.” You have been “dislanguaged by what happened.” You have no way of entering into that “elsewhere.” Still, you imagine them, “Restlessly wandering, along the shore,/ Waiting for a way to cross the river.”

You are lost. But so are they. Perhaps everyone is lost, wandering, dislanguaged. Perhaps the great illusion is to imagine we know where we are and can communicate freely and easily across the divides that separate us from one another. Darkness and bewilderment remind us that this is not so, that our common condition is that of restless wanderers.

Michel de Certeau has argued eloquently for just such an understanding of authentic spiritual practice, seeking among the lost and dislocated souls of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a model for what he calls the “wandering life.” Toward the end of his great (and bewildering) work *The Mystic Fable*, Certeau notes: “He or she is mystic who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further,

⁶ David Ferry, *Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 101.

elsewhere. It lives nowhere.”⁷ Here is a restlessness born of intense desire for that which can never be fully known or understood and which is precisely for this reason seen as indispensable and infinitely precious. The pearl of great price. But the price is high: Insecurity, uncertainty, homelessness. Still, the alternative, suggests Certeau, is hardly worth our trouble: a stability without value, a knowledge that is bought too cheaply. Hence the birth of a desire that leads to endless wandering, a commitment to always “go further, elsewhere.” To seek that which “lives nowhere.”

Language strains to describe or encompass the paradoxical character of such desire, or the wandering and lostness that arise from it. Nor is it easy to grasp what the relinquishment of this security yields in the end. Does the wandering ever cease? Is there ever any rest? Any sense of arrival? It is not clear. Indeed, the very character of such experience seems to deny the possibility of any sure knowledge. The one who wanders in this unknown country, suggests Certeau, is always seeking “to enter into the indefinite, as if he, in turn, were seized by that sort of universal that overflows meaning. He is seduced, suddenly bewitched, by an absence.”⁸

Here again we encounter that sense of immensity that both draws us in and destabilizes us: the universal that overflows meaning, a reality that can only be approached or intimated in darkness, whose very immensity and mystery can feel like an absence. In the testimony of the mystics, this sense of absence often serves as a clarifying agent, helping us to guard against the temptation to say too much, or assume too much about the One we seek. Absence does not mean nothing; but neither does it mean anything we can easily know or express. In our own time, when the very language of God has been emptied of meaning for so many, we find ourselves drawn in a new way to the sense of absence and unknowing that provokes what Certeau describes as “the movement of perpetual departure.” Considering our current condition, he notes: “It seems . . . as if, unable to ground itself in a belief in God any longer, the experience only kept the form and not the content of traditional *mystics*. It is, as Nelly Sachs says . . . , leaving

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 299.

⁸ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 41.

without looking back.”⁹ There is great nobility in such leave-taking: it requires courage to set out for such an unknown country, especially when the sense of ground that once gave the journey meaning has eroded beneath our feet. But this, it seems, is part of the spiritual climate we now inhabit, marked by the insecurity and vulnerability that characterizes “the movement of perpetual departure.”

It is not easy to reconcile such language with the sense of joyful trust and hope that we associate with mature Christian faith. Nor is it really possible to separate this loss of confidence in the possibility of naming or knowing God from the wider anxiety we feel in the face of all the other losses we are experiencing in the present moment. The growing environmental catastrophe embodies one of the most acute expressions of this loss, so vast and far-reaching that we strain to grasp its meaning and significance. Edward O. Wilson, the renowned entomologist, has expressed a concern felt by many that the rapidly increasing rate of extinction is a dark harbinger of the extinction of life itself. “We now have a sense that we are bringing life to a close. I mean, we’re destroying life; we’re reducing that natural world out there in an irreversible way.”¹⁰ Or, to put this catastrophe in slightly different terms: “Death is one thing, an end to *birth* is something else.”¹¹

It is not surprising that, faced with the prospect of this “annihilating silence,” we ourselves fall silent, whether from grief or anxiety at all we are losing or from awe in response to the fragile, broken, but still-beautiful world. “We ourselves are prey,” notes Shierry Weber Nichol森, “sometimes consciously, sometimes beneath the surface of our awareness, to a host of desperate anxieties—about the holocaust of nature, the collapse of the world, the failure of a future. These we leave almost wholly unspoken.”¹² Nichol森 perceptively observes that this “dislanguaging” we experience is rooted in and is itself an expression of a kind of trauma—which we increasingly experience as an “elemental anxiety.” This anxiety, Timothy Morton argues, is “the

⁹ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 299.

