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## THE LOUISVILLE REVIEW

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Fenton Johnson

## LIGHT IN AUGUST

Every summer, toward the end of July a day arrives when I'm walking along in mid-afternoon and I realize the light has slipped. Its angle is no longer that of high summer, high and hammering—light that for the past couple of months I've come to take for granted, in my too-human fashion, as the way things will always be. Summer will never end. No one I love will ever die.

Now the angling light signals that the endless summer is ending. In fact I and everyone I love will die. The question is only who will be first to reach the finish line.

And yet I see I have indulged a commonplace misperception, since properly understood there is no finish line. We are creatures of light, sentient bundles of energy moving through the universe, it is of us as we are of it, there is no death, there is only process. Through some Cartesian sleight of hand the brain refuses to perceive this. Instead it cunningly divides the world into dualities. There's a little dab of brain, I'm told, given over to setting boundaries: This is where I end, this is where you begin—me/you, us/them, male/female, light/dark, beginning/end, life/death.

No doubt this illusion is or was necessary for our survival, no matter that it's the basis for murder and mayhem and our egocentric misunderstanding of death as now-you-see-us, now-you-don't. In fact death is only another milepost in the never-ending becoming of what is. Ask your dog—she'll agree; look to the wag in her tail. You don't see her moping about impending doom.

In this particular summer I noticed the slipping light on a walk rendered poignant by the tension of unrequited love. Denied an outlet for my passion, I offered my companion the observation that if I believed in death I'd kill myself. What do you mean? he asked, no doubt casting an uneasy glance at the penknife dangling from my knapsack. All that loss, I answered, all the going away, all the departed. Who could stand it, if he believed death to be the finish line? Not me. I take great affirmation and good cheer knowing we're light from light, true gods from true gods, one form of energy changing into another until billions of years hence when in the entropy of time all our colors will merge and melt into a uniformly still gray, the gray of the paintings that hang in the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

Some years back, under the auspices of *Harper's Magazine*, I moderated a debate held in that chapel. The subject at hand was faith and reason, as false a duality as light and dark or male and female or science and art or life and

death, but one thing had led to another and here we were, with the Pulitzer-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson representing faith and the Nobel-winning physicist Steven Weinberg representing reason and me wondering how I had gotten myself from the hollers of Kentucky into refereeing such (A)ugust company.

I chose the Rothko Chapel as our venue—a mistake. It features works by Mark Rothko, painted in the decade before he took his life in 1970—vast lozenges of a smooth, even gray surrounded by haloes of an almost indiscernibly darker gray hung against the lighter gray of the walls. Their enveloping gray stillness prompts not debate but meditation. They demand that we sit down, shut up, still ourselves to the essence of being, the unbearable gray light-ness of being.

Robinson burned with quiet passion. Weinberg might be the most articulate man with whom I have had the honor of conversing, as was evidenced in that day's debate, in which he, the combative empiricist, set forth the case for faith, then argued with himself while the contemplative Robinson listened.

But we're not yet at the debate, we've just walked into the chapel and are spending a moment looking at Rothko's paintings. Weinberg shook his head. "I love abstract art," he said. "But I just don't get Rothko. What is it with these great blobs of gray." The most delicate of pauses ensued before Robinson said quietly, "It's the moment before creation."

I would have been happy to have ended the debate right there, since to my mind the exchange said all that needed to be said about the debaters' different understandings of the way things are. In *The First Three Minutes* Weinberg wrote, "Even when physicists have gone as far as they can go . . . there seems to be an irreducible mystery that science will not eliminate." Robinson, the contemplative, grasped what he, the empiricist, had not perceived: Stories and art are our means of putting our hearts around the irreducible mystery. Rothko had painted that mystery, a few years before he plunged in.

Among the most brilliant of book titles is William Faulkner's *Light in August*—a novel contained in a phrase. "Memory believes before knowing remembers," Faulkner writes. "Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders . . ." To write poetry or prose is to dwell in the realm of the believers, the people of faith.

Everything is always, as my friend Barry says, most especially us and most especially memory, and before you ask what he'd been smoking, take a walk at eventide in the light in August, the month of plenitude and of loss.