PAUL KINGSnorth

BEAST
It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly at its hem.

Annie Dillard
front of an altar in the presence of something greater than ourselves, then we are sensing the animal shift and turn beneath our feet. Then it is calling us home.

Or perhaps it is hungry.

St Cuthbert was called to be a hermit on Lindisfarne. This was more than a thousand years ago. There were only small wooden huts there then, and the wind and the wild sea and everything that lived in the wild sea. Cuthbert went out there to the monastery, but the monastery was not far enough and he was called out further. He rowed to an empty island, where he ate onions and the eggs of seabirds and stood in the sea and prayed while sea otters played around his ankles. He lived there alone for years, but then he was called back. The King of Northumbria came to him with some churchmen, and they told him he had been elected Bishop of Lindisfarne and they asked him to come back and serve.

There’s a Victorian painting of the king and the hermit. Cuthbert wears a dirty brown robe and has one calloused hand on a spade. The king is offering him a bishop’s crosier. Behind him, monks kneel on the sands and pray he will accept it. Behind them are the beached sailboats that brought them to the island. The air is filled with swallows. Cuthbert’s head is turned away from the king, he looks down at the ground and his left hand is held up in a gesture of refusal. But he didn’t refuse, in the end. He didn’t refuse the call. He went back.

We head out because the emptiness negates us. We leave the cities and we go to the wild high places to be dissolved and to be small. We live and die at once, the topsoil is washed away and the rock is exposed and it is not possible to play the games anymore. Now I am exposed rock. Like Cuthbert, I have been washed clean. What do I see?

I wonder if she misses me. I wonder if she remembers me. I wonder if she can walk yet, or speak. Has there been a first word? Perhaps she needs me. Perhaps I should go to her. Would that be the right thing? How do I know what the right thing would be? I look at it now, I have a year’s distance, I look at it now and I see myself illuminated from behind, walking away from light and into light. I was the questing hero and the treasure would be mine, and when I came back with it, when I came back changed, they would see that change even in the way I carried myself as I approached over the hill. Everything about me was different now, they would see this and a great joy would rise up in them, and when I reached them they would welcome me back, wiser and better, a better person, and they would forgive everything. They would forgive everything and everything would be better, and I would be better. That was how it would work. That is how it will work, when I see them again. Yes. I am sure of it.

The storm isn’t abating. If anything, it’s getting worse. The gap is getting bigger, it’s crashing around up there now, it’s coming apart, it’s all going to come apart and then what, then what? I’m going to have to go up there. It’s dangerous, I don’t know what might happen if this keeps up. It’s not safe in here. I’m going to have to go up there. If I don’t do something now, the whole roof is going to co
survived. I could still breathe and I had not bled to death in the night. How did ribs work? I didn’t know anything about medicine. Did they just heal? I knew that bones would heal themselves in time. Maybe if I didn’t touch them they would recover.

I looked down at my knee. That looked worse. It had swollen into a great yellow and black ball and it felt like it was burning from within. It was splayed outwards at an angle it should not have been able to bend at and I couldn’t put any weight on it. How would I walk? Was it broken?

I didn’t know anything outside the miracle of my life. It mattered only that I was there. Here I was. Here I was alive and standing and breathing. Now I needed to eat and I needed to drink and I probably needed to do something about my knee as well. That was going to mean walking. That was going to mean walking from the bed over to the table and the chair and the cupboard in which I felt there would be food. By the cupboard on the floor was what looked like a jerry can of water. I could see that the can was about half full. The true power of my thirst hit me as I looked at it. I could not remember ever being this thirsty.

I pushed myself away from the wall as if I were pushing a boat out into a lake. I swayed for a moment and stumbled I went down hard onto my left leg and a great sheet of pain shot up through the left side of my body. I screamed and flailed my arms in the air to keep my balance and I rocked back onto my right side but I stayed upright. I steadied myself and then I began to walk. I had to put some weight on my left leg as I moved and every time I did I would screw up my face involuntarily and try to keep from crying out though there was no-one to hear me. I could have screamed to hell and no-one would have heard me but I would not let myself. I kept walking stumbling towards the wall. It seemed to take much longer than it must have taken and I got there. I collapsed in the chair and rested the weight of my upper body on the table.