¹⁰ Edward Lueders, ed., *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1989), 26.

¹¹ Michael E. Soulé and Bruce A. Wilcox, eds., *Conservation Biology: An Evolutionary-Ecological Perspective* (Sunderland, Mass.: Sinauer Associates, 1980), 8.

¹² Shierry Weber Nichol森, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 10.

characteristic attunement of an ecological age.”¹³ The world is coming undone. We sense this and carry it in our bones. Still, our capacity to acknowledge it and bring it to conscious awareness is severely limited by the immensity of the catastrophe itself: it is too much to take in.¹⁴ And so we experience, within ourselves and all around us, something that Harold Searles argues is the inevitable result of this habitual evasion of reality: a “severe and pervasive apathy.”¹⁵

Apathy born of elemental anxiety: it is difficult to imagine a more dispiriting condition than this. Still, it rings true to much of our experience of the world. Nor should we pretend that there is any simple way out of this predicament, either in terms of the environmental damage we are inflicting upon the world or of our own psychological and spiritual dislocation that is so intimately bound up with this damage. But if we are to have any hope of making a meaningful response to this crisis, it seems clear that we will have to find a way of facing the anxiety that afflicts us. Here we encounter something akin to what the apophatic tradition teaches in many different ways: you must be willing to embark into the unknown, risk coming undone in the bottomless depths, engage the soul-wracking power of the elemental. “Ecological awareness,” Timothy Morton suggests, “is necessarily elemental.”¹⁶ In the frisson that comes from drawing close to other living beings or gazing out onto the endless immensity of the night sky, or plunging into the churning ocean, there sometimes surfaces within us a palpable sense of the elemental. Yet the elemental character of ecological awareness is also, and increasingly, expressed in the boundless sense of anxiety we feel at the prospect of the growing environmental catastrophe. “Elemental anxiety,” Morton suggests, is “an existential *Ganzfeld effect*, the term for a visual experience that comes upon one during a blizzard. The effect renders *here* and *there*, *up* and *down*, *foreground* and *background* quite meaningless.”¹⁷

¹³ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 78.

¹⁴ On the idea of the “shifting baseline syndrome,” a theory that helps to explain why we fail to notice declining populations of animals or other significant environmental erosion, see Peter F. Sale, *Our Dying Planet: An Ecologist's View of the Crisis We Face* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011), 153–166.

¹⁵ Harold F. Searles, “Unconscious Processes in Relation to the Environmental Crisis,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 59.3 (1972): 361–374. Cited in Nichol森, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World*, 1.

¹⁶ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 78.

¹⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 79.

Here, we encounter an apt image for the sense of radical disorientation, estrangement, and bewilderment that is so pervasive in the present moment. As with many of the images arising within the apophatic tradition—desert, ocean, void, darkness—we are invited to consider here the full weight and reality of what it is to be lost in an immensity far beyond our capacity to comprehend or navigate. Certainly this is not something we can easily absorb into our consciousness. Nor is its possible meaning clear and unequivocal. The loss of all bearings and orientation that we feel inside this immensity can indeed feel like a kind of death. But does it not also signal the potential for a new way of seeing, living, and being, freed from the old constraints: humbler, more open and receptive to the life unfolding before and within us? I think it does. Especially if we take seriously the emerging “posthumanist perspectives that renounce mastery, transcendence, and stable, terrestrial frames of reference that center the human subject within visible horizons.”¹⁸ We are being invited to reconsider, in this moment of acute crisis, the potential value and meaning—both spiritually and ethically—of allowing ourselves to risk wandering out into this immensity.

The Vastness We Do Not Enter

I have been traveling now for three days across the *puna* in the high Andes of Argentina, with my good friend Rubén Martínez and our two guides, Ricardo and Patricia. It is an open, often desolate-feeling place, but also heartbreakingly beautiful and wildly varied. Huge salt flats shimmering in the late summer sun; still-active volcanoes dusted with early snow rising on the distant horizon; sudden outcroppings of jet-black basalt; and short grasses, tinted with red and gold and perfectly adapted to this harsh climate, carpeting the hills: *rica rica*, *coyron*, *tolar grande*. Occasionally we catch sight of *vicuñas*, shy, tawny colored deer-like creatures, so graceful in their loping movements across the landscape. Also llamas. And once or twice, we glimpse *puna rheas*, the ostriches of the *altiplano*, whose speed and agility astonish us (they also astonished Darwin) as they race far into the distance. We keep a close watch for those rare sources of water—*ojos de aguas*, seasonal *arroyos*, *vegas*, and *lagunas*—where the

