

KEN SPARLING

What Can The World Do For Elrond?

It seemed a simple thing to follow the path. He saw almost immediately that the butterfly was not a real butterfly. He moved slowly, staying in the light. What can the world do for Elrond? he thought. Why is Elrond even here?

Turtles crept over the bank out back and plunked into the river like stones. There were so many of them. They fell like hair. I saw spots. I put my head down. Cards spit out of the machine. It's endless, man. I'm so tired. A man searches for reason. For terror. He feels it in the most mundane of activities. He seeks to name it. To give it form. He seeks to capture what is lost. A guy takes a walk through his life. He is bewildered. He recognizes the simplest of moments. His parents' divorce. The day the pole beside the dining room table came loose. The day he lost his toy soldiers in a hedge. The guy robs these moments for his own purposes. Uses them like fuel. The guy exists today in the mundane world of day-to-day domestic life, from the skewed perspective of an underling, undermining the simplest emotions, crippled, but at the same time capable.

The one for morons looks like it isn't for morons, but morons love this stuff.

Teenagers were knocking over gravestones. They seemed to be looking for something. But at the same time, they seemed to be moving in patterns so random they were no pattern at all. A boy stood at the top of a small rise. The gravestones were in a shallow valley. The boy was near the top edge of the western end of the valley. Trees rose high above the stones. The boy on the rise called out to the racing lines of boys, Turn over every rock! Leave no stone unturned!

Where are your eyes? It's so easy to fall, don't you think? There is nothing simple about being at home.

The hairdresser saw, as she got closer to the scalp, a spreading topography of red. Like a map in relief. Her comb bounced when she dragged it through his hair.

KEN SPARLING

The boy looked down at his hands. He answered the hairdresser's questions. But he never looked up. With the hair dryer blowing, she couldn't hear a word he said. Just the low tone of his voice. A humming underneath the high, whiney whisper-scream of the dryer.

There was a little poem with dirt in it. It looked like it might be a little indoor garden. The man looked and looked. Finally, the deliberation, accompanied by a sense of accident, made the encounter into a gathering of little birds trying to fly off the page in a silent dance that only seemed thwarted by the man's intense focus.

Day after day, the architects dug, led by Bill "Dig-it-Man" Johnson. I believe in experiences. I believe in that special kind of communication that you get when you are reading all by yourself. I believe a sunburn can change the sound of the lake on a still day and that the hum at the end of a towel means more than the towel itself. I have always lurked alone in that place where the writer captures her deliberation and ziplocks it again as the best instance of anything she'll ever encounter.

How do you get it to do that? he asked the cats. The cats were like a series of triangles set atop one another. Pointed ears set atop each of their heads; downturned mouths; diverging lines running diagonally down from above their heads to where their bottoms cut a horizontal line in the rug.

He was moving. Fast. He threw a glance at Natalie sitting in her office. Just a quick glance. I knew he was up to something. But I had no idea what. Tom frequently behaved as though he was up to something. I frequently had no idea what. I had it in my head that it didn't matter. Whatever he was up to. It couldn't be very interesting. Tom kept mostly to himself. Rarely talked. Never drank. He'd never actually told me he didn't drink. But Tom never told me anything.

I was in the old man's living room. There was an old woman behind the curtains. Where did the little boy go? The woman asked no questions. Out in the yard, there was a little girl. She wore a white dress with ripped lace around the neck and sleeves. The old man's house was in the middle of a large field. The field was surrounded by rows of townhouses. The townhouses were stacked against each other, full of abandoned lives. The old man was a kind of sorcerer. It was through

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO FOR ELROND?

his strange brand of sorcery that the townhouses had been kept from encroaching on his field. Now, however, there was no longer any magic to keep the townhouses away.

The boy was in a classroom. He was watching the others. Quietly renouncing his name. Hours later, he crossed a ridge in Montana with his best friend, Kip, and his horse, Hors d'oeuvre.

A librarian sees only a chair with books around it. There is no one in the chair.

Once, at a staff meeting, Tilly asked Tom if he believed in God. Tom got a look I've never seen on anyone. It was like discomfort, only not. It was like discomfort with something malignant rooted in it. The rest of us sat in silence. We waited for Tom's answer. Finally, Tom spoke. That question is too complicated to answer at a staff meeting, he said. He looked down at his notepad and doodled something. The meeting was over.

I play my banjo for an hour everyday. I clip clothespins to the bridge to get the volume down. I can play it at four in the morning and not wake my family. Last night, when I went to my lesson, my teacher said the skin was loose on my banjo. He showed me how to tighten it. Use a nut driver, he said. He went to get a nut driver. He didn't have a nut driver the right size. So I did it when I got home. The sound of my banjo changed.

