

STILLNESS

Southern Living, Southern Journal: May 2013

I remember a quiet so complete a lone cricket was a cacophony, a single drop of water boomed like a stick hammering a bass drum. I remember space, vast and long, remember cotton that stretched to the end of everything, interrupted only by ribbons of blacktop that led to exotic places like Leesburg, Piedmont, and Rome. I remember a darkness complete, not only the absence of light but a thing that could swallow light altogether, the way a mud puddle does a match tossed from a passing car.

It was the early 1960s, in a place called Spring Garden, Alabama, where I would lie in my bed in a big, ragged house and wonder if the whole world had stopped spinning outside my window. I would have asked my big brother, Sam, about it, but he would have just told me I was a chucklehead, and gone back to sleep. I have never slept much; I think I was afraid I would miss something passing in all that quiet dark.

Then, sometime around midnight, I would hear it. The whistle came first, a warning, followed by a distant roar, and then a bump, bump, bumping, as a hundred boxcars lurched past some distant crossing. They were probably just hauling pig iron, but in my mind they were taking people to places I wanted to be. A braver boy would have run it down and flung himself aboard.

And then it was gone, without warning, and I would go to sleep,

grudging, and dream about oceans, and elephants, and trains.

I miss the stillness. It is an antique in this shrill, intruding life, an all-but-forgotten thing of no real value, like inkwells. It is as if we have tried to fill up what stillness there is with all the mindless claptrap we can conjure, as if a little quiet or a patch of peaceful dark is a bug that has to be stomped before it gets away.

In restaurants, I am forced to eat my meatloaf with the television tuned to two mental giants ranting about a topic they manufactured that morning, apparently from mud and straw. In a doctor's waiting room, a televangelist told me I was going to hell, then Rachael Ray made me a tuna melt.

At any given moment, on a plane, in a lobby, anywhere, I hear the TV at war with a dozen personal electronic devices. I am certain that, if I were sitting on a rug woven from palm fronds and dead army ants in the middle of the Amazon, I could hear the ubiquitous song of an iPhone.

I miss the wind in the cedars. I miss that sifting sound. Sometimes in summer, we sit on the porch of our old house in Fairhope to watch the dark fall, but sometimes the neighbors get to hollering about, well, living, and how do you go over and say, "Excuse me, but you are messing up my dark"?

It is enough to wish for a lightning storm. There's that moment when the lightning flashes and thunder shakes the house. The power flickers and dies, and a dark stillness falls. And you're swallowed up by a pure, old-fashioned silence, free of the hum of the refrigerator or the air conditioner, free from all the man-made background noise that makes you feel less human.

I do not sleep any better now. I live most of the year with sirens and squealing tires. But someone, somewhere, is looking after me, and sent me another train. I hear it bump through the city of Tuscaloosa in the small hours of the morning, and I dream and wonder, again, though I know exactly where it goes.