¹⁸ Stacy Alaimo, “Violet-Black,” in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 245.

birds are: Palomas, swallows, Andean teals, gaviotas, Andean coots, among others. Also flamingos: *Los flamencos del altiplano*. This is one of the main reasons we are here: to search them out and monitor their well-being, especially the recently hatched chicks. They will be leaving the *altiplano* soon, and Patricia and Ricardo, who have been studying them for many years and who are participating in a four-nation conservation effort on their behalf, need to assess the health of the community.

We arrive at Laguna Grande by late morning, after three hours of hard driving through remote country. As we crest the final hill, we see them for the first time: thousands of *flamencos* fanned out across the *laguna*. From this distance, they are tiny dots, but with our field glasses, we can see them more clearly. Luminous, strange, graceful creatures, at home in this hidden corner of the *altiplano*. No one speaks. After a while, we drive closer to the *laguna* and Patricia and Ricardo get down to work. Counting the hatchlings is particularly important today. In a few weeks, with the help of friends, they hope to return to ring the young birds, for observation and study. Today is devoted to careful observation and preparation for that crucial work. Rubén and I each go our own way, settling near the shore to observe the birds. I cannot remember too many thoughts from that day. They came and went like the clouds drifting overhead. Yes, I wondered about the life of these magnificent birds; I tried to learn what I could from Patricia and Ricardo about their life in this place, their habits, their needs, how secure they are from threats to their existence (they are many and varied, not least from egg poaching and the increasing frequency of lithium mining in this part of the *altiplano*). But mostly, I gave myself over to watching these wondrous animals. What I remember: their stillness in the water. Their sudden movement into flight, their reflection as they glide just above the surface of the water. Their fierce attention to the hatchlings—silvery grey and downy—in the *crèche* at the center of the *laguna*. Also the sudden gusts of wind that ruffle their feathers, the *vicuñas* grazing on the far shore, the snow-covered peaks in the distance. All of it.

Later we rejoin Patricia and Ricardo for a simple lunch of bread, cheese, *mortadela*, and fruit on a precipice high above the *laguna*. We inquire about their work; they share their excitement about the condition of the birds and their nervousness about the ringing work to come. It will be their first time attempting this work with this colony and they will have only one chance at it this season. They need to

prepare carefully and get it right. They are hopeful about what the work will contribute to our understanding of the life of these birds.

It feels daunting to be in the presence of people whose knowledge of both particular animals and the landscape through which we are moving is so vast and deep. Sometimes Rubén and I feel a little sheepish asking them our simple, elementary questions, but we try not to let that get in the way. “What do they do at night?” we ask. “Well, they stay right here,” laughs Ricardo. “What else?” But they acknowledge that, even after many years of studying these birds, they have little understanding of their nocturnal habits, of how they spend those long, cold hours, or how they or their hatchlings endure the bitter cold that descends on these high Andean *lagunas*. It is not easy to say. “And what about their migration,” we ask. “Where do they go? And how do they get there?” A long pause. “We don’t really know,” says Patricia. “We don’t know much about it.”

An astonishing admission. After eighteen long years of close observation, she answers with a confession of ignorance. A few moments later they elaborate, telling us what they do know about the migration habits of the birds—at least on some occasions and in relation to certain places. But they admit that there are huge holes in their knowledge of the life of these creatures, that their movements and habits remain mysterious and to a great extent unknown. Will this change? It is clear from listening to them that they hope that their research will deepen their understanding over time. And that this growing understanding will help them work more effectively on behalf of the *flamencos* in their shared conservation work in the High Andes. But there is something else I notice that day talking with Patricia and Ricardo that has stayed with me in the months since we were together: their great respect for mystery. Their capacity to accept and even embrace the vastness and unknowability of the world within which these birds live and move. They are scientists of course, and they are always seeking to push back against the unknown and grasp more fully the subtle beauty and intricacy of these animals. But there is also, in their posture toward their work, a fundamental respect for all that cannot be known, for the immensity of the life-world of these beings. A deep and abiding sense of humility in relation to the Other. A commitment to live and work out of that posture of humility, and to cultivate continually a habit of wonder and regard for the vastness of the world within which these birds live and move. A willingness to enter that vastness, to submit to its power and live within it.

