

Michael Atkinson

Life after Death

Our souls are presumably smarter than our bodies,
 seek as they are said to do more sophisticated pastimes
 like basking in the heavenly presence of
 the Greater Thing, and so it's hard to claim kinship,
 indeed oneship, with the ghost inside us
 only interested in making it with the proverbial Spirit
 in the proverbial Sky, forever, in an ecstatic
 non-landscape our living selves — all body,
 all bread and blood — would find impossibly dull,
 and beg for a second death from. The latest
 reports describe a state, of course, not
 a location but a cloudless, timeless playground
 where the soul enjoys its continuous bath
 in "radiance"; if light is all the soul lives on,
 the sun must be a poor source of joy, though
 I've never heard anyone complain. We can suppose
 it's the promise of this light-meal after
 our bodies give up like broken trees that keeps the soul
 going all these years — which may not be very many.
 If we had eternity to measure it by,
 would it mean more or less to us how many
 beautiful bodies we've made love to, how many ounces
 of chocolate we've eaten, how many fistfuls of lilacs
 we've brought home from bike rides. But
 we're talking Paradise, a place where one can use words
 like *rapture* without irony, and must take on faith
 its unmappable terrain, its perfection — as if
 a million souls together in a room wouldn't mean utter chaos
 — and the very fact that our deepest selves
 could ever be happily divorced from fucking, from food,
 from the softened light of an unmade bed, from risk,
 from glory, from crickets and crabgrass,

pastrami and bulldogs and the smell of oil paint,
Yeats and bacon and Derek & the Dominoes
playing "Layla" on a car stereo in July.
This kind of faith is the hardest to come by.
What color is the air there — is the sky just white
with unrelenting brightness? Is there color at all?
I'd miss having the waves of orange set over the trees.
If it is a "state," it must — since it's not anything
close to this, our life — be close to sleep, or dreams,
where you can fly and pass through walls and
watch yourself walk to the window and press
your nose to the screen, smelling summer.
Could Paradise really be the womb, waiting
for our return? Is it, and it is, isn't it,
just a promised land imagined in a story
told to a grandson by an old man afraid of his death?
Mine is the canon of hammocks, of fireflies,
of churches when they're empty of everything
but the stained glass light stepping into the pews
on emerald, gold and lavender legs.
Wrist watches, children's books, printed linen.
I could go on for pages. Because I doubt everything,
I doubt our souls are ever very far from thrilled
with a glass of beer sipped in maple shade.
I think that if the soul wants light, it
just needs it to read by. And, because I doubt so much
even as I stand this Sunday as godfather to
my friend's brand new daughter, smiling when
told to vow aloud that I renounce Satan, Prince
of Darkness, the wailing of babies filling
the cloister, I wish I could tell Bobby Whitlock
he can play piano breaks over my life anytime.