Month Seven

Figuring Out the Good Part

But what exactly constitutes the good part of a story? And since our lives themselves are stories, where in this sea of misery, this vale of tears, does the good part lie?

from "The Good Part" by Dennis Covington

Have You Gotten to the Good Part Yet?

There has to be a good part to the story. A good part to the stories we eventually create out of our lives. It has to be this way. Or we'll all go mad. I'm indebted to Dennis Covington for writing about this in the best possible way—through stories—in an essay, entitled, fittingly, "The Good Part."

It begins:

> My sister Jeanie has lupus, and occasionally, when her brain swells to the point that she gets confused and starts having seizures, she has to go to the hospital to have her blood cleansed. It's a painful process that Jeanie endures by telling stories.

The first story Jeanie tells is about her husband. Bunky Wolaver. A man who, in addition to having a wonderful name, loves a good bargain. He's at one of those discount shoe stores, she says, when he comes across a pair of Florsheim Imperial Wingtips for $5.88—the bargain. The problem is that he wears a size nine and a half, and the shoes are a size six. He buys the shoes anyways, and has been trying for days to find someone to give the shoes to—no luck. That very morning he calls. She tells him her doctor is making rounds. Bunky's response? Could she just lean over the bed, he wants to know, and check and see what size the doctor's feet are?

The story goes on. Another lupus patient, a woman in Jeanie's support group, stops by to visit. Both women have advanced disease and Covington relates that the visit is mostly a

somber one, but then at one point Jeanie tells the woman about Bunky's Florsheim Imperial wingtips and the woman starts laughing so hard that the chair she is sitting on collapses.

Covington writes:

> Jeanie's stories have always seemed particularly Southern to me, and on the way home from the hospital that night, Vicki and I entered a serious discussion about the nature of Southern storytelling. The good part of Jeanie's story, I thought, was Bunky asking her to check out the size of her doctor's feet to see if the shoes he had bought on sale might fit. Vicki thought the good part of the story was the moment when the other lupus patient's chair collapsed.
>
> We didn't resolve the issue, but we did conclude that every story, Southern or not, has to have a good part. 'Have you gotten to the good part yet?' we often ask each other when one of us is reading a novel the other has recommended.
>
> But what exactly constitutes the good part of a story? And since our lives themselves are stories, where in this sea of misery, this vale of tears, does the good part lie?

Covington proposes that the answer to this last question can best be found in another story, and he proceeds then to tell a long and winding story which includes, among other things, his father, twelve armadillos, the loss of two of the armadillos (the father left the latch to the cage open and afterwards felt horrible about it), a stint of alcoholism, a marriage, getting sober, two daughters, his father's death, a trip to Florida with one of his daughters to look at a piece of scrubland his father had left him, a baby armadillo spotted by the side of the road, a decision to take the armadillo in as

a pet and name him Joey, then Joey's illness, Joey's death, his daughter's tears in the wake of Joey's death.

The good part? At the end of all this, Covington writes how he and his wife disagree a bit on just when exactly the good part of this particular story begins. He thinks the good part may have started on the way to Florida, when he first spotted the armadillo. (The redemptive armadillo?) Or maybe at the moment when his daughter asked him if they could keep it and he decided they would try. His wife, he says, thinks that the good part began at that moment, after the armadillo died, when she asked their daughter why she was crying. And the girl said she was crying for her father.

What fascinates me about this essay is what Dennis Covington doesn't suggest. He doesn't suggest that the good part of the story was when they stumbled across a pot of money. Or when one of his daughters got accepted into Yale. Or won a soccer championship. It wasn't even when he got sober (though being sober, one could argue, allowed him to recognize the good part when it came along). The good part wasn't when he found out his father wasn't going to have to die. Nor when Joey, the armadillo, was able to be miraculously cured. His father did die. So did Joey. And yet still there was this something Covington recognized—something that happened between him and his daughter and his wife, something that echoed a moment that had happened once between him and his own father. Something.

What does constitute the good part of a story?

Who decides?

And could this question itself be a kind of beginning?

PAJAMAS

One of my favorite movie lines is from *City of Angels*, a movie in which Nicholas Cage plays an angel, Seth, who lives in the Los Angeles Public Library.

The movie opens with a young girl becoming ill with a high fever. Her mother carries her to the Emergency Room where she watches, through a window in the door of the treatment room, as the girl is attended by doctors. Seth appears next to the mother—invisible to her but visible to us. At some point, as the girl's fevered body reaches a crisis on the treatment table, the girl leaves her body and comes to stand outside the door next to him.

