**There Is Always This Moment**

Michelle Mounts

There is always this moment when I am snuggling with my son in his bed, at night, that dictates how the following moments of the night will go. Each time we pass through this moment, I ask myself… Will our grip on each other’s bodies loosen? Will we drift out of consciousness? Will I teeter on the edge of a dream and almost fall into it but catch myself, haul my body out of his small bed, roll onto the cold hardwood floor, stumble crookedly into my own room and close the door?

 Or will my five-year-old boy open his tiny, shiny lips in the dark and ask me a question I can’t pretend not to hear?

 “Mommy?”

 “…Mmm?”

 “Mommy!”

 I open my eyes.

 “I wonder what the last word on earth will be. Do you?”

 “You mean the last word spoken by a human?”

 “Yes! What could that ever be?”

 “That’s a really interesting question,” I say, groggy, clumsy, shuffling through possibilities. “Maybe…*goodbye*?” I say.

 “Hmm, probably not,” he says. He is rolling on his back, now, like the roly-poly bugs he digs up in the garden and balances on his fingertips. He knocks into me with elbows, hips, knees.

 “There are gonna be thousands and thousands and hundreds and hundreds of people,” he points out, “and then there will be one and then there will be none. An asteroid will hit the earth and extinct us like dinosaurs.”

 I close my eyes. I smell his baby shampoo and think of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. I think of COVID and future relatives of COVID that turn people into violet-faced zombies. Flood wreckage. Pictures of 10 a.m. on the West Coast, black morning trees against fire-red sky. I think that we will extinct ourselves long before any asteroid finds us, but I’ll mention this tomorrow. Not because I want to protect my son from the bad news, but because I can feel the hum and rumble of his brain engine working hard to process whatever weird stuff it came across today. Sorting, organizing, labeling, imagining—who am I to interrupt this mysterious process?

 “And the sun will burn up the earth, Mommy,” he goes on, still doing his roly-poly bug on the bed, “and just like that—blip—all life will be gone! You, me, and Daddy—blip, blip, and blip—gone.” He sits up, shakes his head, seeming to search for words in the dark. He turns toward me, his face a small, pale moon. I smell toothpaste. I smell lavender laundry detergent and the freshwater scent of his skin. “It’ll all just be nothing, Mommy,” he says quietly. “The whole world and all the things that happened will be like—blip—*nothing at all.*”

 I look at him. It is uncomfortable, loving someone this much. I suddenly want to be in my bed with a laptop watching Netflix. I want to be brain-dumb and heart-dumb, but it’s too late now. I am helpless against the power of his delicate bird bones and black eyelashes thick as broom bristles and soft brown eyes that see things I have long ago stopped seeing.

 Is he going to cry? He’s so quiet. Is he trying to picture his parents turning into blips? Is he picturing the earth—most of which he hasn’t explored yet—turning on its axis and turning into a sphere of char and ash?

 He throws back his head and laughs.

 “Isn’t it funny, Mommy?” he shouts. “It’s just SO CRAZY!” He laughs and laughs, bobble-headed, loose-limbed, always in motion.

 I think about the improbability of our planet’s existence and the further improbability of our perfectly distanced sun. Ocean water that will boil someday but that for now remarkably sustains us. I think about the sun growing so red and fat that it will look like a cartoon villain in the sky, but with no eyes on earth to see it. I think of the earth orbiting that sun, the earth an over-roasted chestnut in the indifferent expanse deep black space.

 I think of chestnuts roasting in little silver carts throughout Central Park and my grown-up son strolling under nighttime sycamores, holding a bag of those chestnuts. Maybe he is alone. Maybe the sky is violet-dark. Maybe there is an eyelash of moon. Maybe he is thinking of me and his dad, but probably, almost certainly, not.

 I reach for his little hand and start to giggle. When he hears me giggle, he laughs more, and harder, until I am full belly laughing, too. “So crazy!” I say. “It really is so crazy, Simon!”

 I try to pull him toward me for a hug, but he keeps rolling and rolling away.