
PATRICK MADDEN

Laughter

What is writing other than drawing two letters and laughing?
—Marcel Bénabou

As I write—not specifically *now* but generally *in these days*—my two-and-a-half-month-old daughter is just beginning to laugh, and I am sharing in her joy, or, if it is not joy that she feels, still I feel the joy of her laugh. Infants can smile soon after they're born; some pediatricians say that those fleeting moments are due to gasses or facial stretches or random chance, and don't be fooled into thinking she's *really* smiling. I don't know about that. I don't imagine anybody can say for sure. But now she is laughing, and I am sure.

She does not laugh only when we laugh; she is not only mimicking. And it is not because she is ticklish; I have tried that and it doesn't work. As far as I can tell, she is delighted by the world. She sees a funny face, sees her brother in a giant witch's hat, sees me with my glasses on upside down, sees her mother dancing to the funky music of a commercial, and she laughs.

I have loved her since she was born—since before she was born, when she was only a concept to me, an idea—and yet I do not feel I knew her until now. Her laughter has become a common ground for us, a realization that the world is an interesting, silly place.

To laugh, if but for an instant only, has never been granted to man before the fortieth day from his birth, and then it is looked upon as a miracle of precocity.

—Pliny the Elder

Which puts her out of “miracle of precocity” range, but still within respectable limits. Jupiter, it is said, was born laughing and didn't stop for seven days. According to Barry Sanders according to Theodore Hopfner

according to a third-century-B.C. Egyptian papyrus, "When [God] burst out laughing there was light. . . . When he burst out laughing the second time the waters were born; at the seventh burst of laughter the soul was born." Man as the height of God's laughter: that might explain a lot of things.

Laugh and the world laughs with you; he who laughs last laughs best; die laughing; laugh your head off; be the laughing stock of; laugh all the way to the bank (the word itself, *laugh*, begins to look ridiculous—misspelled, unintelligible, strangely pronounced); laughter is the best medicine; laugh up your sleeve.

I have tried to be thorough, even having discovered this last one, laugh up your sleeve, which I haven't heard before and which derives from Renaissance times when sleeves were voluminous and available for storage and hiding laughs, but there must certainly be more. Add your own laugh aphorism (laughorism?) in the space provided.

Max Beerbohm, in his essay on this theme, wonders that "of all the countless folk who have lived before our time on this planet not one is known in history or in legend as having died of laughter." But Beerbohm is wrong. E. Bulwer Lytton's *Tales of Miletus* speaks of Calchas, a soothsayer who was told by a beggar that he would never drink of the fruit of his vineyard. Moreover, the beggar promised that if his prophecy did not come true, he would be Calchas's slave. Later, when the grapes were harvested and the wine made, Calchas celebrated by laughing so hard at the beggar's folly that he died. In more recent news, The Joker kills people in Gotham City by laughter, but maybe that's different. He is, after all, inducing the effect artificially, with Smilex gas.

Laughing gas, nitrous oxide, named because of its effect on those who inhale it (disorientation, euphoria, numbness, loss of motor coordination, dizziness, loss of consciousness; I'm not sure who laughs more, a patient anesthetized by the gas or the doctor who administers it), has been used since its discovery in the 1700s as a general anesthetic. Joseph Priestly, who also discovered oxygen and carbon dioxide, called nitrous oxide "an air five or six times as good as common air." The gas is still used to anes-

thetize dental patients and as a propellant in whipped cream cans. Recent research has linked laughing gas (in high dosages) to birth defects, nerve damage, and permanent organ damage, especially brain damage. As an interesting side note, the 1993 World Trade Center and 1995 Oklahoma City bombings involved detonation of laughing gas (a by-product of ammonium nitrate fertilizer), which decomposes explosively into nitrogen and oxygen at high temperatures.

Laughter is like any word; if you say it enough, it begins to sound strange and wondrous. Listen to the sound as it separates from meaning; hear its similarities to other words, its complete uniqueness; feel your tongue pull away from the back of your front teeth, your bottom lip bitten slightly as the air escapes out the sides of your mouth, a quick strike of the tongue, like spitting, cut the air somewhere back of the mouth, in the throat, almost like a vowel, a sound foreigners have difficulty making. It is enough, sometimes, if you say it fast enough long enough, to make you laugh. And if you say it repeatedly with the right rhythm beginning with a quick *da-da* and saying an additional *taf-taf* every third word, you can pick out the *William Tell* overture and call to mind the Lone Ranger, whose faithful Indian friend Tonto's name translates in Spanish to "fool," which may cause you yet another laugh. Kimosabe, Tonto's name for his masked friend, is of dubious origin, but I have heard it explained as deriving from "Friend" in Potawatomi, "Dancing Frog" in Navajo, and "Who Knows Him" in Portuguese.

Better of laughter than of tears to write
For laughter is indeed to man unique.