The girl is very calm. She asks him if he's God. He tells her that his name is Seth. The mother is crying. The body on the table is being put through the routines of resuscitation. The girl tells Seth that her mother is not going to understand what's happening. Seth promises her that the mother will understand, someday. Then he takes the girl's hand and the two of them walk away, down the hospital corridor. As they walk he asks her what part she liked best. She doesn't hesitate. Her answer is succinct: "Pajamas."

This was the line I rented the movie for again—the girl's answer. The best part. But it was on watching this scene again that I noticed something I hadn't noticed before—how the girl needed to be asked the question in order to answer it. This seems so simple, and I suppose it is. The way Seth's question changed the scene. The way sometimes a person can enter a scene and ask a new question and this can change the story.

What part have you liked best about your life so far?

What makes it the best part?

Research on Perceived Benefits

I wrote in the last chapter about the research begun by James Pennebaker, a psychologist at the University of Texas. In 1983 he asked a question that has more or less framed the field of writing and health: Can writing one's deepest thoughts and feelings about a difficult life event result in fewer illness visits to a health clinic? The answer to that question turned out to be yes—writing can influence health visits. And in the years since, the data has been positive more often than not: expressive writing about difficult life circumstances tends to lead to improved health outcomes.

Fifteen years after Pennebaker's groundbreaking study, Laura King, a researcher at the University of Missouri, asked a new question--a series of questions actually--that moved the research in a bit of a different direction. Her questions:

> What other kinds of writing might be healing?
> Does writing have to be painful in order to heal?
> What about writing that focuses on the good part?
> Might that kind of writing be healing as well?

Research had already shown that writing about mundane topics was not especially healing. For instance, in Pennebaker's first study, one group of students was instructed to describe their dorm room, a topic chosen specifically because of its lack of emotional freight. And, though it's possible that, for some students at least, the dorm room did strike a meaningful chord, as a group, and as predicted, those students who wrote about their posters and rugs and lamps did not show changes in health outcome.

But what about topics that are neither painful nor mundane? What about topics that carry a more pleasant emotional charge? What health effects might writing about those topics have?

Laura King is the researcher (Month Three, Drawing a New Map) who asked college students to write about "their best possible future self." She discovered this kind of writing to be of benefit.

In another study, she asked a group of volunteers to reframe a difficult life event by writing for twenty minutes on four consecutive days on the perceived benefits of this difficult life event. Volunteers were instructed to consider a traumatic event that they had experienced and then "focus on the positive aspects of the experience. . . write about how you have changed or grown as a person as a result of the experience." When King and her associates analyzed the results they found that the health benefits for this group were identical to those for the group that had written their deepest thoughts and feelings about a trauma. Both groups benefited equally.

Perhaps this finding doesn't surprise you. Perhaps, in hindsight, it even feels like common sense. But, after fifteen years of research on writing about trouble, it introduced a new wrinkle into the research on expressive writing and health. It opened the door to a possibility that many people had perhaps long suspected: that a vast array of different kinds of writing might be healing. Writing about the difficult part is healing. Writing about the good part is healing too.

What would happen if you were to try this?

Consider a problem or trauma or difficult experience that you've encountered. For fifteen or twenty minutes, focus on any positive aspects of this experience. How, if at all, might you have changed or grown as a person because of this experience?

What good thing—however small—has arisen that would not have arisen otherwise?

I read somewhere about a family who had only one son. They were very poor. This son was extremely precious to them, and the only thing that mattered to the family was that he bring them some financial support and prestige. Then he was thrown from a horse and crippled. It seemed like the end of their lives. Two weeks after that, the army came into the village and took away all the healthy strong men to fight in the war, and this young man was allowed to stay behind and take care of his family.

Life is like that. We don't know anything. We call something bad; we call it good. But really we just don't know.

from *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron

On the Island

Cancer sucks. This seems important to say at the outset. We call it bad for a reason. I mentioned in an earlier chapter that I'm cautious about imposing the notion of benefit upon anyone who is suffering. This seems, at worst, a form of violence; at best a kind of indifference.

On the other hand, it's out of extreme situations that good things sometimes emerge. A reprieve. A sweetness. A connection. An unexpected generosity.

