

laete elephante

for David Rosenthal

My father believed that too much quick or easy happiness makes you depressed. "Laetitia Molyneux", he would say "if you use up your joy on silly things, you won't have any left when you really need it." Often in my childhood he would approach me when I was playing with one of my brown or grey dolls, put his wide-brimmed grey hat on the same hook as his tasseled brown coat, give me a yellow crocus or a pine cone, and tell me about their shapes and their smells. This sounds boring and oppressive, but he was in fact fascinating about these things, and I am sure few children have noticed the intricacy of a pine-cone's overlapping scales and thought how they resemble the scales of an anteater or for that matter the outer leaves of a crocus before it opens. And few have thought about the subtle resemblance of the smells of these two reproductive devices. He never talked for long, as he wanted me to see and smell and delight for myself, as I did almost daily with subdued and beautiful things.

Light yellow, brown, grey, pale blue, pink. Not too bright, and you have to focus to appreciate them. I had no clothes and no toys of any brighter colour. Certainly no scarlet or purple. No seventh cords, for that matter, and Dad was uncomfortable about sixths and minor thirds. One colour had a special forbidden importance, vivid blue on the edge of purple. I know now that there is a lot of this shade in the world around us. But when I was a child our parents would put their hands over our eyes or pull our hoods over our faces if we came within sight of clothes or curtains or plants that were this particular blue, though it isn't particularly bright, unusually cheerful, or worryingly immediate. I was eighteen, and about to leave for college, before I learned the reason. A philosophical experiment. If I had seen colours but not this colour, would I be able to pick it out from a purely verbal description? He sat me down and spread a colour chart in front of me. "Which sample is a little more saturated than this one, has a little more red than this one, and clashes with this pale orange but not this pink?" I got it right away.

I was cheating. In my bedroom, third drawer of my chest, underneath some grey blankets and some children's books with black and white illustrations, there were pages from fashion magazines, pressed irises,

colour printouts of lavender fields. (Dad never wondered why he had to replace both cartridges when the B&W one was empty.) I had started this collection at the age of thirteen, and built it up slowly but steadily. So I pretended to hesitate, repeated his description out loud, let my finger waver between several candidates, and then poked it at the shade that I had known immediately was right. I still don't know what I would have done if I had not seen all these examples.

This experiment was incidental, though. He really did want to save me from the despair of thinking that only ecstasy is enjoyable, or that only quick and easy feelings are satisfying. I think he succeeded. I even think that the business with colours worked. I got into the habit of looking carefully and reacting slowly, and not labeling my thoughts till I knew what they were. It had a subtle but terrible price, though, which I did not understand until college, when I read Proust and some neuroscience.

There was something colourless about all my early childhood reminiscences. I could remember that various important events had happened, but they did not feel different from the unimportant ones, and the memories only came to me when I searched for them, not on their own bidding like those of other people. My past was like a book I had read, not a film I was entranced by. I took classes on the cognitive and neural basis of memory, in order to understand this better, but they nearly all left the issue as mysterious as ever. The one exception was a course on aphasia, where I read about people who lose the ability to perceive or process smells. These people do not describe their experience as vastly changed, since most of our sense of smell is unconscious. But they are prone to depression, disconnection, and a sense that things are not really happening. It is as if their lives are monochrome, tone-deaf, tasteless. Suddenly I understood. I had been robbed of the associations that would give life to my memories.

All this changed when I met Tory. She was the most inventively foul-mouthed person I had ever met. She was writing a dissertation on invective, and she explained that cursing once invoked the truly fearsome and forbidden: horrible fates that we should not risk summoning even by mentioning them. It was her aim to restore this to our lives. A modern list: fatal diseases, terrible failures and humiliations. I first met Tory on a bus. The driver had complained that her transfer was dirty, crumpled, and only had one minute's validity left. She just pointed to him and said "pancreatic cancer, son of a syphilitic eunuch, horned black angels shrivel thine testicles". I don't

think he understood consciously, but he turned white and radioed for a replacement so he could leave at the next stop, shaking. Of course I went and sat next to her, and made sure we became friends. In the following weeks I heard invocations of AIDS, innumerable specific cancers, ALS, impotence, autism, emotional failure, bankruptcy, abandonment by ones lovers and children, and many others, all somehow with an impression of the supernatural and all bundled into threes. Disease, failure, magic. The shortest I heard was "if you were alive you'd see you never were", and the target of that one looked thoroughly puzzled until she fainted.

Once we were friends I told Tory all my stories, my whole life history. She reacted with creative obscenity to many of them. Not to all, since they didn't all have the same meaning for her, and in fact many of them were cheerful stories of good times and happy occasions. But by then I had her personality in my head, so that when I remembered something that had happened to me I found myself imagining a reaction from her: colourful, smelly, resonant. These associations soaked into the memories, and then one day I found myself sensing a diffuse wordless impact somewhere within my mind. Unable to bring it into focus I stopped thinking about it until, five minutes later, I imagined first Tory's voice saying "Uncle-fucker, putrescent happy rapist" and then a memory of a rotten mango that I had bitten into when I was six years old. It happened more and more often: Tory's unique speech was bringing my memories to life.

AIDS, abandonment, putrescent rapists: my memories were mostly good ones, with the occasional rotten mango or unwelcome relative. I wanted them all to be vivid, and so I looked for verbal extravagances to fit the happy times. It was harder for some reason. Invective comes more easily to us and brings a peculiar delight. But I found I could do it. My first success came when I was looking at a photo of my seventh birthday party. Children were blowing plastic horns and pretending to have no idea why the parents were at their wits' end. "Happy stripey elephants" I exclaimed, bringing to mind brightly coloured trumpeting creatures dancing on four enormous feet. From then on good memories were always enormous but improbably agile polychrome beasts. The rough cheerful creatures would visit my mind moments or sometimes minutes before I knew what fact was slouching its way towards my awareness. Now I had something to give Tory in return. I taught her about the trumpeting many-hued herds, happily out of tune or subtly harmonic depending on how you wanted to hear them. Sometimes I would see her suddenly smile or giggle, and I knew that

some anarchic rabble was bringing her a welcome message from the past.

The Christmas after this all began I went to see my parents for a day. My father wanted to know if his efforts had succeeded, whether he had saved me from specious happiness. I thought for a while and then I told him. "Well, I know when I'm happy now, and I know it's not always. The feeling is a bit less calm than seeing a crocus, and almost as live as hearing a really good curse."