A small orange cat lay on the grass in the centre of the yard. It was licking the fur on its belly. A rain-dark sky rose behind it. No rain. Yet. A girl in pigtails looked out the window. Light canted her face. Smears it. As though the rain had come already and washed her sidewalk chalk features of light. A black cat in a tree looked down at the orange and white cat cleaning itself in the garden behind the white clapboard house. A young woman on a townhouse balcony wore a tight black t-shirt. She stood sideways, the small dome of her stomach pushed out in relief. Her dark hair strong and thick. Her eyes blackened with makeup and sadness.

A boy pulled a wagon with a record player in it. Music played. In the dark angle of the building, a man's eyes peered out at children emerging from shadows. He had to read the taps, but his back hurt so much. He remained where he was, flat on

KEN SPARLING

his back, his head tilted up slightly, resting against the pillow of plastic. He could see the taps at the other end, his feet against the wall on either side. But still he hesitated. There was someone, a girl he knew, who wanted him to be somewhere later that day. He didn't, in fact, want to go. But he liked the idea that someone might want him there. He was afraid if he didn't go she might not invite him again. He had seen it happen before. If you never showed up, people stopped asking.

A boy looks through the window at his father in the backyard. The father has a broom. His back is turned to the boy. The father thrusts the handle of the broom under the lid of the barbeque and pushes. The lid rises. A squirrel sits in its nest in the barbeque. It looks at the boy through the window. Their eyes meet. The boy is frightened. The squirrel runs. You need a great act of love—someone's great act of faith in you—to lift you. But you also need to be ready. Be ready. Be a pit. Be a fallow field. Be empty. Be nothing. The boy's father owned a piano. It was in the basement. The father tuned it himself regularly. For there were no more piano tuners in the world.

By music, I mean, simply, the sounds you hear every day atomized in the small spaces between the bones in your ears. I mean the pulse that brushes the hairs in your ear. I mean the cosmic music of plants pushing tips of green out through dark soil. The sound of worms looking at stars in the night. The clink of ice beneath miniature umbrellas with toothpicks for handles. Some of them are like doors that are wide open. Doors into fields of tall grass in wind. With doors like that, when you speak, your words are like something sucked into a great wind. Sent to meet something. A flock of birds caught in a gust. Flipped. Aghast. And, together with your new friend, you look to the sky. Your words are like pointers to another, bigger word. Loosen up the soil of your soul. When the seed begins to rain down, some of it will take. Be blind to some things, awake to others. Because people are always poised to disappoint you. And, in your disappointment, you are always ready to grow afraid. You are always ready to lose faith. You are always ready to give up. Don't.

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO FOR ELROND?

What are the things in your current workspace that freak you out? Mice. That smell we get on Thursdays. That guy, Bill, who hides behind my bookshelf. The hat on the hat rack that isn't mine. Lula, when she vaults over my divider.

The structure of a piece allows a group of musicians to meet and play together. Rhythm and chord progression and melody. The musicians are looking to these ideas to determine their relationship to each other. Then they work together to overcome the structure, to fool it. But it doesn't last. The next day you wake up in more pain than the day before. Full of more questions. The questions hurt to the degree that you believe the answers annihilate the questions. Think of the questions as annihilating the answers. Think of the questions as a kind of dance, sounding in answers. Like a kid trying to dodge raindrops.

His hair travelled toward the back of his head in wayward curls. Before it dropped over the edge of his head, it changed its mind. There was a pixel in the corner of the screen he sat before that looked like a strong man questioning his own ability to lift something. The death of Tyler was a manifesto, a copy of its own derelict inability to froth at the right moment.

The book arrives in the mail on Friday. I'm away with Mark at a swim meet. I find the book on the kitchen table when we get home Sunday. It's packed and padded in a brown envelope. It's midnight. I put the envelope in my knapsack. The next day at work I open it. I pull the book out. Open the cover. Read. The spaces are divine. The space is what animates the word. The ramp from the space to the word is already word. The transition is in the mind, the step from silent meaning to intent. The noise of intent floundering suddenly in the silence that surrounds it.

The swim trip was this weekend. On Saturday, Mark swam all morning. He made finals in two events. So we went back in the evening. In between, I was feeling crappy. I took a tub at the motel. They had a great tub. Much better than the tub we have at home. Mark went out while I was in the tub. Called on one of his swim friends. Joanne. They went out with a couple of the other girls for a walk. They wound up in a pawn shop. Mark saw some CDs he wanted. He came

KEN SPARLING

back and got some money. Went back and bought the CDs. On Sunday, Mark made finals again. He was in the last event, the 400 IM. He'd already swam three thousand metres that weekend. Fifteen hundred metres Friday afternoon. Almost a thousand today. The pool deck was practically empty. Just Mark, eight other swimmers and their coaches. In the stands, eight sets of parents. A couple of little brothers. Some sisters. Three lifeguards and twenty timers. Mark looked pretty tired. He was standing by himself, on deck, waiting for his turn.

