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Gulf Coast Writers Association

2024 Contest

Non-Fiction

1,221 words

**Between the Heat and the Bugs**

Rather than slam the front door, I huff away from it, hoping that an evening walk would clear my head. There’s a lot to clear. I’m frustrated with writing, worried about a friend, grieving a death, confused about the world, and angry at my husband.

Rounding the corner, I flutter my hand toward a neighbor who’s walking his fluffy white dog.

“Beautiful evening,” he says, returning my limp salute with gusto. Gazing north, he points above the powerlines. “I’ve been looking at the different colors and layers of clouds over there. Like that gray one, in front of the orange one.”

In mutual nods, we scan the sky.

Forgetting that mere moments ago I was pissed off, I raise my arms in a hallelujah.

“God.” My voice is reverent yet lighthearted.

“And isn’t she magnificent?” His eyes twinkle. “This time of day is perfect, isn’t it? After the heat and before the bugs.”

“Sounds like a title,” I say.

“It does!” Knowing I’m a writer, he waggles his index finger at me. “Maybe you’re onto something.”

Maybe I am.

I’m onto a walk.

As my feet set a good pace into the familiar, my mind gets lost between the heat and the bugs. In that delicate space now dampened with a breeze, I wonder if God, in her magnificence, is trying to tell me something*.*

Instead of heeding wisdom, however, I seize control by definition, beginning with clouds. I struggle to categorize what I see: Cirrus, cumulus, nimbus, stratus. I grasp for nouns: Cosmos, firmament, vapor, air. I wrestle with adjectives: Billowy, angular, glowering, puffed. I toss about phrases: Smoldered blasts, flatly-shorn thunderheads, layers of cotton and steel.

Word salad.

It’s a good thing I’m not a painter. My critics would fault me for exaggerated forms and clashing hues. No, I’m a writer. And writers, you know, like to think that we come up with words when in reality, they come to us. On their own terms.

“God,” I exclaim as I did before. It’s the only word that captures the moment.

Between the chirp of a bird, the yip of a dog, and the belch of a frog, I finally listen. Words come. Not because I am forcing them, but because I am immersed in God’s presence. The words belong to St. Ignatius Loyola.

“Go out and place yourself in God’s presence,” he said in laying out what he called his daily examen. “And give thanks for God’s great love for you.”

Let me set you straight. I don’t typically strut down the street quoting the 16th-century Basque priest who founded the Jesuits. No, I’m more likely to channel Ignatius J. Reilly, the unkempt protagonist of John Kennedy Toole’s *Confederacy of Dunces*.

But decades ago, I latched onto the saint’s five-step prayer as a means of finding God in everything.

Swarmed by color and soft breezes, it’s easy to place myself in God’s presence. Not so, however, when torrential rain forces my soggy body indoors. Or when constraints of time and responsibilities win out over a walk. Or when emotions overtake logic, like they did 15 minutes ago.

But tonight, strolling past manicured lawns and manufactured lakes, between delicate gardens and sturdy manure, God was emerging in everything.

“Good evening,” I say to a young woman who’s walking another fluffy dog.

“Beautiful sky,” she replies, looking upward.

“Salmon orange, tutu pink, and pearly opalescence.” I vocalize words I had stumbled upon.

“Exactly!” A smile hijacks her face.

We introduce ourselves. I assume she’s a visitor since this is a 55-plus community.

“Oh, no.” Pointing to a white house down the street, she corrects me. “I just moved in with my parents.” *Ah, a sponging woman child*. *At least she’s walking the dog.* “I’m so grateful that at this time in my life, I’m able to come down here and help my mother take care of my father. My sisters’ lives are too hectic.”

Before I could wonder about her debilitated father and admire the love that motivates her, words percolate from the saint’s second step: Pray for the grace to understand how God is acting in my life.In an instant, I find the grace to realize how judgmental I’d been.

Would it be too hokey to think that God put these two people in my path tonight? To show me how God is acting in my life?

Although I often struggle with an anthropomorphic deity, that’s the only way humble humans can grasp the divine. All cultures, after all, have stories about god the father, god the mother, and the gods of holy ghosts.

Minutes ago, I was frustrated with life. Yet, here I am, doing a daily examen. Step Three, Ignatius taught, involves recalling specific moments of the day and assessing my feelings about them.

The sounds of the world—between the heat and the bugs—prompt me to think about my actions and reactions. Did I chirp, yip, or belch? Or in the more cleverly crafted words that Ignatius uses in his Step Four, did those incidents draw me closer to or further away from God?

I don’t know.

Mimicking the fingers of fronds that appear to be waving bugs from the sky, I swat away doubts in my search for answers.

The sun, now sinking through a shredded firmament, gives way to a neon afterglow, its last rays sowing the seed of tomorrow’s light. A row of beige carriage houses catches the luminosity, blushing now in toe-nail pink. The transformation is mirrored in a pond disturbed only by the undulation of an alligator floating between his ancient past and a murky future.

Ignatius advised in Step Five, “Look toward tomorrow. Think of how you might collaborate more effectively with God’s plan.”

Tomorrow? In the closing space between heat and bugs, I’m not interested in tomorrow. I linger in yesterday, recalling last hugs, cherished kisses, and bittersweet goodbyes. Between a wisp of the moon and the hiss of old flames, I summon for inquisition the family and friends who have gone on to the other side of the neon sky—with or without God’s plan. My questions for the dearly departed have nothing to do with my distance to or from God.

“How on earth,” I demand, “Do I collaborate with what I don’t know?”

Like the fading light, my question dissipates.

A distant pulse of lightning and the muted thunder of an ascending airplane suggest the classic struggle between faith and fate, between destiny and volition, between letting go and letting God. Or, in the wisdom of the Yiddish proverb, *Menschen trakht aun Got lakht.*

Man plans, God laughs.

I laugh.

So much for examining my life à la Ignatius.

The seam between heat and bugs having now closed, I smash skeeters as I scurry homeward. Between the fragrance of gardenias and the stench of fertilizer, between the glow of the sky and the dark of the night, between the cries of the past and the call of the future, I realize how quickly I have abandoned my search for words.

That’s when I remember the advice of the other Ignatius, the one of the *Dunces*.

“When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors,” he said, “I make an occasional cheese dip.”

Words to savor as I head indoors.