Mrs. T. in the physical therapy room quoting Jeremiah to Andre Dubus. Spiky Ball changing—and becoming nice. Andrew's wife offering me a cup of tea when I would go out to their house early in his illness. Andrew's brother framing his photos of the Sargasso Sea. A young nurse outside the room of a young woman with severe anorexia, saying that she prays for her every night.

We have to have these good parts. We have to find them. Or we're not going to be able to bear it, some of these stories that we're trying to live and write.

Andrew was fifty-five when he was diagnosed with cancer. He and his family hoped, when the tumor was first discovered, that it would be one of those manageable tumors—localized and resectable. They were hoping—of course—for the restitution narrative. The tumor would be cut out, he would be cured, and he would go back to being who he was before. That didn't happen. The tumor was metastatic to his liver, large tumors occupying his liver, over 85% of it. He began chemotherapy. He continued working with imagery. He'd had the conversation with his immune

cells, telling them they were not alone, and this created a kind of shift. He became more intrigued by the possibilities in imagery. He borrowed some audiotapes and began working on his own, between sessions.

"The body is a tropical island," he announced to me one morning. "It contains everything you need. The liver is this fertile garden patch on the island. The cancer is soil blight. And the healing system are these gardener guys."

When Andrew was a child, he'd enjoyed drawing maps of imaginary islands. Now he was imagining an entirely new island—an island that represented his body. There was this sense, listening to him, that this work was becoming very real to him—both vivid and urgent.

He'd had a vision of who was in charge on the island—a man by the name of Babu. He described Babu as a grizzled man with dark skin who'd been on the island for an eternity. He took care of the island, and he also took care of the children who lived on the island.

There were children.

And, over time, things began to happen on the island. A shower of soft pink molecules falling out of the sky. Chemotherapy. The children gathering the pink molecules and placing them onto the blight. Carrying the debris away in buckets.

Andrew knew—we'd talked about this—that one of the biggest problems with chemotherapy is that it's indiscriminate. It destroys all rapidly dividing cells, cancerous or not, this the reason hair and gut and skin cells

are especially vulnerable. The children had found a quiet and efficient way to address this, directing the molecules away from the healthier areas of the garden and onto the blight.

One morning Andrew told me he was having abdominal pain. He hoped, he said, that this meant the chemotherapy was working. He asked me to guide him back into the imagery so he could understand why he was having the pain. Also, he said, he'd like to check on the children.

I invited him to relax. He closed his eyes.

I'm on the rear deck of the ship. The ocean is warm. There's a salt odor. The lapping of the water against the hull.

I waited.

I can see the island from a distance. It's a tropical island with fruit trees and shrubs and flowers. . . now I'm on the beach. . . I'm taking a path through the forest to this clearing. . . the caretaker lives here. . . he comes out to meet me. I ask him if he'll take me to the garden at the center of the island. He says all right. He's taking me there. The garden is green. The soil is rich and dark. But I can see these large areas of blight which are dried out and brown. . .

I want to watch the gardeners. I can see them now. They're mixing the chemo molecules into the blight. They're taking hoes and getting the molecules all through the blight, not just at the edges. That's where the pain is coming from—the hoes digging into the blight. It feels good to know that. To know the reason for the pain. To know that means the chemo molecules are really getting in there.

He seemed relieved. He'd done what he'd set out to do, found a reason for the abdominal pain. I reminded him then that he also wanted to check on the children.

The children are fine. Babu says the children are fine. I'm asking him if there are enough children with buckets, enough gardeners. He says he's taking care of things, that there's a reason he's there and I'm not. He says things are settled down, everyone knows what they're doing, they're not worried. Babu says the blight was strange at first and they had a lot of meetings about what to do but now they know what to do. And it's pleasant to work on the island. Everyone likes each other.

I want to walk barefoot through the good green part of the garden.

A few minutes passed. This was a good part.

I want to sit for a few minutes under a palm tree and feel the gentle breeze.

Another few minutes passed. All of this was good.

I forgot to tell the gardeners how much better I feel. I'm telling them now and they're getting a big laugh. . . they're giving me a big hug. . . they're smiling. . . they're going back to work.

"The caretaker is in charge," Andrew told me when he returned. His eyes were open, clear. "The caretaker is competent and the gardeners know what to do."

