

## Table Talk

MY DAUGHTER studies biology, and she often treats me to the most amazing facts she comes across. This time it's an episode in the life of the acacia (if I remember the tree correctly). These trees typically stand in rows next to each other, and giraffes like their leaves. Now, when a giraffe starts nibbling at a tree, the damaged leaves emit a substance which warns the trees downwind, and they react by making their leaves more bitter to the taste. So when the giraffe moves to the next tree, it finds unsavory leaves and trots off. Nice work. Nature is full of the neat tricks living beings play on each other. Giraffes, however, are not new to this game, and they are pretty clever in their own way. Some of them, having eaten their fill at one tree, then pass by number two and three (with a knowing smile on their faces, I reckon) and carry on eating at tree number four. Isn't that incredible?

What I find even more incredible is the fact that among all those giraffes, acacias, ants, nettles, fungi, and bees, there is one being who is capable of analyzing these mechanisms and finding a source of deep wonder in them. My daughter is entirely immune to philosophy, and she routinely shoves aside my effort at finding a different level of wonderment. "No, we're not wandering off into your type of question: 'But what *is* consciousness, really?' 'Is your blue the same as my blue?'" As you can see, I've tried it before.

Meanwhile, I remain stuck with the fact that Darwin cannot explain the origin of *The Origin of Species*. The story of evolution would be very different if the narrator weren't one of the beings described. The telling of the tale is something above or beyond or next to, but in any case not part of, the world described.

Imagine that the concept of evolution had never seen the light of day, because the process stopped with the chimpanzee. This would mean there was never any flickering light in a Neanderthal, nor that first bright spark in Australopithecus. This is more or less the stage of development one would expect life on other planets to have reached, if we ever came across any. If this light had never been switched on, then the entire incredible process would not be incredible, nor would it be miraculous or monstrous or accidental or beautiful or cruel; it wouldn't even be nothing. There just wouldn't be any opinion about it. No one would admire it or try to understand it.

And if, after billions of years, the whole thing had gone up in flames without any human ever having had the chance to say anything about it, then the entire idea of "life on earth" would never have existed. Life would never have begun, and it would never have ended either, because "beginning" and "end" are human concepts we impress on our surroundings in order to lend some coherence to an otherwise

random universe. But even "random universe" is a human qualification. It's enough to make you crazy, this impossibility of saying something that will stand up against our absence, something that would make sense even if we had never arrived on the scene. Are we up against a wall here, or dangling above an abyss? You might almost become religious. Nietzsche fully realized this when he warned us: "The death of God is much more terrifying than you people think."

Who could have foreseen that the colossal relief we all felt at His interment would gradually turn into a panic when it became clear that He really was no longer around? Because now we think: wasn't it nice to know that someone had an opinion about us? But we made it up ourselves, that opinion. I know, I know, but still, wasn't it consoling that we would be thought of, even in our absence? God would remember us. During all the aeons to come He would never forget what it was like for us to be alive. He would make the difference between being swatted to death like a fly and "passed away, but forever in our heart."

What's my problem, exactly? I want us to be intended, and I want somebody to remember that intention forever and ever, with a smile, a grin, or a tear. Yes, a tear would do.

—Bert Keizer

\*

I STAND IN line for three hours to see Michelangelo's statue of David. I circle David over and over. Everyone else stands still, palms covering chins, fingers over mouths, unsure of how to greet male perfection. As a bodybuilder, I'd stared it in the face before, perfection that was not a reflective white like this, but a light peach color, shaved just as smooth as David must feel, but with thousands of little black follicle specks that say, *You're human, you're changing—living, dying*.

I listen to the people as I circle:  
*Such an interesting pose with the hand at the shoulder like that.*

*Where's the slingshot? Is that it in his hand? I can't find the stone, either.*

*I heard his hands were made out of proportion because you have to look up at him.*

*Do you think Michelangelo used a real model for this or made him up in his head?*

*Has he killed Goliath yet, or is this his pose before?*

I'm not having conversation around David. I don't think it right to talk in his presence that way. It isn't right for me, anyhow, because it's through my eyes that I'm trying to find something or understand a little better what brought me here. Others talk of his curly hair and the way the slingshot weaves across his back. They wonder why he looks so calm and passive—

complete. They say he is victorious or that he knows he will be, and this is why the face is so sure of itself. But I know better. There is no certainty, no, not in the face. There is only certainty in the body. I see it in the valves of his throat, the way the muscles jut down to the collarbone, flow into the trapezius tents of his shoulder. His veins, the way they shoot down from the tip of the bicep, bend like diverging rivers at the forearm and loop around to meet again at the top of the hand. And there are striations in his chest, ridges down the middle that say he's pressed up against a lot of things in his life. He is always pushing. He moves life with his hands.

David is not flexing his abdomen. If anything, he is sucking all his air in, gathering enough in those triangle lungs to breathe on after his heavy task. His lower abdominals are not protruding, and this causes the midsection as a whole to look like a kind of church window that I feel I can see through. And what is there, through the window at the pit of that stomach, are all of the things I do not understand about myself. I circle and circle, trying to piece together if I could have ever been, could be now, a man like this David. But my body has thinned with age, the muscle fallen off, and I am on my way down, out, and I feel it's much too late to ask such questions.