From the chair I could just reach out and open the cupboard. In the cupboard I found a cracked china bowl of soft potatoes some dried beans in a plastic bag a loaf of bread a pile of teabags a packet of painkillers and two big bars of chocolate. When I saw the chocolate my heart leaped. Sugar and water. I wanted sugar and water so much. I took out the bars of chocolate and the pills. I dragged the jerry can of water over to the table and opened it and poured water into an old blue mug on the tabletop. I drank and drank four or five or six mugfuls. I took four painkillers and then I unwrapped one of the bars of chocolate. I ate it deliberately slowly. I felt the sugar slide across my tongue and down my throat and set my body running. Then I drank two more mugs of water and sat in the chair at the table and breathed steadily and gently.

After a while the pain in my head began to subside and the throbbing died down a bit. The pains in my knee and my chest didn’t change but they were less of a problem if I sat still. I decided that my chest would heal itself if I just left it alone. I didn’t know if that was true but I had nothing else to tell myself. There was nobody here to help me and I could not go looking for help. Where would I go? I didn’t know anything about that. Nothing was clear. I was here and this was my problem and that was all.

But I knew I would have to do something about my leg if I was going to be able to walk properly. A splint was the only thing I could think of. I sat at the table and looked through the window at the sky in the yard. It was pure white. The air was hot and muggy as if a storm was coming. Everything was still and quiet. I sat and thought about splints. What was a splint exactly and how did it work? As far as I knew I needed a stick. I supposed I needed a stick as long as my leg and something to strap it to my leg with. Some rope. That sounded right. There was clearly nothing like that in this room. If I wanted a stick and some rope I would have to go outside.

When I found the strength and inclination I hauled myself to my feet again and I got myself to
the door the same way I had got myself to the table. I was mastering this slow and strange way of walking already. A body will adapt to anything. I got myself to the door and I swung it open and hobbled out into the yard outside. There was an impression of whiteness and stillness. It was hot out here as well. Hot and muggy and still and the sky was a uniform white across the farmyard and over the top of the silent ash trees and up to the moor. A ripped tarpaulin a steel ladder and several plastic bags lay in the centre of the yard. I turned myself around and looked up at the roof of the house I had been sleeping in. A sheet of corrugated iron was hanging off. There was a big gap in the roof.

It was so still. I stood in the warmth in the white warmth breathing. I had worked out just how much breath I could take in and ease out without my chest screaming. My breath was all I could hear. I stood in the centre of the yard breathing slowly and steadily surrounded by ripped tarpaulin and plastic bags. The door of the house was open and the sky was white. There was white everywhere. Things drifted into my head and out again. Words and offerings cravings and needs all of them tugging me around demanding that I follow them. I let them come in and roll out again roll on into the whiteness without me. I didn’t know what any of this was. I stood breathing in breathing out watching it all come in and all roll out in the silence of the still trees and the empty weight of the stone beneath and around me.

In the barn on the other side of the farmyard I found a frayed stretch of blue nylon rope and a broken handle from an old broom or rake. I used the handle as a walking stick on my way back to the house and found it made the journey easier. Inside I leaned on the door until it closed and then I sat down on the edge of the bed. I wondered what I should do. Do I just strap the handle to my leg? I supposed it was that simple. It was slightly shorter than my leg and that seemed to be about right. But my leg would not straighten. It bent outwards at the knee and the knee would not bend without terrible pain.