“We are measured/ by vastness beyond ourselves,” says the Acoma poet Simon Ortiz.¹⁹ Yet we also fear it, resist it, flee from it. There is something in us that seeks instead to reduce the world to something entirely knowable. Something we can control. Still, our lives are haunted by an awareness of how small and poor we are making our world. We carry within us an abiding sense of the presence (and absence) of something we cannot easily name or understand. Call it vastness. Unnamable and unknowable, but at the same time fundamental and indispensable. The very ground of our existence and of everything we hold dear. Yet, we seem so often to be unable or unwilling to open ourselves to it, to feel its power, to allow ourselves to get lost in it.

It's not humankind after all
 nor is it culture
 that limits us.
 It is the vastness
 we do not enter.²⁰

“Make Me Night Too”: Entering the Darkness

Why in our loneliness and alienation do we resist the call to enter this vastness? This is not merely a personal question, although it does have personal significance. It touches upon something larger, on our very sense of what the world is and how we are to exist in it and respond to it—our responsibility for it. Here, I believe, is where spirituality, ethics, and politics converge. Without real feeling for the immensity in which we live and move and have our being, a sense of relationship and intimacy with it, will it really be possible to care for it? I wonder. And by relationship and intimacy, I mean to signal the deepest possible kind of response, one that requires risk and vulnerability.

It is here that contemplative traditions of thought and practice, especially those that risk confronting the darkness, have so much to teach us. In these traditions, the vastness that beckons to us is nothing less than God. But the radical commitment to seek what Meister Eckhart calls “the God beyond God” serves as an important reminder that

¹⁹ Simon J. Ortiz, “Culture and the Universe,” in *Out There Somewhere* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 104–105.

²⁰ Ortiz, “Culture and the Universe,” 105.

whatever it means to encounter God in the night, it always transcends our most exalted language and concepts; be wary, then, in imagining you know who or what God is, or where God is to be found, or lost. “Where knowledge and desire end,” says Eckhart, “there is darkness, and there God shines.”²¹ Here, we encounter an ecotone, or liminal place, of great significance—a place where darkness and light mingle, where silence and speech dance together, where stillness enables us to apprehend and stand within radical mystery. It invites and perhaps even helps create in us a posture of humility: a willingness to listen, receive, and respond to all that is unfolding before us. But it also brings with it great risk, inviting a relinquishment of self so profound it is in fact a kind of death.

Who would seek such a death knowingly? And why? The responses offered by those who have traveled deep into the night are many and varied. But they almost always circle around and eventually return to the same unexpected truth: because here is found life. Here we meet the numinous Other. In the relinquishment of the claims of the ego and the slow opening of the self to something larger than itself (even if this something cannot be named or known) is the possibility of a rebirth. Paul Bowles, an American writer who spent many years living in and traveling through the vast, silent country of the Sahara, describes this experience as a “baptism of solitude.” “It is,” he says, “a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here, in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, even memory disappears; nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and you have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course.”²²

What is it to be drawn out into an immensity so far beyond what the mind can comprehend that one’s very identity is placed in question? What kind of baptism is this? Is it the dawning awareness of who you are (and who you are not) within such immensity? A subtle shift in your conscious awareness that enables you to relinquish control, to open yourself to that vastness, to disappear into it? It is not easy to

²¹ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 18, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Oliver Davies (New York: Penguin, 1995), 185.

²² Paul Bowles, “Baptism of Solitude,” in *Travels: Collected Writings, 1950–1993* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 75–76.

say. But one thing is clear: if you open yourself to this encounter and do not “fight against it,” you will not be the same person when you return.

