

Nocturnes

The Top Ten Wonders of the World:

All manufactured optics, including spectacles and contact lenses and especially the increasingly rare Contax II rangefinder with a Zeiss Sonnar 50-millimeter 1.5 lens.

The carburetor, the train, the act of locomotion.

An automatic, self-winding watch.

A piano, a metronome. Or the *Pietà*.

Moore's Law and the grains of sand which enforce it.

A wineglass or comb.

The art of the locksmith: key, tumbler, hasp.

Antibiotics (and the condom).

A mast, a shovel, indoor plumbing, & electricity.

The Gateway Arch in St. Louis; the Pantheon in Rome; the Taj Mahal; The Autobahn and the Panama Canal and the Hoover Dam; the Brooklyn Bridge. Also the Sears Tower, which started out as a catalog.

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On Insomnia:

It keeps him up at night.

It's also useful for making observations in the dark.

Exercise, he knows, is the best thing for sleep. The mind requires exercise lest it fall asleep. The body requires exercise lest it not.

A fine tapestry, like a disintegrating marriage, is filled with thousands and thousands of knots.

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A Brief History of Creation:

Adam, to the lovely Eve, who does not yet need to shave her legs, she's so brand-new:

Lie down with dogs, get up with fibs.

Eve's reply:

Which guys did you name Dog?

Adam, cocking one hip to show off the length of this new penis, and pointing to the sky:

There. See? It flies.

Eve's reply:

Bird, I think. It's more jazzy.

On Travel:

Everybody takes it far too lightly. In the old days one sailed across the water and tried not to sink. In the new days one flies across the heavens, often unnecessarily, with people who do not fit well into their seats.

It does not comfort Stephen to know that aircraft blankets, which typically warm him on cold transatlantic flights, are Flame-Retardant.

On Grief:

The Psalms of David are helpful.

Grief at least is sweeter than Despair. Rage, far worse, is driven by Shame.

Human nature is not at issue. What is at issue is the ability—desire?—of men and women to restrain that nature.

Grief is preferable to Despair if one has somebody who understands the agent and the consequences of that Grief.

If one does not have so understanding a partner—or if both are grieving simultaneously—they become, Grief and Despair, one and the same.

No light without fire; no smoke without ash; no fire without material with which to commingle and burn. Here beginneth the lesson.

On America's Favorite Artist, Tiffany:

She's certainly not a lamp.

Nor a windowpane.

A trick: any photographer will shoot through a windowpane.

Pane/Pain: it's a rule.

On Terror:

Like Electricity, like Power, it is a dangerous thing. When it strikes, it strikes always from the sky. It makes the genitals hot.

Why do Men rape Women? Because they can.

On the Road to Hell:

The Road to Hell is paved with good intentions and laced with mines. That's mine. No, that's mine. Mine mine mine.

When one steps on a mine, and when one is lucky, the mine takes only the leg which permitted the foot to step on the road paved with good intentions. What one might otherwise call a *Wrong Turn*.

In a minefield, it is always difficult to turn back, especially if one's leg has been blown to smithereens.

The lead singer of a popular band is a man who sometimes rents a house in the city of Chicago. Stephen met him once at a political party fundraiser. After a moment, and after realizing Stephen was not a celebrity, the coked-up rock star turned his back and rejoined the party.

Democracy in action always forms first a committee by which to act.

On Solicitation:

He doesn't mind the more traditional sort, wherein one person typically leases a right of passage to his or her body.

What he cannot abide is the latest permutation: the dreaded Telephone Solicitor. Consequently Stephen never answers the telephone. The Telephone Solicitor never leaves a message. For a while there was a lot of ringing until Stephen turned the ringer off.

You're it, he used to say, playing tag.

The Prostitute, naturally, uses the body. The Telephone Solicitor—like Milton's Lucifer, whispering to Eve—relies strictly upon the ear. Other professions which rely heavily on the physical and material nature of the body?

Physicians, Athletes, Ballerinas, Bricklayers and Other Common Laborers. Soldiers, who are trained to kill it.

Once, at a grocery store, Stephen watched—and listened to—a Call Girl in front of the milk schedule an appointment.

Around the world, five hundred, said the girl, who had flame-red hair, picking up her milk. A grand for the night.

Am not—

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The Catechism of Stephen Brings:

One sees through a glass darkly by way of optical lenses now orbiting in space. The darkness, of course, is the space—the space broadcast between that which is perceived and that which is revealed.

Divine Intervention, like the Old Forms of God, has become a thing destroyed by the Wickedness of Man and the Wonders of Modern Technology. After Darwin, after Freud and Jung, after the splitting of the Atom, after Elvis and the Discovery of the Human Genome, God is no longer the presiding moral authority. With knowledge comes responsibility. Free will is meaningless unless one is willing to exercise it.