It was agony. I tied the blue rope tight around the top of my thigh and then I wound it in a spiral down both my leg and the stick pulling it tight as I did so. I thought I was going to die it was so painful but I would not scream. This was my mission this was my pride I would not scream I would do this without screaming. By the time it was done I was sweating and shaking. I lay back down on the bed and hauled my splinted leg up onto the mattress. The leg was shaking and my hands were shaking but I felt heroic. Was I supposed to sleep with it on? I wondered. How long should it be on for? Was this right? Had I made things worse? I didn’t know anything. But I looked at my leg and through the pain I could see that it was straighter than it had been. I hoped that was right. It was too late now.

I lay there letting the pain and the shaking subside letting the sugar run through me and the water do its work. It felt like morning. I had images in my head. Shapes but no names. People feelings fear and anger and shame and purity and wonder all of them making shapes inside me. The shapes came the shapes come the people come and go. I am coming and going rising and falling with all of it around me. I know so little here I know nothing. My name is Edward my name is Edward Buckmaster there are circles around me I am a stone dropped into a pool. Something has happened I am in pain I am still in pain. Someone is waiting for me where the moor ends. I think there is much that I do not see.

It would be impossible for me to guess how much time passed in this way. Every day was the same and this was how it had always been. Every day in this stone room with the table and chair with the cupboard and the window with the white heat outside and around me. I was here and perhaps had always been here or perhaps had never been here before but I didn’t think much about
against the trunk of the ancient yew in the churchyard. From there I could see out onto the lane to the place where I had seen it and for some way on either side. If it came back here I would not miss it.

The yew must have been centuries old it was hollow at the centre and the wood I was leaning on had been twisted and gnarled by the ages. Its green needles were thick above me its berries scarlet. I drank more water. I said nothing to myself or to the tree or to anyone I could dream of or think about. I just sat and watched the lane and the hedges and the fields and nothing happened for hours or what I thought must have been hours. I had no watch and so time was nothing not even a concept time was nothing and nothing happened. When you sit like this you realise that nothing has its own energy that it moves that nothing can happen like an event or an episode. Nothingness extends itself emptiness moves and when you stare into it things happen to you. I sat with my back against the yew and I looked across the churchyard wall over to the lane. Inside me the worm was still coiling though it was moving more sluggishly since I had settled down.

At the end of the hedge where it curled around the corner of the lane and disappeared out of my sight was a tree. It must have been fairly young it had a thin trunk and its slender angular branches hung over the lane. There were no leaves on it so it was hard for me to tell what it was. Maybe a beech maybe an oak. If you sit looking at anything for long enough then everything else fades from your vision and all you have is what you are staring at. I was staring at a small knot above the biggest branch on this tree. Its trunk was black and it was bare in the white heat and suddenly I saw what terrible things trees are. They sprout up from the Earth they reach out in all directions they reach out for you they will smother you they will never stop growing and dividing and colonising. They are so fecund there is no stopping them chop them down burn them they always come back up they stretch to the sky these thin green fingers they are indescribable. They are just waiting there waiting everywhere for us to sit and then they will come back and they will grow over everything they will suck it all in and take it up to the sky in their thin fingers. Their roots will wrap around all that we were and our lives will rott down in their litter and theirs will be a silent Earth of roots and leaves and thin grasping and there will be no place for us in their world at all.

Then I remembered a man who would go out every morning and look at his trees. I didn’t know who he was or where I remembered this from but it felt like a memory and it came to me as I stared across at this tree in the lane. He was an old man he wore a tweed jacket and a flat cap and he planted trees. Perhaps they were fruit trees. I remembered that this man whenever I passed he would be in his garden walking slowly between the trees shuffling between them and inspecting them looking at every leaf turning the blossoms over smelling them sometimes. What goes on in the head of a man who looks at trees like that? He did it for years perhaps he had always done it perhaps he is still there doing it now. What went on in the head of someone who could do that same circuit every day for years forever? Why couldn’t I do that? Who was he that I was not? Today the thought of his circuit the thought of his silent circuit of the trees filled me with horror. How much I hated trees how much I feared things that grew. I was surrounded by trees surrounded by things that grew surrounded by this horrifying green abundance and it all wanted to swallow me and it was so silent so slow it spoke no language I could understand. How I hated it how I hated it and how I wanted to run.