Still, who *will* you *be*? And why does this transformation matter anyway? Sometimes, it must be acknowledged, the longing to enter this silence, however real, is itself almost incomprehensible. Nor is the meaning of what happens to you there always clear. It is simply necessary. This is certainly how it felt to Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa, for whom the longed-for immensity was not a vast desert but simply the night sky above his beloved Lisbon: “Oh, night, in which the stars masquerade as light, oh night, equal only to the Universe in magnitude, make me, body and soul, part of your body, and let me lose myself in mere darkness, make me night too, with no dreams to be as stars to me, nor longed-for sun to light the future.”²³

“Make me night too.” What a strange, haunting plea: to dream of becoming lost in darkness, without a “sun to light the future.” A difficult, even bleak image. And yet, there is also something beautiful and mysterious here, something akin to the sensation Karl Ove Knausgaard describes simply as “the feeling of inexhaustibility,” that sense of oneself as part of something endless, infinite.²⁴ To experience the self as porous, fluid, capable of dilating within that endlessness, and delighting in it, even if its shape and texture and precise meaning eludes us. To live in a way that is not so constrained and constraining, where the boundaries are not so clear, the horizon not so close. Still, this too can feel like kind of death: a descent into the darkness so utter and complete that you yourself *become* the night.

It is difficult to know how to respond to the prospect of such an immersive plunge. It feels both thrilling and frightening. An annihilation of the self. Or maybe a rebirth. What it might mean for you depends on so many things—where you have been, what you have endured, what has been most lacking for you. For someone who has long traveled through the darkness of depression or who has been afflicted by a great suffering or loss, it might feel cruel to suggest that there is nothing but an endless night ahead. Still, for others, especially those who feel oppressed by the blinding and unrelenting glare of images, information, words, ideas, marketing, or the inadequacy of

²³ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, 36–37.

²⁴ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book One*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 207.

pat answers, or the sheer noise of existence, it can feel like a relief to feel night coming on. The enveloping dark becomes a balm, a place of healing or renewal. A solace.

In her recent collection *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, poet Louise Gluck touches on this particular dimension of darkness.

At last the night surrounded me;
I floated on it, perhaps in it,
or it carried me as a river carries
a boat, and at the same time
it swirled above me,
star-studded but dark nevertheless.

These were the moments I lived for.
I was, I felt, mysteriously lifted above the world
so that action was at last impossible
which made thought not only possible but limitless.

It had no end. I did not, I felt,
need to do anything. Everything
would be done for me, or done to me,
and if it was not done, it was not
essential.²⁵

Here the night takes on an embryonic feeling: “I floated on it, perhaps in it/ or it carried me. . . .” A womb-like space, benevolent and enlivening; also endless in its reach: “it swirled above me/ star-studded but dark nevertheless.” Nor does one engage the night as a dispassionate observer or consider it merely as an aesthetic object. Floating in this darkness, you can find yourself “mysteriously lifted above the world.” Here, wheeling through the immensity, the poet realizes (with a sigh of relief) “that action was at last impossible.” And that this made “thought not only possible but limitless.”

This sounds remarkably like contemplative thought, the kind of purposeless gaze that asks nothing of us but our attention; that promises to suffuse our awareness with limitless presence. No wonder

²⁵ Louise Gluck, “Midnight,” in *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 34.

the feeling of gratitude and yes, relief at discovering that, even if only for a moment, action is impossible. In that stillness and quiet and emptiness, something else can surface—thought that “had no end.” And with it a sudden realization that there is no need to do anything. Anything. What a strange, wondrous thought: existence, identity no longer defined by action, by doing (“What do you do?”—one of our habitual social niceties that hardly begins to give us access to the life of the person standing before us), a recognition of how much the endlessly busy, purposeful mind—acting, acting, always acting and planning and executing—can and often does miss. Instead, there is a release into a place of deep trust where we relinquish our need to control and manage and instead allow ourselves to be carried in the night.

Still, there is so much to be done that it is difficult not to feel ourselves hesitating over or resisting what feels like a dreamy evasion of basic responsibility. *Carried by the night*. What does that even mean? Isn't there more than a hint here of what we once called quietism, that spiritual lassitude that has little if anything to do with authentic contemplative practice? Perhaps. But I believe there is another way to approach the question that leaves us more room to see and feel the value of what might be hidden in these words. I am thinking especially of that intense and admittedly rare sense of being utterly alive to yourself and others and the world—the entire field of being; the sense of knowing yourself to be at once deeply held and utterly unconstrained. Free enough (for once) of the need to determine your own thoughts and actions that you can allow yourself to receive the gift of this awareness—of yourself living within an immensity. “These were the moments I lived for,” says the poet. Indeed.