There are things we have to do in between the things we don't have to do. The things we don't have to do are the things that keep us hungry. Don't ever confuse the things we don't have to do with the things we have to do. Don't ever confuse our terrible hunger with our need for food. Success has to do with the space in between. How the space in between can buffer the non sequitur. Is the non sequitur a kind of failure in a world where sequence is everything? Where story is used insidiously, insistently, to redefine the moment? Is the space a place among non sequiturs where you can breathe? A place where you can re-breathe the idea of success as it stands in the non sequitur moment, waiting for us to decide how to make of it something more than what it appears in the moment to be?

The women in their cars like lights, like stars dipped in sky, like celestial wind scurrying down Yonge Street. Turn right. Disappear.

In the end, the music became so overproduced it lost its humanity. Even at live shows, the bands were so scripted, so mechanized, that living beings were hardly necessary. Music became a set of numbers. With the mysterious fragility of humanity gone from the music, people lost interest. Not in music per se. In music as they understood it from what they heard on their computers. Music wasn't banned or forbidden. It wasn't outlawed. It was simply taken for granted. That's what happened to music. Music belonged to everyone and anyone could practice it. This was democracy at its most transparent. Many songs were spoken, or growled. Music was machine produced or fully scripted, blurringly fast or aimless and meandering. Musicians were either achingly devoted to perfection or utterly untrained. There were no musicians left who pursued their vocation in an effort

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO FOR ELROND?

to walk out the back door of technical proficiency and rediscover the exuberant innocence that makes a child's song so achingly poignant. The boy's father had been a concert pianist. When the sort of music he created seemed no longer to have any audience at all, he became a lonely soul in a basement tinkling out little tunes on a broken piano that he had to tune himself.

On Sunday, when no one was looking, God made a couple more things. He was sitting in his backyard resting. It was threatening rain. He looked up at the sky, took a sip of the drink he was nursing. He thought, I can't just sit here anymore, I don't care what I said about Sunday.

She worries that the buildings aren't where they should be. That we aren't where we should be. That I'm not where I should be. That we are maybe where the buildings should be and the buildings are maybe where we should be. Think of it this way, she says. The buildings are over there. And there. And look. Look over there. Now look here. We're here. You see? John saw a building made of little stones. He thought of things you could put in a lunch bag. Ridiculous things. Things too big to put in a lunch bag. He thought of a side of beef. He thought of things he had seen on TV. If you listen hard enough, you'll hear the spaces in your life.

God had married by this time. He'd had kids. He was driving a little Honda. But it was not big enough for all God's stuff.

The boy was ahead of the man, calling him to hurry. The man moved slowly. As though each step required an absorption of thought so great as to be uncontainable. As though each step were the result of every moment thus experienced in the life of the man. Later, in the evening, they walked together, side by side. The man and the boy. The sun behind them. Arriving. Eventually, they came to the park. It was the man who folded his heart.

Ron pulled open the door. Stepped onto the sidewalk. Looked at a red car. It drove away. Ron looked at the sky. Nothing. Blueness. Ron crossed Yonge Street. Some girls walked past. Ron looked at the girls. They looked at something behind Ron. Ron turned. Looked where the girls were looking. There was nothing there.

KEN SPARLING

Cars. Buildings. A bicycle locked to a bicycle post. Ron turned back. Walked. It rained. Ron got wet. He walked. He turned. Went in a door. Stood at the counter. Looked at a woman's back. The woman turned. Can I help you? Could I have a coffee, please? Just cream? Sure.

Tutti and the boy drive the car out of the driveway. There is rust around the wheel wells. I can see the rust when the car gets out on the road. It turns sideways to me and I can see the rust as it pulls away. The people across the street wave. They sit on their front porch and wave. I wave back. Tutti and the boy wave at me. The boy yells, Bye, Daddy!

I go back in the house. The house is empty. I sit in the empty kitchen. There's nothing left to do. I've done everything. I did it all last night. I made my lunch. I laid out my clothes for work. I don't have to go to work for another hour. I sit in the empty kitchen. Listen to the house. There are no sounds. I listen to how quiet the house is.

Whatever it was I was doing, I just kept on doing it. It was something different from whatever it was I was doing before.

There are various kinds of music, the old man told the boy. I knew a girl once whose music existed for all the wrong reasons. Music can ennoble, the man said. But it must be capable of the basest motivations in order to resist and rise.