I stopped looking at the tree. I found myself back in the churchyard leaning against the yew but now the church seemed to loom behind me like some presence. Now that I was aware of it I couldn’t put it beyond me I wanted to turn to look at it to make sure it wasn’t moving towards me coming to claim me. Now the church felt like a threat. What if God was a tyrant? The Bible’s God
never looked at me i want it to see me. when i can look into its eyes then i will know.

the potato is disgusting my mouth is cracked and dry like glasspaper why did i eat a raw potato what a stupid thing to do. i gather up the rest of the tubers clutching them to my body to stop myself from dropping them and i carefully follow the wall of the house around to the door and i go through the door and shut it. i will light a fire and heat water and boil the potatoes and mash them. i drop the potatoes onto the tabletop where they roll about and come to a rest i find some paper in the bottom of the cupboard and twist it up and put it in the bottom of the stove i break up some dry sticks lying next to the stove and pile them in a pyramid on top of the paper. then i look around for matches. there is one matchbox and it is empty. i go through all the cupboards i look in all the corners i look everywhere there are no matches and there are no lighters i can’t light a fire. i’m starving and the cloud is pressing in and the table is covered with muddy raw potatoes and i can’t light a fire. i am furious about this to be here in all of this i kick the stove so hard that i bruise my toes on the solid black iron then i lunge at the tabletop pick up a potato and hurl it through the window. the glass smashes with a delicious sound for a second i feel guilty and expect to be told off but then i realise i will never be told off and i pick up another potato and throw it through the window as well. there are twelve potatoes left i pick them up slowly and carefully and i aim using all of my concentration and i use the twelve potatoes to knock almost all of the glass out of the window frame. when all of the potatoes are outside in the cloud and only tiny knives of glass remain embedded in the cracked putty i have a sense of pride. now the cloud is curling into the room.

i hate potatoes anyway i don’t have time for potatoes now. i have broken the window there is nowhere to hide everything is outside and inside now. since everything is in the cloud. there is no reason to be in here there is nothing in here for me there has never been anything in here for me. i want to look into its yellow eyes.

i look down at my feet since i was woken by the scream i have been walking around with my boots unlaced i bend down and i tie them up tightly and then i double knot them. i stand up and stare through the broken window at the cloud. what am i to do now. in a shoe shop a woman is giving me a lolly. it’s red. i am a polite and patient little boy i have broken the window and i enjoyed it. why am i not afraid of this thing. it came looking for me here it came hunting me why else would it be here. it came for me and it took account of me and then it left. i’m not afraid of it why am i not afraid of it. i suppose it could pounce and kill me instantly. no.

when i have tied my boots i go through the door out into the yard again i don’t take anything with me there is nothing to take with me. i stand listening in the cloud it moves around me like it is alive this cloud i stretch out my arm and i can just see my hand i rise up into the air and i keep rising with my hands outstretched either side of me up through the cloud up and up through the solid hill of cloud until i rise above it. all is blue up here all is so blue and the great yellow ball of fire in the sky is coming down on me and i look down onto this great rolling carpet of cloud and through it i see the yellow eyes of the cat and down i go i fly down through the cloud and i stand in front of the cat and it looks at me right into my eyes. yes. that is what i thought.

but how am i going to find the cat. where do i go how can i possibly know anything here. when i can just see my hand how could i possibly walk without stumbling without becoming lost forever if i walk out there surely i can never come back surely i will never find my way back to this place. but what do i have here anyway a broken window an empty matchbox a cold fire no food. the cloud is in the house now. i am going to walk and i am going to find it.

perhaps i have been standing here for an hour.
wish i had a lighter here i wish i had some matches i would love a cigarette i am rolling a cigarette at a bus stop golden virginia i only buy small packs because i’m not really a smoker i take out a green paper and a pinch of tobacco and i pull the tobacco apart and spread it out evenly and then i begin to roll the paper between my fingers and thumbs i never use filters. i lick the edges delicately and glue the cigarette down i love this ritual i take a yellow plastic lighter from my coat pocket and i spark up and the first breath is always the best is really the only one worth having it lifts me up and i fly.