Painfully Aware: Lost in the Night

The power of the night here seems to be rooted in a widely shared hunger to live against a wider horizon; to know the self as part of something larger and more encompassing. At a moment when the experience of ourselves in the world is becoming ever more fragmented and impoverished, such a possibility can feel like a blessed relief. And the reticence to name or describe that something is also significant: we have already paid too great a price from reducing mystery to something bound by our own limited ideas and images. Let us then fall silent, we say, and allow ourselves again to feel and know what it

is to live and move within the infinite. For our own sake, yes, but also for the sake of our relationships with one another and with our fragile, but still-beautiful world.

Here we encounter something unexpected but crucial about the sense of the night in contemporary experience: the realization that the personal character of one's attraction to the night is also part of a larger, shared set of concerns. And that attention to the night can inform a renewed ethical practice and a deepening commitment to solidarity, rooted in a simple regard for the Other, especially the suffering Other. We are, all of us altogether, passing through a very difficult and painful night. Yes, there is a personal dimension—each of us feels in our own way a sense of uncertainty, doubt, and sometimes despair over the suffering that befalls us, our fellow human beings, and all sentient beings in the world. This darkness can feel like the very antithesis of faith, something we should resist with all our might. Yet, seen from another perspective, it can be understood as a gift, an invitation to risk entering the space of darkness and loss shared by all.

Edmond Jabès, the mid-century French–Jewish writer who spent much of his adult life living in exile from his native Egypt, and whose work was deeply marked by the darkness of the Shoah, offers a compelling case for this larger, communal vision, something he always associated with the starkness of the desert, the depth of night, the void. In Jabès's work, we encounter a central paradox of much twentieth- and twenty-first-century response to suffering, loss, and exile: There are no words sufficient to express such experience; therefore, an ethic and practice of silence is necessary. But there remains a deep longing to bear witness, to say something (however inadequate) about this loss; a need to create a poetry and literature of what Jabès calls "wounded words." Which is why the language of the desert, the void, and the night came to have such great significance for him.

For Jabès, the desert is a terrifying immensity, a void, an emptiness that we rightly fear to enter, but without which we cannot really engage existence. It is open, unfinished. But it has no "meaning." There is no "ultimate meaning." No "God" at the center or end of it. Only the void. "Not to think anymore. To be the thought of the universe. To drown in it, O void, O nothingness!" he exclaims.²⁶ It is difficult to know how to respond to these words. They seem to be pointing to the end of all possible meaning. But there is such honesty

²⁶ Jabès, *The Book of Resemblances, Volume 2: Intimations The Desert*, 89.

and worthiness in these wounded words: a rejection of all language that might be used to help explain or account for suffering and loss that cannot be explained or understood. And they hint at a larger reality in which we are all implicated: our fundamental obligation to care for one another and for the broken world. For Jabès, this is the great ethical concern that must guide everything we do. It is, at its root, also a theological concern:

God, as the absolute Other of others: as if we must first become familiar and share responsibility with other faces before we can approach through them the absolute Other without face. As if on all drowned faces there glowed the loss of His. As if His face had paid the loss of all of ours.

Here is distress, the despair of love within love, infinite pain within pain, delirium blazing within delirium. Here is passivity rent in its deep sovereignty. Here, like a bottomless cliff, like the dark of all nights.

How far does our responsibility go? The void is forged by our hands.²⁷

“How far does our responsibility go?” This, I think, is the key question. Jabès’s strange, beautiful words defy any simple attempt at explanation, but they point to something that I think can only be learned in the emptiness of the desert or in the deepest recesses of the night. Only by relinquishing everything—our sense of self, our ideas about God, everything—can we hope to discover within ourselves the capacity for fulfilling our fundamental obligation toward the Other: especially those “drowned faces,” our only access to the face of God. We must become empty, open, lost. We must die. We must enter the night. “The void is forged by our hands.”

It is not easy to say what this might mean for us. But I want to take Jabès’s challenge seriously by considering one part of what I think might be involved in responding to his plea: allowing ourselves to become lost. Or rather, recognizing how lost we already are and opening ourselves to this reality in service of a more honest and open-hearted practice of solidarity. There is within our spiritual and literary traditions a consistent call to allow ourselves to become vulnerable,

²⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 165.

undone, dislocated. To relinquish all we claim to know about the Other—ourselves, God, our neighbor, the world—for the sake of a naked, simple, open-hearted encounter with the Other. At its heart, this is how we learn to behold and stand with and love the Other.

