

NIGHT SOUL

(This story appeared first in the anthology *Fathers and Sons*, ed. David Seybold, Grove Weidenfeld, 1992, reprinted Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999. Translated into French [as "Night Soul"] by Bernard Hoepffner, in *La Main de Singe*, No. 8, Seyssel, France, 1993.)

The first night, the man woke to a string of sounds, expelled, quite awful stabs of voice throat-rasped, deliberate, from the crib across the room. So that for a time he felt the person there to be his equal, and he feared for him. In trouble over there, in a small, accurate way the infant is possessed and on his own, and maybe the man can't help his son, maybe he can't do anything about it. It is even part of *him* out of control.

A shallow-sleeping family man who will wake in the middle of the night anyway, he woke to the woman breathing next to him, and to the room in the desert, his eyes opening on the window at the foot of the bed, where the screen was ripped, burst, jagged as a wave with an infinitesimal fire – like steel or flesh – telling him something has gotten in here, an animal, a hand. While the terrible sounds from the crib across the room – *ah, ih, uh, eh* – choked-out, cut-off, not asking for anything, were vowels, he realized. As if this is what you do waking alone: you speak, even if you are not talking yet; for anyhow the room is awake. So that getting out of bed beside the breathing of his wife, he would make a noise the baby would hear – who would want his company, or hers. But these vowels uncannily at work, the child is choking or being taken away or accosting whatever it is, so what's his father doing here in bed? what is he waiting for?

Like a comrade he made his way across the cool bricks, he's with his son in a moment – *flowed* there to him and stands above the crib in whose immaterial depths a blink of the mouth locates the face. Where are his eyes? Darkened, do they stare behind their little lids? They're asleep in some way and distinct from the child that is his, whose mouth moves as the moon in the window above the crib draws a cloud in front of it. The kid's in one piece, thank God, thank the stars, thank the desert, but the sounds begin again, for they were no dream of the man's zig-zagging away through low piñon pines and stunted, ancient-elbowed juniper the way the phone seems to have rung as you wake upon the waste of future and past which dreams are. But where are these sounds coming from if his son was not greeting a predator or giving a name to an intruder? Why, they're just practical sounds the baby's actually practicing which the father hears as if his own good depended on it and will try to answer.

And so it happens that he is learning these sounds, like letting them strike what hasn't yet quite woken up in him: the *ah*, the *ih*. Squeezed off the palate hard, or choking, cut off, not hoarse at all in the dark but blunt, certain, and alone. The man's no clawed intruder but the father here, a witness; ready for anything – to be his son's equal, who is alone and launching these sounds, one that goes far, just the intent of it, while the next, you could swear, sends its breath at some near thing. Hearing is like answering him, even if they are no match for each other. He is to be answered. The man believes in it in the middle of the night. It's what he will tell him one day: answer – not do what they say, but don't not answer. If tongue-tied, at least make a noise. Go *agh*, go *aiee*. Come back at them in a whisper. But don't not answer. Did the man just learn this, it feels so fresh? Seed planted in him in the middle of the night.

For the vowels are brave. They are things more right than words; but, as the man heard them, *there* and *here* are what they apparently say – *ah* and *ih*, a cast and a return; while the next, the *uh*, as in "mother," accepts what belongs to you, to this basic person, it measures just this. So to the man it meant, *What you found*; while the next, the *eh*, as in "again," *stops* what you found and holds it to what it is: *accosts* it; accosts what? the moon moving? a knife of reflected light cut by the ceiling beam? or a memory you can't have all by yourself? As good as an owl whistling in the arroyo, hearing like this, or some fool – hearing *there, here, found, accosting*.

The infant whispered like thought, old things are what he whispers into his thinking. The time has come, vowel cries that are about to come again that the man standing around naked in the middle of the night is learning, they are not to him, they are only what woke him. This creature in the crib talks out loud and with something at stake: but in an order more raw and stately – "*uh, ah, eh, ih, aw*." *He* knows what he's doing – and to his father's ear it is *found, there, accosting, here*, just between the two of them a seesaw sense more *theirs* now, less to be feared.