i see that there will be a time yes a time will come again not for lifetimes but it will come. the woods will be flooded as they were and hung with moss and we will take boats through them flat wooden boats and there will be no-one full enough to believe that any of the real things of the world could be counted or named. we will hear again the sound of the oars through the water and the sound that evil makes when it plays at being good and coming up from the ground we will be only what we were naked as in the old dance on the plains before we toppled the king and fell with him. down we fell down to where it first began but even here he can see us he can always see us there is no escape from him. hide in the mountain and he will find you hide in the forest and he will find you hide in the grave and he will find you. he will find you and pull you apart you will be torn into parts and those parts buried and a season will pass before a flower will grow from the soil you were sunk in. and that flower will become you born again complete but not the same and you will sit up on your bed in the tent on the fringe of the brown wood rubbing your crown three white hairs in your shock of black and a limp where there was none and you will think of whoever is there or no-one at all you will ask lover what has happened to me?

there, the noise again, the cat again, there.

i think it is closer now perhaps it is coming from the same direction as before it is hard for me to tell now that the road and my expedition into this building have disorientated me but i stand up when i hear the noise i drop the cigarette butt and i turn around because it is coming from behind me. it is still there. yes it is closer it sounds throatier when it was circling me in the yard the noise was so loud i could hear its breath in my mind i could see its mouth open the pink wetness in there.

it is important that i pull myself together. this is not a game i have work to do. now i face the source of the sound and i begin again to walk towards it. i decide i will not walk around any obstacle in my way instead i will walk over it i will not be distracted i climb over three picnic tables and then reach the back wall of the garden which is stone. i climb up the stone wall and vault over it onto heather moorland. the call comes again it is straight ahead now you see this is the way to do things a straight line to the goal i keep walking i plough through the heather though there is no path i clamber over small rocks and some large ones i am heading uphill. the call comes again still straight ahead i laugh and i begin running slowly i bounce through the heather i keep bouncing like this until my right foot lands in a trench i didn’t see and then i twist and fall heavily onto the ground. it’s fine i’m not hurt i lie on the ground with my face pressed up against the heather there is the sound again but now it seems further away. just inches away from my head is a rock as big as my fist i was lucky. she is standing looking over the garden in the sun i come up behind her with the rock in my hand and i hit the back of her skull hard with it twice her head cracks and she falls to the ground then i take the child and hold it under the water until it stops kicking. i love you she says i love you too i say because you have to say that. then she puts her arms around me and we go back inside the house for dinner.