The island image continued to evolve for Andrew. It was never static. It was always changing. He returned to the island a number of times in his imagery and each time there would be these new and often wonderful details. He learned that although Babu was in charge of the island during the day, during the night it was Babu's wife who took care. He learned that she braided baskets, beautiful baskets dyed with plant extracts. He discovered a spring-fed pool on the island. He went snorkeling on the reef and was delighted by the colors there—the pinks and greens of the reef, the

yellow of the angelfish. He encountered a squawking bird with a bright orange beak, which the islanders considered to be a bird of good fortune. He attended a festival in his imagery where he partook of a feast and then he watched the islanders dance and he carved shapes out of nuts for the children. Often he brought treats with him—gifts—when he went to the island. For the children he brought a barrel of licorice, another barrel filled with ginger snaps. He brought for them carved beads. For Babu he brought fresh eggs, and sometimes tobacco. Throughout all of this, in a kind of uninterrupted current, the gardeners proceeded to work in the garden, working their hoes into the blight, and the children proceeded to carry the debris away in buckets, and all this time the caretaker and his wife were taking care.

With time Andrew began to notice changes on the island. He began to notice pink healed areas at the edge of the blight. He noticed once, and then he noticed again, that the seed pods on the blight had died, and he interpreted this as meaning that the blight was no longer reproducing.

It all seemed so lovely. At the same time it was hard not to wonder what it meant. We both couldn't help wondering if what he was seeing in the garden might be reflected in his body.

He went in for his first CT scan. The tumor growth had slowed considerably. Yes, we thought, it's making a difference. But then there came a time later when the CT scan showed the tumors were growing again, this in spite of a continued healing in the garden imagery.

Not long after this discouraging CT scan, Andrew went in imagery to the island. The caretaker was emphatic—the garden was continuing to heal.

"The island is just so healthy," the caretaker told him. "It's in balance, peaceful. Nothing's dying real fast. Nothing's out of control. It's in balance."

What was happening?

It was hard not to wonder. What did this imagery mean? What was happening?

We didn't know. We couldn't know. But we also both had this hunch that imagining healing had to be different—and better than—imagining not-healing. One of Andrew's goals was to stay calm and peaceful throughout the process, and he told me many times that the imagery was calming. When he would wake in night scared sometimes, or wake from a nap frightened, he found the imagery soothing. He told me he found it peaceful to imagine the ship and the sea and the island, calming to imagine someone competent in charge.

It wasn't that Andrew was in denial about his illness. He was a realist. He knew what he was facing. At the same time there was this other dimension—something so good was happening.

And I would find myself telling him again—this has to matter. Imagining healing has to matter somehow. I don't know how yet. I don't know what will come of this. We can't know. But I know it is making a difference. Perhaps in some way that we'll never understand or fully grasp, I know this work of imagining healing has to be making a difference.

What might it mean to imagine healing?

What image for the body resonates?

SEA

CAVE

HARBOR

PROMONTORY

ISLAND

MOUNTAIN

SKY

What healing place could the body become?

How could this imagining become a good part of the story?

Nora told me this—

That not long after she broke her vertebra, and came to realize she was not going to make it to Commonweal after all, she had a series of dreams. These were dreams, she said, about places she'd traveled. Tuscany figured largely in one of them. When this series of dreams ended, she told me she understood now that all of the places were deep inside her, the memories, that she carried these places with her now, and it would no longer be necessary for her to travel.

Mystery

I knew Nora for two years before she received her diagnosis of cancer. She was a patient who'd seen me on and off for stress-related symptoms; she'd been doing well. She'd suffered an enormous amount of pain in her early life, and she was finding ways to work through some of her grief about that time. She was beginning to feel a sense of freedom—and possibility. She'd recently made plans to move away from North Carolina with her husband and take a new job in a large city. She was excited about the move.

And then one evening, she came in to see me, carrying a large brown grocery bag. She sat down, and she proceeded to take from the bag a bottle of wine—and two glasses. She handed one of the glasses to me.

This was disorienting, entirely unlike anything she'd ever done. In fact I can say that I never, before or since, had a patient bring wine and glasses to an appointment—ever.

She opened the wine. She asked me would I have some.

Sure, I told her. Sure.

She poured a bit of wine in my glass, and then a bit more in hers. I waited. This seemed to go on for a long time.

To what are we toasting? I finally asked.

To breast cancer, she said. I've just been diagnosed with breast cancer.

We toasted breast cancer.

She'd found a lump. She'd been in to see her internist a month before and at that time everything, including her breast exam, had been normal. And then she'd found this lump. And she'd gone in for an evaluation—a biopsy—the lump was cancerous.