In the lab, the old man layered the chemicals. Mixing things in approximate quantities is not a science. If you get a little bit wrong, it might even work to your favour. You layer your understandings over future events. Your words might be more or they might be less. Each a trigger for something you can gauge, but never predict. Each a moment followed by another imperfectly gauged event. I want you to think about this the way you might think about a secret. You hear someone whisper. You can't hear the words. You know there is a secret. You don't know what the secret is. Someone is telling someone else a secret. You're in the same room. You hear them. But you only hear the hiss of a whisper. You can't hear the words being whispered. Most of us want to keep the secret. Meaning what? If we write, does that mean we want to keep the secret from ourselves? It's a secret we don't

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO FOR ELROND?

want to face, isn't it? The secret meaning is something about ourselves, something we don't want to believe about ourselves.

Is there somewhere, under the ground, where you don't know exactly where you are? So you don't know quite where to begin digging? But that doesn't mean you shouldn't dig. Does it? It just means you might want to be prepared to do some hard work when you decide to start digging.

The guard at the cargo pass didn't look like an average guard, but maybe no guard looks like an average guard. This guard was tall enough. But skinny. Like a sapling that's sprouted up too quick. He looked willowy and delicate. He had no bulk. No thick neck. No wide head.

I like the feeling of my feet being sore and my arms being sunburnt. I continue to hope that she will get her buttons out. When she gets her buttons out, she is silent and beautiful. Her eyes look rested and alive. It's like everything I need to know about her is there in the way she approaches her buttons. The way she puts her fingers in the tin. Stirs things around. The way she'll pick one button up and look surprised. Like she's never seen that one before. Like she's never seen anything like that button in all the world in all her life.

The old man had a routine:

1. Wake up on back and stare at ceiling
2. Roll over onto side and stare at curtains closed over window
3. Slide body close to edge of bed
4. Drop feet over edge of bed
5. Pull back one curtain, look outside
6. Stand
7. Place hands on windowsill, stretch quads
8. Place left hand on back of right arm, stretch shoulder
9. Repeat with right hand on back of left arm
10. Leave bedroom

Things that happened after that included making coffee and peeing, but there was no set order. The old man liked to put the coffee on before he peed. But sometimes he had to pee so bad he peed and then put the coffee on.

KEN SPARLING

The boy should survive in the box, the old man thought. Do not remove the tube from your arm, he told the boy. The old man pictured a tiny little truck, something you might doodle on a piece of paper, pulling up to a little tiny door. It was ludicrous.

He made pizza. Saw Joan outside the window. Joan was under a tree. Her chunky hips. Her purple lips. The oven was on. He could smell garlic. Onions. Joan breathed. He could see her breath. It came out of her mouth. Hit the cold air. Turned to steam. Joan stamped in the snow. She was by the big tree, the streetlight behind her. Her frizzy hair a halo. Hands in pockets. Eyes dark. He opened the oven. Pulled out the pizza. It smelled hot.

I'm going down, I said, hold the rope. If he lets go, I'm gone, I thought. But imagine if he doesn't. I'll have made it further down than anyone before. And when I come back up, I'll have this knowledge: someone was willing to send me down and then, unexpectedly, bring me back up.

They knew not the purpose of the flies that landed on their food. They went to it with hearty appetite. They had not seen each other in so long. I hate these lusty flies, said the boy. As do I, said the old man. They vomit in your food, you know, said the boy. So I have heard, said the old man. And have you heard that they breed disease, said the boy. Obviously, neither wished to spend this precious moment together talking of flies. And yet, the talk went on. Did you know they have faceted eyes? asked the boy. This, also, I have heard, said the old man. They ate ancient cheese washed down by questionable water.

It seemed to David, now in his seventeenth year, that his father had displayed a kind of proud regret at the size of his hands. David had seen his father's idols on tv. White devils with large hands. Bird-like, fluttering over keys. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland walked a fence. The fence was the rainbow. Sound cascaded beneath her voice the way the fence cascaded beneath her feet. She struck each note with a pure intensity of emotion that wasn't in the song when David's father played it. When David's father played *Over the Rainbow*, there were extra notes all over the place. Like flies on a horse's ass. David's father seemed to wait until

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO FOR ELROND?

it was too late to rescue the next melody note from the chaos of his playing. He sometimes didn't bother to rescue the next melody note at all. David felt a terrible fear in these moments. He waited to hear what his father would do. It seemed utterly irrational. But then, quite miraculously, David's father would pluck notes out of the air that caused a sort of redemption. David's father somehow made it seem like every note was exactly the right note. David would feel rescued. What he felt was like a victory. His victory, not his father's.

I wasn't going in unless she came out to get me. That was what we said she should do. When the time came, she should come out to get me. I thought of knocking. I didn't want to knock. I didn't even want to go in. I realized there was a God.