Though hearing the *aw* sound hard and creaking as a bird, foraging and unconsciously alert, the man made little or nothing of it, and felt free to. So he stepped back so as not to wake the child with his body or familiarity; for if the kid is asleep after all, he could open his eyes that seem hidden by their lids from the darkness and the breathing of the man, and see the man, who now thinks proudly where this is, where they live – a desert state, vast or actually weird – "beloved," he likes to think, who, waking to the gash in the screen enhanced by the moonlight, forgot he already knew how it got ripped. Waking to these godawful sounds and the damaged window screen which his eyes told his brain was part of it, he thought *Animal*, an animal had leapt in out of the desert. But no high-hipped bobcat far from its rock or lost bear cub or snouted coati with a taste for the fruits of the night that jumped out of somebody's truck on the Interstate is going to try a stunt like this. And in his heart like what he knew all along it was of course the same mange- and sore-ridden half-blind dog of yesterday who couldn't bear the noonday sky, the bright ground, and, wanting the shadow of the house, went for the open bedroom window while the family were having lunch.

His son's blood is safe from that dog who wouldn't drink or eat and didn't even roll his eyes up when he brought two dishes in and then brought the baby in to show him this hounded creature, muzzle on the brick, too tired to have rabies or plague, where he had ended up collapsed with one hind leg out, the hide caked with adobe dirt.

A personal sigh has deepened the room, his wife's, and it threatens them with her perspective. She turns. She hears with her body, her mind, declines to talk in her sleep, hears her *husband* if necessary, yet will sleep on until, toward dawn, hearing the baby burst out crying, she will probably get out of bed in one motion, go and take him, hold him and nurse him. So the man knows from her breathing she is not doing any serious hearing of these sounds right now. Which come again in the moonlight, vowels in a whole *new* order, called and attempted, or brave; not crying, but uttered.

Plus the *o-ish aw-ish* one the man hears as *aw* now – vowel five, it's his.

They open to each other without at all getting mixed up together, to his ear like talk he hears in the kitchen of a Hopi farmer, a dog barking outside in the dusty wind of the mesa. Sounds coming your way, stopping short. *What was there is here; and now that it's found we accost it*. At nine months and five days, is his son at it already in a tongue of his own? What does it take? only the breath cut off in his throat that primitively rasps its old use. It goes back into him, a

spirit – a way that's all his. That's what it is: his son's language under cover of night brought here from far away. But the man is the father, he's got too much at stake to let himself believe such things any longer tonight. But has he ever believed them? The *aw* pushes the speaker's lips, he knows them in his sleep. He pushes them across, so self-possessed by the night-time vowels. *There, here, found, accosting*, was where the man came in. But then, *found, there, accosting, here*.

Are you all right? the woman murmurs more or less remote, as if she is thinking of him somewhere else. Mmhm, he says, close to his son. Is it that his wife does so much, that she *feeds* the child? He does not envy her. *What was there is here; and now that it's found we accost it*. Is it a madness in the infant's voice which is only nature? And has the man ever believed such things as these coming to him in the baby's voice? He is aware of a long, winding, affirmative answer but it is going out of him somewhere else and he does not get it. He is going to know his son's language. It is a son's language. You can do that much.

It's changing, though, it's "*eh, uh*" – *accosting, found* – yet the known sounds *ih* and *ah* after them have changed their feeling to *if* and *dark, ih, ah* – with once again that *aw* which is little more than a neighbor sound following from the "dark" *ah* that's almost a stranger, an act. So what the man's getting with *accosting* is: *Only by accosting, you find – and only if dark*.

Thinking it, he can understand it, the baby at nine months old years from such advice which comes best not from the father anyway but from elsewhere, from outside. Is it not from his son at all but *through* his son? – like how the man will speak to the baby (*You're ready for a nap*) but be speaking to his wife, the real other person here? The baby's mouth opening in the dark, or pursed; nursing the old life of these sounds, practicing it. But there's a thing somewhere the *man* has to do. Is it the *aw*? On his breath almost more than his voice, he says back, *eh, uh, ih, ah*.

