

SYCAMORE TREES

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MY CHILDREN LIKE TO PLAY an age-old game with me called Why? I'll tell them, for instance, that I need them to finish breakfast, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say so that you receive adequate nutrition and hydration, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say because as your parent I feel obligated to protect your health, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say partly because I love you and partly because of evolutionary imperatives baked into my biology, and they'll say, "Why?" And I'll say because the species wants to go on, and they'll say, "Why?"

And I'll pause for a long time before saying, "I don't know. I guess I believe, in spite of it all, that the human enterprise has value."

And then there will be a silence. A blessed and beautiful silence will spread across the breakfast table. I might even see a kid pick up a fork. And then, just as the silence seems ready to take off its coat and stay awhile, one of my kids will say, "Why?"

When I was a teenager, I used the why game as a way of establishing that if you dig deep enough, there is no why. I reveled in nihilism. More than that, I liked being certain about it. Certain that everyone who believed life had inherent meaning was an idiot. Certain that meaning is just a lie we tell ourselves to survive the pain of meaninglessness.

A while back, my brain started playing a game similar to the why game. This one is called What's Even the Point.

There's an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem I've quoted in two of my novels and will now quote again, because I've never come across anything that describes my depressive blizzards so perfectly. "That chill is in the air," the poem begins, "Which the wise know well, and have even learned to bear. / This joy, I know, / Will soon be under snow."

I'm in an airport in late 2018 when suddenly I feel that chill in the air. What's even the point? I'm about to fly to Milwaukee on a Tuesday afternoon, about to herd with other moderately intelligent apes into a tube that will spew a truly astonishing amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in order to transport us from one population center to a different one. Nothing that anyone has to do in Milwaukee really matters, because nothing really matters.

When my mind starts playing What's Even the Point, I can't find a point to making art, which is just using the finite resources of our planet to decorate. I can't find a point to planting gardens, which is just inefficiently creating food that will sustain our useless

vessels for a little while longer. And I can't find a point to falling in love, which is just a desperate attempt to stave off the loneliness that you can never truly solve for, because you are always alone "way down in the dark which is you," as Robert Penn Warren put it.

Except it's not a darkness. It's much worse than that. When my brain plays What's Even the Point, what actually descends upon me is a blizzard of blinding, frozen white light. Being in the dark doesn't hurt, but this does, like staring at the sun. That Millay poem refers to "the eye's bright trouble." It seems to me that the bright trouble is the light you see the first time you open your eyes after birth, the light that makes you cry your first tears, the light that is your first fear.

What's even the point? All this trial and travail for what will become nothing, and soon. Sitting in the airport, I'm disgusted by my excesses, my failures, my pathetic attempts to forge some meaning or hope from the materials of this meaningless world. I've been tricking myself, thinking there was some reason for all of it, thinking that consciousness was a miracle when it's really a burden, thinking that to be alive was wondrous when it's really a terror. The plain fact, my brain tells me when it plays this game, is that the universe doesn't care if I'm here.

"Night falls fast," Millay wrote. "Today is in the past."

The thing about this game is that once my brain starts playing it, I can't find a way to stop. Any earnest defense I try to mount is destroyed instantaneously by the searing white light, and I feel like the only way to survive life is to cultivate an ironic detachment from it. If I can't be happy, I at least want to be cool. When my brain is playing What's Even the Point, hope feels so flimsy and naïve—especially in the face of the endless outrages and horrors of human life. What kind of mouth-breathing jackass looks at the state of human experience and responds with anything other than absolute despair?

I stop believing in the future. There's a character in Jacqueline Woodson's novel *If You Come Softly* who says that he looks into the future and sees only "this big blank space where I should be." When I think of the future, I start to only see the big blank space, the whyless bright terror. As for the present, it hurts. Everything hurts. The pain ripples beneath my skin, bone-shocking. What's the point of all this pain and yearning? Why?

Despair isn't very productive. That's the problem with it. Like a replicating virus, all despair can make is more of itself. If playing What's Even the Point made me a more committed advocate for justice or environmental protection, I'd be all for it. But the white light of despair instead renders me inert and apathetic. I struggle to do anything. It's hard to sleep, but it's also hard not to.

I don't want to give in to despair; I don't want to take refuge in the detached ridicule of emotion. I don't want to be cool if cool means being cold to or distant from the reality of experience.

Depression is exhausting. It gets old so fast, listening to the elaborate prose of your brain tell you that you're an idiot for even trying. When the game is being played, I feel certain it will never end. But that is a lie, like most certainties. Now always feels infinite and never is. I was wrong about life's meaninglessness when I was a teenager, and I'm wrong about it now. The truth is far more complicated than mere hopelessness.

Believe. My friend Amy Krouse Rosenthal once told me to look at the word and be awed by it. See how it contains both be and live. We were eating lunch together, and after telling me about how much she liked the word believe, the conversation drifted off toward family or work, and then out of nowhere, she said, "Believe! Be live! What a word!"

Etymology dictionaries tell me that *believe* comes from Proto-Germanic roots meaning "to hold dear" or "to care." I like that almost as much as Amy's etymology. I must choose to believe, to care, to hold dear. I keep going. I go to therapy. I try a different medication. I meditate, even though I despise meditation. I exercise. I wait. I work to believe, to hold dear, to go on.

One day, the air is a bit warmer, and the sky is not so blindingly bright. I'm walking through a forested park with my children. My son points out two squirrels racing up an immense American sycamore tree, its white bark peeling in patches, its leaves bigger than dinner plates. I think, *God, that's a beautiful tree.* It must be a hundred years old, maybe more.

Later, I'll go home and read up on sycamores and learn that there are sycamore trees alive today that date back more than three hundred years, trees that are older than the nation that claims them. I'll learn that George Washington once measured a sycamore tree that was nearly forty feet in circumference, and that after deserting the British Army in the eighteenth century, brothers John and Samuel Pringle lived for over two years in the hollowed-out trunk of a sycamore tree in what is now West Virginia.

I'll learn that twenty-four hundred years ago, Herodotus wrote that the Persian king Xerxes was marching his army through a grove of sycamore trees when he came across one of "such beauty that he was moved to decorate it with golden ornaments and to leave behind one of his soldiers to guard it."

But for now I'm just looking up at that tree, thinking about how it turned air and water and sunshine into wood and bark and leaves, and I realize that I am in the vast, dark shade of this immense tree. I feel the solace of that shade, the relief it provides. And that's the point.

My son grabs my wrist, pulling my gaze from the colossal tree to his thin-fingered hand. "I love you," I tell him. I can hardly get the words out.

I give sycamore trees five stars.