

The Dark

Beauty didn't interest me.
Bats did. I was
a budding nerd

who'd already memorized
everything I could find about
the 17 species of bats

nesting in Carlsbad Caverns
and now my imagination was aroused
by the possibility of seeing the nursery

of the Brazilian free-tailed
where a colony of millions
hung upside down

nourishing their babies with
milk, not insects, as I explained
to my mother who gleamed with pride

at her little chiropterologist.
The bats flew out of the cave
in a huge black cloud every evening

to hunt insects and haunt
the countryside, returning at dawn
using *echolocation*, I explained

to my mother. The nursery
was off-limits to families on the tour of course
but I had plans of sneaking away.

*

The park ranger herded us down
the chained path sloping into the earth
until we came to a cathedral

where columns of rock caught the light
and shimmered. If beauty
had been my thing this was it

but it wasn't. I was impatient
to see the flutter-mice I'd come for
and nothing less. In a sonorous voice

the ranger said to us, his congregation,
Absolute darkness is rare.
Even if you lock yourself in a closet

at night during a blackout
a small amount of light

will seep into your eyes.

He said he would turn off the lights
for 30 seconds. *Just 30 seconds,*
he said, *but it will feel like*

a lifetime. Then the world, everything
I knew went dark and I gasped
for light

as if it were air and breathed in
nothing I knew. Confusion,
panic, calm, exhilaration

washed over me. I breathed
the darkness into my lungs
felt the darkness on my skin

not an absence but a texture
which now, half a century later,
I might name

the black fabric of my unconscious
although at the age of 11
all I knew was a rising panic

that dissolved
into pure
imperishable awe.

*

In that darkness
the chronic angers of my family
which had ruled my life

receded, as did school
which bored me, my supposed
friends whom I suspected

pitied me, and the whole
shoddy apparatus of my life
as an autistic kid

who hadn't learned to speak
until he was five,
an easy target for bullies and abusers,

a kid who had climbed into himself
and found so little in the empty attic
of a soul full of broken toys,

he'd accepted
his role as the loneliest boy
on the planet, a perpetual

party of one, a specter
on the spectrum. Having been
silent almost half my life

I hadn't gotten the hang
of being pleasant, so I relied
on the illusion of intelligence—

a tiresome authority on insects,
a memorizer of maps and tables,
a secret lover of Dean Martin,

a singer of the music
of scientific names—
this life, the only one

I would know for decades—
faded away in the dark
like a bad dream I could wake from

simply by turning out the lights
and the darkness inside me
would merge with

the darkness of the world
and I would feel whole
and, if not happy,

at least at peace with
this sorry lot I'd been given
through no fault

of my own. The world
of darkness would be mine
and, like a comic book hero

who'd fought the demons
and won, I would have
my own kingdom and with

a gentle hand I'd rule
the gentle dead
who'd welcome me home.

*

And when the lights came back on
and the cavern beckoned
with its precarious

paths, low
ceilings and huge opera halls,
stadiums of jeweled earth

and the slight breeze coming

from even deeper
darknesses

below, nothing in the tour
of those magnificent caves
and their tight squeezes that led to hippodromes

and amphitheaters crowded with stone spectators
who'd witnessed the slow accumulation
of calcium ghosts

in the galleries of ancient coral beds,
not the Hall of Giants
or the Crystal Spring Dome,

not the stone elephants
or the fine filigree of red minerals,
or the stone draperies

and lily pads suspended from the ceiling,
or the cave pearls, the gypsum flowers,
the chandelier ballroom of massive speleothems,

or the water dripping from the ceiling for eons
shaping the great cities uninhabited by the living,
or the tempting mysteries of Lake Lebarge

with its blind white fish who'd never seen daylight,
nor even the 138 miles of the forbidden wilderness
of the Lechuguilla Cave

awakened my innocence
and longing
as this song, this

beckoning
from the underbelly of the world
this darkness singing

*come home, come home
little one
we've been waiting for you.*

*

As we passed the sign
showing the way
to the *bat nursery*, which

was the ranger's cue
for a scripted joke about Batman,
I ducked

out of line and moved toward
the narrow passage, but

my mother gently

reined me in
and I stayed with her
through the tour, discovering

a group of sleeping bats is called
a *cauldron*
and in flight, a *cloud*

and that evening
we returned to watch from the amphitheater
the black cloud of bats leaving the rocky entrance

and gaining speed like wind-blown smoke
sweeping over the Chihuahuan Desert
with a horizontal speed of up to 100 mph,

each soul catching and eating up to half of
its half-ounce weight
in flies, crickets, maggots,

and I envied their nimble flight
on quick fierce wings
and I wanted to return

not to the cave, but to
the darkness, those 30 seconds
flying through

the stone passageways
navigating by sound and
instinct

out of the cave and up
to the reddening sky, the slender moon
bright as a sword.

*

Yes, I knew I would return
to this nothingness, this absence
where I could blossom

like a stone flower,
a stalactite
growing slowly, invisibly

in the darkness that rose
like a slight breeze
from the chambers below

where even
my own breath seemed
unbearably loud,

this quick fierce movement
like wings at the beginning of my feeling
life, this moment when the past

and future melded
and time
no longer flowed

like water
but flowed like rock
and even now, here

in this darkness I still contain,
I feel completely and blessedly empty
and my own death begins to sing.