Stephen believes to have faith in humanity is also to have faith in God. God did not make Adam in his own image. Adam made God. Adam made God in order not to be so lonely.

At the time it must have seemed a bold discovery—like art, like

fire, or the rib cage and the vital organs it protects. Like song. Life from Life, the song goes. One God from one God.

In Stephen's mind God exists so long as Life exists. Consequently, Stephen believes in God because he believes in Life. He believes in the necessity for the absolute and fundamental Forgiveness of Sins.

If God can do anything, can God make a rock so big he cannot lift it?

A tautological question. Frivolous.

If God can do anything, can he split an atom? Can he milk a goat? Can he return a lost boy to his mother and his father? Can he return to the some hundreds of millions of this past century alone their broken hearts repaired? Their hair, shaved off; their teeth, forcibly plucked—can he give that back? Can he make warm the hundreds of thousands of Siberian graves? Can he repair the hymen of Nanking? Can he, like any modern government, rewrite History?

Stephen loves God because Stephen loves his fellow men and women. Even Jesus got to go back home. Stephen loves God because, despite its agonies, what are the alternatives?

In this manner Stephen Brings is a God-fearing man.

Even Jesus, the Son of God, got to go back home.

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On Kidnapping:

A kidnapped child is not a foundling, like Moses.

The tradition nonetheless goes back a ways. Pluto stole Persephone from Demeter, thus inventing winter. Cold, ice in the heart.

Satan stole Christ, but only for a few days. Just a little visit. God was lucky?

You make your own luck, some people say, usually those who no longer require it. Jack Welch, Rupert Murdoch, that type of guy.

Pick yourself up, Boy. Get on with it!

Lindbergh, that was a famous case. The Spirit of St. Louis and the poor immigrant accused, and consequently executed, and the baby who never came back home, anyway.

How does one ransom the disappeared?

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The Red Cross:

In Phoenix, a Latina and her two young children were visiting a military air show. Her husband was stationed then on a carrier in the Adriatic. At the air show, the Blue Angels were on display.

There was a B-52 bomber, the wingspan of death, parked on the tarmac. You have to see it to believe it.

The woman's eldest child, a four-year-old boy, stared up at the giant wings and told his mother he had to go poop. The woman took the four-year-old boy to the row of Porta-Potties lined up like soldiers.

The woman set her new baby girl asleep in her car carrier in the shade of the Porta-Potty. She went inside with her son to help him go poop. She held onto him in the dark, foul-smelling latrine and assured him gently he would not fall in.

After wiping her son's bottom, after helping him to wiggle into his short green pants, they stepped into the white light of the Phoenix sun—holding hands, blinking, their free hands to their eyes.

The sleeping baby girl was gone.

The mother wept on television.

The son held onto his mother's hand and watched the Blue Angels in the distance. The jet engines made his ears hurt, and he became afraid, the sky ripping open like that, and nobody ever gave the baby back. The young boy's father was contacted on his carrier in the Adriatic by the Red Cross and granted an emergency leave.

Did you see my baby, the woman screamed. Did you see?

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On Pornography:

It's there for all the world to see.

It's the smart bomb descending an Iraqi air shaft leading to a hospital or school. It's Colin Powell's very bloody road to Baghdad. It's the Live Chat and the Gentlemen's Clubs. Whack whack, whack.

It's the nightly news. If it bleeds, it leads. It's a rock star named Slash turning on a groupie. The semen on the abandoned torn skirt in the back of a cab. It's blood and teenagers—the lubricant of inner-city vice—straddling the cracks in the streets and the inside look at the celebrity home and the sexual histories of the members of the House made public.

A stockyard in Amarillo. A camp at Omarska.

By the late 1980s child pornography had virtually been eradicated. Then came the Internet and the world's collective need for porn booted-up and brought it back and children by the thousands all over the globe began to disappear. Even in Rome.

It's the snuff film and the slashed throat and the infant caught on tape.

All roads lead to Rome.

www.rome.org

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On Adoption:

It's possible somebody bought Stephen's son. An infertile couple in London, or Paris. Millions and millions of lire.

That little boy, he's all mine.

Best-case scenario: a happy home filled with toys, possibly a nanny, or au pair. Weekend picnics on the moors or the coast of Normandy—ski trips to the Alps, though probably that would come later, after the boy had grown some.

The thief would have sold Stephen's son to another, who would have in turn sold the boy to either a pornographer or an adoption agency which—lawyers buttoned up inside, and being lawyers—would have arranged the paperwork to sell Stephen's son to a loving family with the means to bear the cost.

Price, in this case, would be no object.

One cannot ransom that which is priceless.

Perhaps Stephen's son was saved? Like this?

Like so many pennies cast upon a broken plate?