Here, I think, is where the audacious testimony of the mystics can help us. Not by offering answers, but by helping us chart a course into the desert. To cite just one example, John of Ruusbroec, the great fourteenth-century Flemish mystic, claims that it is only through allowing ourselves to become utterly and endlessly lost in what he calls the “dark stillness” or “wild desert” of God that we can come to know ourselves, God, or the larger community of which we are a part. Addressing those who feel themselves called to enter and live within this mysterious space, Ruusbroec says, “They that want to dwell there/ and never come back/ Deep in that lostness.” The middle-Dutch word Ruusbroec employs to describe this sensation of lostness—*velorenheiden*—recurs throughout his works and is suggestive of just how vast a space the one who seeks God is entering. And how costly it can be to become lost in this desert. The one who risks such an encounter, Ruusbroec says, “has flowed out of himself into lostness, by means of the in-sinking into the simple essence of God as into his own ground, and has died in God.” The practice of lostness that Ruusbroec describes here suggests a spiritual honesty and nakedness so profound that you come to recognize your own ground as a simple awareness of God’s ground in you. It is an awareness that brings with it a relinquishment of the very idea of the self as you have always known it. But to allow yourself to become lost in this way is also to cross a threshold in which you begin to become more open, receptive, and alive to what Ruusbroec calls “the common life”—the shared ground of our life in God. Here in this desert, in our shared lostness, we learn to behold one another, simply, in God. And we are invited to consider anew what it might mean for us to stand with one another, in the light of day but also in the depths of the night.²⁵

I sensed something of this during the two years I spent living in Argentina. The ghostly presence of *los Desaparecidos*, the victims (known and unknown) from the time of *la dictadura*, casts a long shadow over the shared history of the country. One feels this especially in places like *La Perla* (near Córdoba), once one of the most

²⁵ Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Complete Ruusbroec*, ed. Guido de Baere and Thom Mertens (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers), 123–131.

infamous detention centers in the country, now a place of memory. It is significant, I think, that such places have become important sites of resistance, helping to create the shared political energy that has led in some cases to the prosecution and conviction of those who were complicit in the kidnappings and torture and killings. But there is something else that is noticeable when you visit this place. A deep, deep sadness. A loss that cannot be repaired. This is part of why you come: to stand in the presence of the lost and forsaken, to behold those “drowned faces,” to open yourself to their pain and suffering, and to commit yourself to standing with them. To risk allowing yourself to become lost with the lost.

This challenge and invitation is with us every day. Each of us must determine for ourselves—as individuals and as members of a community—what it will mean to open ourselves to this work, both in practical terms and in the ongoing work of deepening our own awareness of who we are in the world. It seems like such a small gesture, this opening up of our awareness to the suffering Other. But I do not think it is. In his recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis makes a plea for just this kind of opening of the soul as the key to our common work. “Our goal,” he says, “is . . . to become *painfully aware*, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”²⁹

To become “painfully aware.” This is without question one of the most important things the night can teach us. We undertake this work for our own sake, to see if we can recover the deep source of our own freedom in God. But we also do it for the sake of learning how to stand with others in solidarity and contribute to the healing work that is at the very heart of our faith.

The Night Office

It looks like I am going to make it out of these woods after all. Soon, I will join the monastic community in that small cinder block chapel under the shadow of the redwoods for the night office. Vigils: a practice of prayer that has been observed almost continuously in Christian monastic communities for more than fifteen hundred years. It is a moment to gather together in silence and stillness. A moment also to give expression, in our own wounded words (the ancient

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §19; author's italics.

language of the psalms), to all that we carry within us: our sense of awe and gratitude at the fact of our existence, at the existence of the world itself; our awareness of sorrow, fragility, need. It is a moment to give our careful attention to all those things we cannot name or express: thoughts and feelings too deep for words, arising out of and returning again into the silence. Our often inchoate sense of connection with and love and responsibility for other living beings. Our grief at all that is being lost to us. Our hope that the cultivation of an attitude of attention and care may in some small way contribute to the work of healing. It is a simple, beautiful ritual, undertaken not only for ourselves, but also for the sake of a broken world.

Yes, soon I will enter into that space and once again try to open myself as fully as I can to this practice. Sitting in silence and stillness. Keeping vigil. Listening. Paying attention. For the moment, though, I am still outside in the woods, still moving slowly through the darkness, still uncertain of the way. “We can no longer escape the boundlessness that makes our boundaries tremble,” says Ann-Marie Albiach.³⁰ The vastness we do not enter beckons to us still.

³⁰ Cited in Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, 138.