it was further away that time this is not good enough. i get up and i keep walking in the direction of the sound but i must have been walking for twenty minutes or so now and i have not heard it
I do not want to see anything there is nothing I can do now I have done everything I can. There is a knife on top of the stove I pick up the knife and I run across the room to where my sleeping bag is strewn on the floor I pick it up with the pillow and I take them into a corner where I cannot see the back windows and I climb into my sleeping bag and pull it over my head. I zip it up as high as it will go and I take the knife down into the darkness of the bag with me I just wish it would stop screaming I cannot stand that noise not anymore that is not my noise not anymore. It is dark in here I am glad that I brought my knife I stretch my legs out into the depths of the sleeping bag and they do not touch the end I stretch them down further still they do not touch it I begin to shuffle down the bag but I do not find the end I keep shuffling in the darkness on and on I hold a knife in my hand a knife is always important everyone should have a knife with them because you never know what you will meet everybody used to carry knives now they won’t let you the new dangers cannot be dispatched so easily I get down onto my hands and knees and I crawl down the tunnel into the darkness I keep crawling it is damp in here there is damp under my hands and my knees and there is damp in the air in the distance I hear the scream of a cat it is still out there it is still circling me it is circling the house circling the yard circling the moor round and round round and round you measure a circle beginning anywhere I keep crawling away from the noise I must get away from that noise from that thing it wants to eat me I keep crawling along the tunnel it is damp and now I feel things growing beneath my hands there is fur or moss or something beneath them on the floor of the tunnel the floor itself is soft it gives when I crawl it is warm here in the tunnel down I go along I go through the red darkness for hours and miles I go on my hands and knees the soft and warm and damp I cannot hear the cat now not anymore only this rushing noise I hear a light breaking over a green hill the tunnel opens out onto a yellow plain in front of me is a low stone wall I cross the wall I stand up and I begin walking towards the green hill I walk and walk and all around me swallows dive and speak and a gentle wind rolls over me in the middle of the plain is a great black tree it bends down towards me I bow my head to it as I pass I stop walking until I reach the hill and then I climb gently up the grass there is no heather no bracken no bilberries but anyway I am not hungry there is no hunger here I cannot think what hunger would be I walk up the hill I keep walking I realise I have no shoes or socks on the grass tickles me the swallows dive the wind rolls I reach the top of the hill there is a circle of low stones in the centre of its flat summit I walk across to the circle and enter it in the middle of the circle a woman sits she wears a red dress she is beautiful hello again I say I have been waiting a long time for you she says I am so thirsty would you fetch me water I have no water I say I don’t know how I came here find me water she says no I am busy I say can’t you see not this time she says not this time you are not busy fetch me water you may not cross the wall again until I have drunk I look back but there is no wall only the tree perhaps the tree has water I roll down the hill and walk back to the tree and begin to climb I climb right to the top I sit on the highest branch which bends beneath me but I do not fall water I say I keep saying the word water water water water water water water I twine my arms around the branch and dangle my feet down I swing swing swing I stay like this for days if I look down perhaps I will see water the land grows dark there is darkness and now there is a sound the sound of a running stream in another three days the sun begins to rise I cannot feel my arms I pull them I yank them hard they come free from the branch with a jerk and I fall crashing through the tree I hit branches on the way down I am bruised and cut I hit the ground I go through the ground I fall into a high bright cavern and all around me is water crashing over crystal rocks all of the colours of the world are here so this is what water is I have fallen into water I let it take me along and I listen to it speak drink drink drink drink drink the river takes me out onto the hilltop I collapse into the stones and here is the woman in the red dress she
drinks and drinks and then smiles at me it wasn’t so hard she says was it now you see what can be found i don’t see i say i don’t see anything and i want to go home but you have seen the water now she says i am scared i say of course you are she says of course you are you are such a young boy just look at what they did to you sometimes i feel like crying i say i am scared it comes in at me and jabs me i must be alert against it what might happen if it came in she says yes of course it is fine it is fine it is what you should feel it is alright to cry but i don’t want to cry i say i want to kill somebody no she says you want to cry you are so young and they never told you look drink the water dissolves it and so i drink until i am quenched and then i kiss her no she says not this time there is the wall now go i touch her arm it is very hot in here i walk between two stones i step over the low wall i pick up my knife i drop my knife this is not that sort of world i listen but there is no sound i pull my head out of my sleeping bag and breathe the air of the room and i listen and there is no sound i don’t think there has been a sound for weeks i sit up slowly i roll my sleeping bag down my body and step out of it there is a sound now but a low sound a gentle one i walk across to where the table and the mattress are pushed up against the window and i heave the table away and pull the mattress down onto the floor outside the window the pale cloud is thinner and now it is shifting and heaving in a low breeze that has arisen here i can see the wall of a building across the yard now it is gone again now it reappears the cloud is moving the wind is moving the cloud around i walk to the door and unbolt it and pull it open i step out onto the damp cobbles of the yard in my bare feet the breeze plays on my face the cloud dances around me my feet are warm on the cold stone there are gaps in the cloud now sudden and clean i see the gate and then the fence a broken roof a stone wall a scrap of tarpaulin an upturned tub a c