Sometimes patients go through a phase of denial where they believe a serious condition is not going to affect their lives. Perhaps even more often the people around them go through this. In this particular case, I was the one who stayed in denial for a bit. I thought—she's doing so well, she's just taken this new job, she's excited, she has a breast tumor, she'll get treatment, likely it will delay her move, but she'll still get to go. Nora suspected it was going to be a bigger deal. She was right. Further evaluation revealed that she had disease in her liver and her bones. Stage four disease. She changed her plans. She began chemotherapy.

She let go of her job in the new large city. She let go of work altogether. She lost her lovely red hair. She lost weight. She and her husband sold their house and moved into a small apartment. She made a plan to go to Commonweal for a cancer retreat and then fell and broke a vertebra and she gave up on that as well.

Cancer sucks.

Several months into her treatment she shared with me a book. She told me it was the book she'd needed to find and she was excited to have found it.

The book, *Speak the Language of Healing: Living With Breast Cancer Without Going to War*, is authored by four women, each at a different stage of breast cancer.

Carol Orsborn, a woman with Stage II breast cancer, is the one who brings the four of them together. She finds herself leaving a fund-raiser for breast cancer one day, "a fund-raiser exhorting us to lead the charge in the war against cancer." Something about this fund-raiser feels terribly wrong to her. Immediately afterwards, she makes four phone calls, one to each of three other women with breast cancer and one to a literary agent.

Orsborn writes:

> I increasingly encountered the 'cancer culture': a world in which people who die are 'losers,' and the 'winners' are those who emerge from illness unchanged. I knew that this attitude was useful in that it heightened emotions around our illness in order to raise funds for research more effectively, but it came at the expense of our spirits.

A world in which people who die are losers and winners are those who emerge from illness unchanged.

When I read this I recognized Arthur Frank's restitution narrative emerging. I recognized, in a new way, the cost of this, for someone like Nora, and the cost potentially for all of us. We're all going to die eventually, right?—of cancer or some other cause. Wouldn't the logic of the resitutution narrative, taken to an extreme, inevitably make us all losers? Eventually? Don't we need a different narrative for living our lives?

Orsborn writes:

> I'd learned to stop thinking of my inner world and outer challenges as enemies to be conquered, and learned to recognize the potential for true greatness in acceptance and compassion for myself and for others, regardless of the obstacles I faced. To create the optimum environment for my healing—body, mind, and spirit—what I most needed was not a mighty sword but rather a mighty heart: a heart that could hope, love, and remain faithful in the shadow of mysteries that were beyond my comprehension.

The shadow of mysteries beyond comprehension.

In hindsight this feels like a part of what Nora was teaching me. She was pulling me in toward something that was still beyond my comprehension.

Not long ago I found myself telling someone this story—about Nora, about her coming to her appointment with the wine and the glasses and wanting me to drink with her.

Oh, he said, Communion. She wanted you to share Communion.

That felt like it could be true. Nora was Catholic and so for her drinking wine could and perhaps always did carry that sense of sacrament. A sense of mystery. And in fact perhaps that's what we were toasting—cancer as a possible entrance into sacrament and mystery rather than an emblem of failure.

That seems like it could be a good part.

communion |kə ˈmyo͞onyən|
noun

1 the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, esp. when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level.
• common participation in a mental or emotional experience *: popular festivals where all take part in joyous communion.*

2 (often **Communion** or **Holy Communion**) the service of Christian worship at which bread and wine are consecrated and shared.

Synonyms for Communion

Affinity
Fellowship
Kinship
Friendship
Fellow feeling
Togetherness
Closeness
Harmony
Understanding
Rapport
Connection
Communication
Empathy
Accord
Unity

During the night it was Babu's wife who took care. He learned that she braided baskets, beautiful baskets dyed with plant extracts. He discovered a spring-fed pool on the island. He went snorkeling on the reef and was delighted by the colors there—the pinks and greens of the reef, the yellow of the angelfish. He encountered a squawking bird with a bright orange beak, which the islanders considered to be a bird of good fortune. He attended a festival in his imagery where he partook of a feast and then he watched the islanders dance and he carved shapes out of nuts for the children. Often he brought treats with him—gifts—when he went to the island. For the children he brought a barrel of licorice, another barrel filled with ginger snaps. He brought for them carved beads. For Babu he brought fresh eggs, and sometimes tobacco. Throughout all of this, in a kind of uninterrupted current, the gardeners proceeded to work in the garden, working their hoes into the blight, and the children proceeded to carry the debris away in buckets, and all this time the caretaker and his wife were taking care.

