

THE OLDEST LIVING TREE

This not very tall spruce tree (it's only five metres in height) has been standing on a ridge of the Fulufjället mountain in Sweden for more than nine thousand years. It was already ancient when the Egyptians started building the Pyramids far away in the warm south. The Roman Empire grew from a village on the banks of the Tiber, ruled the world and fell to nothing while the tree continued slowly to mature. It has kept going in the face of appalling weather in quiet obedience to the same basic forces that have always governed its existence: rain, sunlight, wind and the nutrients it imperceptibly draws from the forbidding rocky soil beneath it.



THE VOYAGER SPACECRAFT

It left us in 1977, when half the world was still unborn, and it is now more than ten billion miles away, beyond the limits of our solar system, loaded with a touching cargo of Golden Plates – a thumbnail summation of the human condition, with diagrams of the human form, mathematical equations and a recording of Bach. Possibly in 40,000 years it may reach another planet and be received with wonder and sympathy by gelatinous creatures who speak through their tails. It is the symbol of our cosmic loneliness and of our as yet unmet yearning for love and understanding.



ZEN MONKS RAKING GRAVEL

It takes a lot of effort and care to get the lines and circles just right. The Zen monks of Kyoto installed these pristine gardens around their temples in the Middle Ages, not only for their soothing beauty but also for the redemptive chance they offer to make a small part of the world absolutely perfect. On a small but achievable scale, chaos is mastered, matter is brought into rational order and everything ends up in the right place. Outside, beyond the temple gardens, there will always be chaos, but here – in a bounded space – the human will can win. We all need a version of the garden: an arena on which we can exercise our longing for perfection. It might be the laundry cupboard or a puzzle; something which allows us – for once – to get things in order and reconciles us to the painful randomness we otherwise face.



GRANDMOTHER

She's seen so much in her time and there aren't many days left for her. It's made her warm and very forgiving; she cares more about little things (have you had enough to eat? are you slightly cold?) than the apparently huge topics: the economy, the state of the nation. It's not that she's out of touch – she's come to focus on what she can do here and now to make another person's life a tiny bit nicer. There's so much she'd love to tell you, if you could find the questions and she could find the words. Loving kindness, she now feels – as death approaches every day – is the only completely real thing in the world.



WHISPERING IN THE DARK

They are inches away but you can hardly see their nose; your voices are low, as if you are sharing a special secret. You want to giggle; use the very special pet names only the two of you know; you whisper to each other the tender and playful things that the rest of the time you never quite get round to saying. At this moment, you're properly alive to – and appreciative of – what's lovely about being with this person. Often you forget. It gets swamped by the row in the kitchen, the sulk at the airport terminal, the tetchy arguments around the domestic budget. We need things to remind us, during the day, of what we know with the lights off.



A HOT BATH

From here the world looks different: our knees figure prominently, we're interested in the space between our toes; the warmth of the water relaxes certain obscure muscles at the nape of the neck; a dispute we had earlier at work feels less essential; instead the longer we lie there, the more our minds latch onto less urgent, but profound speculations: what was my mother really like when she was a child? I know what my favourite colour is, but why that one? Distant parts of life come into focus: a brief adolescent preoccupation with playing chess or baking bread. We wonder what we might be like if we live far into old age. Safely immersed in hot water, we travel into the adventurous zones of our minds.



TOAST AND BUTTER

Or it might be a biscuit or an apple. The point is, it is at once so satisfying, so simple and so reliable. Everything fades away as we bite through it. Our grander schemes for happiness might not work out; the rarer excitements might be beyond our budget or require time we haven't got to spare. But we can still find a small moment of redemption in the company of an exquisite piece of grilled bread soaked in creamy butter that is available for next to nothing. Whatever the ultimate fate of our largest dreams, we will always have access to the smaller things, waiting for us – reliably – when we are ready to return to them.



A SHANTY TOWN

Five people are living in the same room; there's no such thing as privacy. When it rains, water runs down the inside walls. There's no plumbing; you can't call the police or the fire brigade in an emergency. Weirdly, it's not simply a disaster – there's laughter sometimes and kindness and it feels, to those who live here, normal. Which in fact it is: for most of history life was generally lived in this fashion – coping and making do with almost nothing. Seen from here the most basic things in your life are revealed as quietly wonderful. Even the annoying parts of life in developed countries deserve appreciation: paying a utility bill or getting a parking ticket are tiny markers of civilization.



A CHILD LOOKING AT ANTS

The child doesn't know the science of insect life – but they're newly astonished by the strangeness of existence nevertheless. What would it be like to be a tiny creature marching in file towards a tiny fissure at the base of a brick wall? Do they have friends? Do they get sad? Do they know they are being watched – across a vast existential gulf – by a child god who could disrupt their entire world with the slightest flick of a finger. What will my life be like? Am I a kind of ant? The vast speculative spaces of the mind begin to open. The least thing, properly attended to, could furnish a lifetime of thought. We don't have to stop speculating, as we once did.



WATCHING SOMEONE SLEEPING

It's such a large part of existence, one third maybe of anyone's time on earth – and yet so rarely observed. They're locked deep into the unknowable recesses of their minds: a world to which we can never have access. They'll never be able to properly tell us what they've seen or what it may have meant. Yet they carry this with them always, even when we and they are least aware of it. Free of the possibility of their response, our own more tender attitudes can come to the surface. They're not difficult, abrupt or evasive now. We're quiet, out of immense, unfamiliar gentleness. Do they ever look on us, and feel a similar tenderness, when we are lost in sleep? There is still so much love left to give.