The moon widening from behind a map of cloud stands harsh. Well, the man might be wrong but it's as if the mind of the probably sleeping infant thinks over what he just heard. There comes a startling new order, "*uh*" before "*eh*" – *found*; yet not *accosting*, but *again*. And *ih, ah*, but not with the feeling of *here, there* or *if dark*, but of a reaching, a stem. And *aw*. Which he thought was him, the father, taken down into what he might once have been – it shows him that these sounds might be not feelings *or* meanings. Does this baby blink at the moon, squint, not know the man leaning over the crib rail looking into the crib at him and the kicked-off blankets; or is he asleep?

The man crossing the room to go back to bed has his theory. It's his way of being crazy about his son, of not completely waking when he's hardly been asleep. The idea is that all this is coming *from* his son – it's not the child waiting to have something to imitate. It's late and not much of a theory, it helps the man hang onto the sounds.

Sleeping *or* waking he will go along with his son, who was asleep surely and the man heard him *talk* in his sleep as if it were himself for years and years. While during the next day the man didn't think of it much at all. For during the day, in overalls, the child watches.

You were up and around last night, she says. The man tells her he might have been sleepwalking the way it felt. You were standing at the crib, she says, did you cover him up? He doesn't think so. She tells him just how tired she was. *Go on*, he says, for she'll hear what he means, they accept her stamina and will try not to waste it. *Go on?* she says, but they agree, she will go on being what she is. You were talking again, she adds, meaning in his sleep. Are you sure? he inquires. Closing in on baby as if there's no difference between what she does and what

the man does is the light of their attention empowered by this chosen desert light let in by windows that belong to them embedded cave-like in huge, sandy-surfaced swells of adobe stucco. The baby, to whom the parents talk, sees them as if they're just talking. The man goes *grrr*, and, suddenly airborne out there at a height of six feet above the ground, the road-runner, their rare, most serious and elusive, long, violently shy, narrow-bodied road-runner, is seen to fly exposed thirty yards across the front of the house. While, closer, against the broad window sash of unfinished oak a zebratail lizard not supposed to be in the area comes into focus unseen by their son, who smiles, as if he's forgotten last night, and brags with a measured *Ha, ha*.

Yet at bedtime you forget that all day you've waited for when he won't be imitating his parents, but sharing a language of his own. And in the man's sleep it is the second night, and at the same hour the baby speaks out, nine months, six days.

And he's there for him in five seconds to find spread upon his son's nose and mouth like a flame of milk the pale seal of night-light from a moon gone no higher than the broad southern sky but ready to go higher hauling indifferently this southwestern sea the desert, and the boy with it. Last night's launched vowelish tries go into each other with a speed of going *somewhere*, it's practice but it's a new night, it's not a *thing* he's saying or some outcry, but soundings. So last night's work is left behind with the man. Not as if he's stuck with it. But as if the names his son needed have now been given – to the neighbor's wolf, the high call of the pallid bat feeding on the ground, faces of parents, the hand he examines in the moonlight with his shadowed eyes, the mobile that sways above an intruder's hand meeting the crib rail, the dog you expelled that the baby would not be surprised to see couched low on the brick floor. These names now made into raw orisons equal what's outside him, and the father can tell from the uninterrupted tone that the speaker is right. Is that it?

And for the instant that the man adds to his theory that what his son learned by hearing himself voice last night he now puts to use, the man nearly sees what he and his wife were really talking about like almost recalling a dream he had on waking – but catches up with his son and with this old, direct way of doing things.