—Rabelais

This is debatable—the second part that is. The hyena, coarse-haired scavenger of Africa's savannah, is well known as a laugher because of its high, annoying—what is it? A bark? A whimper? Monkeys scream out laughter-like sounds in the grasses and the trees of Africa, Asia, and South America. The "laughing jackass," a mid-sized kingfisher bird native to Australia, makes a loud call that sounds similar to raucous laughter and which tormented early European explorers of that continent. You can hear its laughing call today in an inordinate number of jungle movies whether or not they take place in Australia. Nowadays the bird prefers to be called by the more politically correct "kookaburra." An old nursery rhyme goes:

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree.
Merry, merry king of the bush is he.
Laugh, Kookaburra,
Laugh, Kookaburra
Gay your life must be.

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree,
Eating all the gumdrops he can see.
Stop, Kookaburra,
Stop, Kookaburra,
Leave some there for me.

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree,
Counting all the monkeys he can see.
Wait, Kookaburra.
Stop, Kookaburra.
That's not a monkey, that's me!

This song, of course, allows a broad definition of laughter based not on humor but on the sound, the convulsion, the jiggling and giggling. But somebody sometime thought the sound alone was enough to qualify as laughter, and other animals with laughing as part of their names are the laughing frog (*Rana ridibunda*, which is edible, *ridibunda* meaning "laughing" in Latin), laughing bird (*Geciniviridis*, the green woodpecker), the laughing crow or laughing thrush (used for many Asiatic birds of the genus *Garrulax*), the laughing dove (*Stigmatopelia senegalensis*, the African dove), the laughing goose (*Anser albifrons*, the white-fronted goose), the laughing gull (*Larus atricilla*), the laughing falcon (*Herpetotheres cachinnans*), the laughing owl (*Sceloglaux albifacies*). And it's not only animals who can laugh; in poetry, brooks, fires, winds, valleys, fields, wine, seas, plateaus all can laugh as well.

Democritus (460-357 B.C.) is known as the Laughing Philosopher either because of his cheery disposition and embracing of hedonism or because he laughed at the folly and vanity of mankind. He is paired with Heraclitus, the Weeping Philosopher, whose more compassionate response to the same plight of man earned him his nickname.

Democritus, dear droll, revisit earth,
And with our follies glut thy heightened mirth.
—Matthew Prior

Democritus is also known as a proponent (if not originator) of atomic theory. He proposed that matter was not infinitely divisible, that there

existed a basic unit of matter, the atom, which was indivisible. Which may bring you laughter when you consider that even if Democritus was right, we have bungled his theory by giving the name *atom* to that which *can* be further broken down into protons, neutrons, and electrons, which in turn consist of quarks, which name comes not exactly from science, but from *Finnegans Wake* because Murray Gell-Mann, proponent and originator of quark theory, so much enjoyed that book. Or at least the line from the book that goes, "Three quarks for Muster Mark!"

Democritus' influence inspired Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, to give himself the nickname Democritus Junior, because he, too, liked to laugh at the foolishness of mankind. He also liked to make mankind laugh. In his voluminous study of the disease of melancholy (published originally without naming its author until the epilogue), he lists among myriad remedies for the sickness, "Help from Friends by Counsel, Comfort, fair and foul Means, witty Devices, Satisfaction, Musick, Mirth and merry company." In that section he writes that "the Lacedæmonians . . . did sacrifice to the God of Laughter, after their wars especially, and in times of peace . . . because laughter and merriment was to season their labours and modester life. Laughter is the eternal pleasure of gods and men."

Although French words, introduced by England's Norman conquerors centuries ago, transmogrified into a large part of what we now speak as English, many of our elemental, homely words come to us from Old English. *Laughter*, that basic human emotion, is one of them. Somehow this is comforting, as if the perseverance of the word, its steadfastness against the influence of the French *rire*, were transferred to me when I say it.

Yet the word has not remained unchanged. In Old English, the velar fricative, the end sound in a Scottish *loch*, a sound we no longer have in our language, was spelled with an *h*. The Old English root word for laughter is *hleahator* (or a variation on this), related to words in Old High German and Old Norse, and thought to be imitative or onomatopoeic in its origin. In Middle English, the spelling of this sound became *gh*. In Early Modern English, competing dialects south of the Humber River caused the *gh* velar fricative sound either to be dropped (plough, though, high) or to be pronounced as an *f*, as in cough, rough, enough, laugh, etc. Linguists postulate that the *f* sound was simply a fallout from a mixing of several dialects. To note the illogic of the change, consider the last name

Laughlin, most often pronounced *lock-lin*, an approximation of the lost velar fricative though it contains the word *laugh*.

Though it has not been seen since the mid-19th century, *laughter* has also meant the whole number of eggs laid by a fowl before she is ready to sit. The etymology of this laughter, as you might imagine, is different from the one we use today, though one can't help noticing that a trace of *laugh*'s cognates and forebears leads to Proto-Germanic *hlahjan*, a cognate with the Greek *klōssein*, which means "cluck," as in a chicken.

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One of the oldest jokes in the book, one that has never made me laugh (first because I was too young to "get it," then later because it is terribly unfunny), is "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

"To get to the other side."

And no variation of Chinese newspapers or roosters or beer has ever been able to make me laugh. This, from the point of view of the person telling such a bad joke, is sometimes called "laying an egg."