And even though in all this time, every circle I make, he does not change or falter or drop any granite dust from his fingertips, I can see that he is afraid. David is afraid. It's in his face that I see it, translated by the sculptor's steady chisel. David looks away, off toward the edge of the only world he would ever know. He realizes he has come to a point in his life where he will never again be able to achieve such a precise and perfect act in such an extraordinary body's shell, and so he looks away, asking us to freeze with him in the stone-cut light, his greatest triumph in the past, lying on the ground with a bleeding forehead, a dark hole the size of a fist.

—Jonathan Starke

\*

IN THE SUMMER of 2012, my husband and I moved into a doublewide mobile home on a small ranch in rural Texas. Though neither of us had ever lived in the country before, it all happened quite naturally: a friend of mine owned the ranch, and I wanted solitude and time in order to finish writing a book. Instead of paying rent, my friend offered, I could help to care for and train the horses that lived on the ranch, while she recovered from a knee injury. I would spend most of the day writing; my husband would work remotely and commute occasionally into Austin, where we'd been living. It would be an adventure—or at least something resembling one.

I had never actually set foot in a doublewide before my friend first brought us inside to look around. I had seen doublewides in dealership lots by the side of the highway, with placards out front that said "No Credit? No Problem!" or "Zero Money Down." Occasionally I'd been stuck while driv-

ing behind a doublewide being moved from one place to another, a pick-up truck mounted with flashing lights and a sign that said "OVERSIZE LOAD" skittering nervously between the behemoth and the rest of us.

Our doublewide did not look clean and new like the ones in the dealership lots; it had been built in the 1970s, and had squatted in the same spot on the same rubbly concrete piles ever since. From outside, it did not seem to sit quite level, but that may have been an optical illusion caused by the slope of the ground, because I never felt tilted when I was inside it. There was a faint green filminess to the doublewide's white vinyl exterior siding, which gave me a vague feeling of luck when I first saw it—as if I were thinking of moving into a penny I'd picked up in some particularly unlikely spot, perhaps the soil beneath a rosebush. The doublewide was surrounded by ancient oak trees that teemed with birds. A large cactus flowered at the edge of the front lawn.

We entered the doublewide through the front door, which you got to by walking around back and climbing a tall, harrowing set of handmade wooden stairs, each step of which had been constructed using several different boards that sagged and tilted distinctly underfoot. Once we were inside, though, we fell in love with the place. The huge living room glowed with light; in one corner, there was a massive ashy fireplace; the ceiling felt cathedral-height; there was a honey-paneled wooden floor; and when a breeze blew over, the doublewide seemed to shift its weight shyly, and murmur to us.

I had understood before then that all houses had character, even if that character took the form only of a blank, dull, back-dropped sterility. I had lived in and been inside memorable, beautiful, and odd houses. But before the doublewide I had only guessed from reading Dickens that some houses could actually be like *organisms*: great sleeping bodies whose inhabitants feel only like lesser, removable organs—kidneys perhaps, or appendices, or even mere tonsils. When I was a child I had an illustrated book of Greek myths, and the first night we spent in the doublewide I found myself remembering the picture in it of Mother Earth embracing Father Sky. Her body was made of mountains, her hair was a forest, her eyes were lakes, her teeth were bones. Somehow the doublewide felt part-inanimate, part-embodied, in the same way.

This may have been, for starters, because the doublewide turned out to have an astounding flea infestation and only minimal plumbing. The fleas seemed to live underneath the lovely wood floorboards, and in the cracks between them. If you walked around wearing white socks, within five minutes your ankles whirred with black freckles. I bombed the fleas, over and over again, but until our dog arrived they would not die. We'd been giving her regular flea pills; for three days, until all the fleas had individually bitten her, and thus sterilized themselves, she scratched and chewed at herself wildly, staring up at us in disbelief.

The water from the sinks and the showers drained directly out beneath the doublewide, into the pipe-strewn,

impossible space between the concrete supports, so that when you were washing dishes you could see a skinny rivulet trickling downhill toward one of the oaks. While we lived there a large vine sprouted in the rivulet's path, twisted up the side of the doublewide toward one of the kitchen windows, and fruited a yellow-speckled, tuba-shaped, squash-like thing. Supposedly there was a septic system. For sure there was a soggy dank area about a hundred feet away, partly collapsed and watery in the middle, where the weeds were a vivid green and grew four or five feet tall, inflorescing purple, pink, and red.

Previous residents had made their mark. The walls in one of the three bedrooms were painted with grass and sky, and there was a second half-completed mural on one side of the kitchen. The artist seemed to have intended to paint a cityscape where each of the skyscrapers was shaped like a different condiment: there was a giant mustard bottle gridded with many tiny windows, salt and pepper shakers, and an outline of what might have been a Heinz ketchup jug. My husband covered up this cityscape with many layers of paint—but still the rocket-like silhouette of the mustard bottle's nib showed through. Built-in mirrors surrounded the large plastic bathtub in the master bathroom. The walls there were streaked a careless, Prince-like purple. When you turned on the water, the toilet in the other bathroom on the other side of the house would gurgle, faintly and inexplicably.

My friend's two ancient horses were named Sport and Angel. In the morning I brought them into their stalls and fed them. At dusk I let them out again to graze. But after dark, I would wonder if they were only humoring me—if, really, I was the helpless one, the one who needed the solemn, absurd daily ritual of enclosure. At night, they would circle the doublewide and stare in at us through the windows. They were especially interested in the bright motion of the TV, and sometimes they would press their lips against the fake glass and leave behind grassy saliva stains that looked, by morning, like the resinous thumbprints of someone larger than life.

—*Mimi Chubb*