A joint tenderness of the parents – was that it? – the child who knows things from the very beginning? The man is not ashamed to hang onto it and to what he has heard in the night. Was he the intruder? Halfway to meet him he meets the baby's glittering eyes, and he won't back into the shadows. Nice person, he thought his wife murmured. Am I awake the way she is asleep? he thinks. He whispers his son's name: it means that the child has at stake this awful, right way of putting things together. Mammal messages able to evolve privately between beings. The crib a little less dark tonight, his smile asks nothing, not that he be picked up. His eyes follow what he is uttering because it goes somewhere.

When did the vowels grow these lids, these frictions and touches of maturity expelled with them from his palate, almost a *gh* before the *ah*, almost an *m* before the *eh*? The *aw* comes by itself still, but then is *gaw*, terribly alone like a watchman's warning, the *uh* has acquired an m after it, the *ih* finds a *dee* but the speaker is sticking onto the sounds the father learned and thought he knew, more than one sound, and the man hears *lah*, which he puts together with the *dee* to sing without song, and again this *gaw*, like another *go*.

The man, who's keeping up – all he wants is to know what the child knows. The infant isn't your equal, no matter how you try the strength of this talk. The infant is almost not there, dead you might say to this world, not a fit companion. Still, the man's idea is that these sounds now

mix for work, and the child has sent them to a place away from him, and they join what they name or get stored in animals or what-all. Confident they've gone, he returns to the man, knowing him. You find a grin in the dark, and no complaint, no retort of, "You started it; you can pick me up." His baby son is unusual in that he has now closed his eyes, his night's work done. What is the father to do? Touch his wife and wake her? He hears his name but just murmured at a considerable distance.

The brick floor cool as tiles is lower than the outside ground, and he stands at the window by the bed and looks through the ripped screen at the desert risen by another scale entirely. The man was closing in on the infant's way of sounding the distances between here and the life indifferently around him, no matter what the infant *thinks* he's doing. Aren't these older sounds a power that his son might for now give into his father's keeping?

It is the second afternoon when she says, You were whispering to him last night. He was whispering, the man replies. Well, you were, because it kept waking me up, she insists. But it was hard to hear, her husband goes on. But that's why I kept waking up, I had to strain my ears to hear; it wasn't like when you talk in your sleep, if I only got it all, the woman replies. Aw, you were asleep, the man tells her, never asking what she heard him say, though sometimes it sounds like predictions, according to her. You weren't whistling to the owl – were you calling to the ground bat again? she asks in friendship, it didn't sound like you what I heard in my sleep. It wasn't, he says. Maybe you were thinking out loud, she says to her husband. I wish I could, the man laughs. She laughs and then so does the baby, who *says* more than laughs, *ah ah ah*, a baby in daylight. When are you going to fix the screen? she gets in as if this was what she really had in mind – don't do *that* in the middle of the night. *Gah*, he tells his son softly, *guh*; and *la-dee*, he practically whispers from memory.

The child won't answer, it doesn't work like that at this age – won't answer at all for a while. But then the man hears, *Mmuh mmuh* – the two parts it's made of. Is it word from the night shared by son and father now going toward day?, you don't want what you said parroted back. Did you hear that? the woman asks. The man says he believes the baby's putting two things together. What things? she would like to know. This *uh*, he says. What *uh*? Something he's working on, the man reports. They contemplate each other, and contemplate the baby. Well, I thought it was "Mamma," the woman says. Could be, her husband grants. Is it precocious? she wonders addressing him and only him. The man, who might be losing ground, picks his wristwatch off the kitchen table, remembering the screen. What do we really know, he replies. His son says a short *a*, as in *man* – *a, a, a*.

Three nights, three foolhardy nights he and his son almost spent together on this. Waking, the third night, to the now invisible screen by the bed, dogs to be heard from the ranch a mile and a half away, and, as if still further, the higher, thin-throated whoop of a coyote or two like answers of the land, the father doesn't hear the son; and then he does. The man has slept way past the middle of the night. What has he missed?