Some discoveries provide answers to questions. Other discoveries are so deep that they cast questions in a whole new light, showing that previous mysteries were misperceived through lack of knowledge. You could spend a lifetime—in antiquity, some did—wondering what happens when you reach earth's edge, or trying to figure out who or what lives on the earth's underbelly. But when you learn that the earth is round, you see that the previous mysteries are not solved; instead they're rendered irrelevant.

from *The Fabric of the Cosmos* by Briane Greene

What If?

In *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, Brian Greene, a physicist, tells about a game he used to play with his father, walking through the streets of Manhattan. It's a game that may have uniquely prepared him to be a physicist, a game that involves shifting perspective. It's also, I think, a potentially wonderful game for a writer—or for someone who is interested in looking at something—anything—in a new way. It's like playing "I Spy", but with a twist.

In this game Brian Greene or his father would spy an object on the street, describe it from an unusual perspective, and then the other one had to figure out what was being described. For example, this, from Greene's book: "'I'm walking on a dark, cylindrical surface surrounded by low, textured walls, and an unruly bunch of thick white tendrils is descending from the sky.'"

The answer?

An ant walking on a hot dog while a street vendor is dressing it with sauerkraut.

You can probably think of other examples.

Here's one: I am repeatedly diving into a hard invisible barrier while an enormous four-legged creature chases after me and makes high-pitched sounds.

That's a fly at the window while our dog—a whippet—tries to catch it.

Greene says this game did two things for him. It not only stretched his brain to consider different viewpoints. But it also led him to consider each of these viewpoints as potentially valid.

Here's another example he offers: an ant resting on an ice-skater's boot. To a spectator in the stands, it appears as if the ice skater, along with her boot, is spinning. But what about to the ant? The crowd is spinning? And which point of view is more valid in regards to absolute space?

This is the kind of question that can give me a bit of a headache. It's also the kind of question—having to do with motion and relative motion and absolute space—that physicists wrestled with in the early part of the twentieth century. And the key to beginning to resolve this kind of question, according to Greene, had everything to do with being able to ask a new question: what if? What if the way we're looking at things now is not the only way to look? What if we look at things from a different perspective? And what if this new perspective were considered as potentially valid?

> *. . . when you learn that the earth is round, you see that the previous mysteries are not solved; instead they're rendered irrelevant.*

I have this inkling that sometimes, for some people, healing is like that.

Just when it has seemed I couldn't bear
  one more friend
waking with a tumor, one more maniac

with a perfect reason, often a sweetness
  has come
and changed nothing in the world

except the way I stumbled through it.

from "Sweetness," by Stephen Dunn

What sweetness has come?

What sweetness could come?

When the Story Becomes Bearable

I know a woman whose daughter died, sixteen years ago, and, still, the grief, it catches her unaware—that raw fresh ache. This is more frequent in January.

How do you do it? I ask her. I really want to know, how does she do it. I picture her getting up every morning, making breakfast, walking the dog—it's wet some days and cold—and then there's all that has to be done next.

How do you do it?

She says she knows that she will see her again. When she dies she will see her daughter again. She tells me this as if it is the most obvious thing.

What is it that makes the story bearable?

What is it that could make the story bearable?

In the dream I had when he came back not sick
but whole, and wearing his winter coat,

he looked at me as though he couldn't speak. . .

And I told him: I'm reading all this Buddhist stuff,

and listen, we don't die when we die. Death is an event,
a threshold we pass through. We go on and on

and into light forever.
And he looked down, and then back up at me. It was the look we'd pass

across the kitchen table when Dad was drunk again and dangerous,
the level look that wants to tell you something,

in a crowded room, something important, and can't.

from "The Promise" by Marie Howe

What If?

One morning Andrew closed his eyes to visit the island and he saw several canoes on the island that he'd never noticed before. They were banked there on the beach.

Babu told him this:

> *There will come a time when it's time to get the canoes and leave the island to go to another island but it's not time for that yet.*

I remember this morning so clearly.

A moment in which it seemed as if the story was changing—something new becoming possible.

Not canoes crashing, becoming decimated, destroyed, annihilated, falling off into some abyss of nothingness. Not an unbearable story. But just this—the canoes moving on to the next island when it was time.

Life is like that
We don't know anything
We call something bad
We call it good

But really we just don't know.

from *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches ---
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.

from "Morning Poem" by Mary Oliver