The phone ringing? Would that be his talking in his sleep, predicting things according to his wife? He's out of bed distracted for a second by a tiny fire a mile away, but it is his sleep still with him and with it names, a string of names. When did tonight's soundings begin? He can hear the baby's body. The woman breathes what sounds a little like, *Hi*. Sure enough the moon's in a new position (though why, the man has seldom taken the trouble to learn, or remember), but through the crib bars the white-sleeved arms are pointing curiously and with that solitary power.

Yet the man does not like what he hears so much. Less blunt, less certain. A nearly whispered "Da" does not mean the father, nor is it cut-off or terrible. The eyelids are illuminated by the moon. His child is beautiful. There is a meaningless *gah* with some *rrr* of the day caught inside it. An old *eh* that accosts nothing but itself and is less like breathing than like a willingness. An *agh agh* that is in the dark and neither there nor anywhere except dreaming maybe of day. And a slow *ha ha ha*, and the *gaw* that was alone but tentative. And, without the *deh*, another sound breathed with some prior seriousness the man's heart hopes for or asks something of.

From his sleep names flood him, animals, places. Along the horizon of the Jemez Mountains dawn could look like this line of sky to the west below stratus and, he thinks, altostratus cloud lids. Two horses in the dark lift their muzzles and are shadowy friends of the house some nights so that you see them best by not looking right at them, the rump of the paler Appaloosa obscured by the thick, dark little quarter horse. The half moon passes among the clouds and his wife makes a curved shape asleep but readier than the man, who has never quite heard himself talking in his sleep – predicting, according to this woman – but has been dropping everything these last three nights to learn a language the speaker now may be letting go, or letting be, in favor of another. And what *did* the man drop, that went away through piñons and juniper like a snake that wanted no part of you. I tried, he says, and the child rolls to his knees and sits up waking. Yes? the man says – but the child is not talking, he's getting set to cry and he cries terribly and piercingly, seeing the man: it means, You are not what I want, you are what I'm yelling at. The child, for the first time the man can recall, pulls up on the crib rail and stands screaming powerfully. And so it goes.

The man has seen the future and should find tomorrow night that his child has left him with elements no longer of much use and has gone on, although the man leaning down nakedly into the crib and lifting the child out now remembers when he dropped everything what it was he dropped. It was mountains far from here yet just out the window, a campfire, a dog, and two men talking. And he thought that if in his sleep he had put words to it he would see again who those men were.

So the three of them have been in bed for a while, the woman in the middle squeezing her breast from underneath to position the nipple maybe, the infant on the far side of the bed snorting quietly. He woke you up, she murmurs. We're both talkers, he says, on his elbow, as if he could stay disturbed and awake for good or slip back into shallow sleep. You woke me before you woke up yourself, you said his name, she says, but then you said "uh" – I believe it was "uh" – you said it a couple of times, you were asleep, as if you were thinking something, getting ready to say it.

The man obviously wants to speak, and he covers her breast with his hand. What did you mean, "I tried"? she asks, I thought you were speaking to *me*.

That it could wait, he says. Oh, good, she sighs. I said his *name*? he asks. She breathes. Maybe she isn't answering. Who on earth cares except the man? The child seems done.

The man might be angry, or talking to himself. Drop everything. Drop everything when he needs you, when he calls. And in return he grows up strong. If he needs you or speaks, if he does anything new, drop everything. It was what you were equal to. What did you get out of being equal to it? Well, you got the name of one of those men by a campfire. You're not really a night person, his wife goes on as if she's only half asleep, as if this answers what he asked.

Ask *him*, he replies. And with that he is out of bed and around to the far side and slides an arm

and an elbow under the child and the other arm under the head so that his wife lifts her arm which was above the child's head and he takes the child from her while she turns to face the other way, her husband's side.

The desert bricks bring some later cold like a harbinger of daybreak against the soles of his feet, and beyond the window screen a scratching on the ground, a jack rabbit's claw, a neighbor dog remembering, is unanswered by the earth. You have to lower the child, you have to make it seem like there's no difference between your hands and arms and bones and the crib mattress, almost no motion from one to the other, these are the things that are necessary.

Copyright 2005 by Joseph McElroy