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If I were living when an onomatopoetic word for laughter was being sought, it might be called something like *heah*, with a sharp, pneumatic hiss at the beginning. If we were looking for an imitative name for my friend Anthony's laughter, we'd call it something like *aish aish aish* (very annoying). There are laughs that are squeals, laughs that are brays, laughs that are vibrato staccato clucks and clicks and snorts. It's no wonder we ascribe laughter to animals. Our own laughter so often mimics animal sounds. Which can often mean that laughter feeds itself because, you have to admit, making animal sounds involuntarily is funny all by itself.

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In English, laughter as dialogue is most often portrayed as something like "ha ha ha." There are exceptions; for instance, Santa Claus's laugh is "ho ho ho." This is also the laugh of the Green Giant (of canned and frozen vegetable fame). Little people with high voices laugh "hee hee hee," sometimes beginning with a "tee." Connivers or old men or half-laughers do it "heh heh heh." In Spanish the laugh is represented the same way. Though they are spelled differently, laughs like "ja ja ja," "jo jo jo," "ji ji ji," and "je je je" all sound the same as do our laughs in English. The same holds true for laughs in Romanian, French, Japanese, and Chinese, and I'd be willing to bet it's the same in most other languages too. Always

a vowel sound introduced by an *h*, the sound closest to breathing, as if laughter were as basic as respiration.

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A partial list of synonyms for laughter: cackle, chuckle, chortle, giggle, guffaw, snicker, snigger, titter, twitter. It is worth noting that at least two of the preceding words share syllables with profanity. That, of itself, often causes laughter among children. Had somebody, when I was younger, used the word "titter," I can guarantee I would have tittered.

I have heard often about the Eskimo, whose language includes (by some estimates) a hundred words for different kinds of snow, the lesson being that we invent words for the things we experience, the things we need to talk about. I consider it a good sign that we have a number of words for laughter.

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Many things become laughable only in hindsight, after the emotion of the situation is placated and everything has turned out fine and we can reflect on our good fortune or our dumb luck. Such are my son's many trips to the emergency room for foreign objects in his nose: partially chewed raisins, foam rubber, paper, the tip of a rubber snake's tail. First were the raisins, which happened during my watch when I gave him chocolate-covered ones and left him alone. He sucked off all the chocolate, and, I can only imagine the rest, must have decided to store the unwanted raisins someplace out of the way. My mother has been telling me for as long as I can remember about the raisins I stuck up my nose when I was about my son's same age. To see the genetic code replicate such a banal act is irony at its noblest. But I could not see it as I was struggling with my son under the strong light of the bathroom sink as he tried to break free of my hold as I tried to pull the desiccated masticated grapes from his nostril. We ended up in the hospital then, as did my mother with me 26 years earlier, and returned the next day for a visit with the ear, nose, and throat specialist, who has since then become a sort of confidant, and whose staff laughs each time we return. "See," I once overheard a nurse telling her coworker when she saw my son, "I told you it'd be him."

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Laughter can unite and comfort because in it people share understanding and happiness. In times of difficulty and sadness, despite Henri Bergson's assertion that laughter and emotion are foes, laughter is often an important

healer. It can lighten a heavy burden; it can change the flavor of tears. When our cat died after nineteen years with us, my family was stricken with grief. The cat had been put to sleep at the veterinarian's office, and my brothers drove to pick him up so we could bury him in our back yard. The veterinarian had stuffed the corpse in a thin plastic bag inside a styro-foam cooler, which was set on the deck as my brothers dug a hole near the woods, one of the cat's favorite haunts, where he had often hunted rabbits and birds and snakes. When the hole was almost finished, my mother and father came carrying the cooler, anxious to finish the burial before it got too dark. Everyone was crying silently, averting eyes and speaking in whispers. Because of the hushed silence, when the diggers took a short rest my father assumed that the hole was finished and reached into the cooler and removed the bag. But the hole was still too shallow, and as my father made to deposit the cat's body in the hole, my brother realized what was going on, calculated instantaneously, and shouted, "Wait! Don't let the cat out of the bag!"

Laughter often breaks down social barriers, draws the curious gaze of the terminally aloof, perturbs the cool imperturbability and silence and feigned disinterest of strangers and passers-by and commuters brought together only by their need for transportation. It sometimes allows, for a brief moment only, perhaps, a kind of communion. If Bergson's laughter requires that one feel himself part of a group, then laughter often forms its own ephemeral groups, united solely for the purpose of laughing, for a moment, before disbanding.

On a train from New York City to New Jersey, late afternoon, Fourth of July, heat hot, bodies tired from walking: my son can't sit still. He can never sit still, but he is extra-antsy because of the heat, the enclosed space, the challenge of entertaining such a large crowd, who knows? The six of us—me, my wife, my son, my daughter, my father, my sister—have flipped the seatback of one three-seater and are facing each other on two benches as Pato, two-and-a-half, jumps from one bench to the other, heedless, careless of who he kicks or who will catch him. We catch him. He jumps up, hanging from the overhead storage racks until his arms give, and I catch him. He clambers on the seatback, throws his grandfather's hat, drops his crackers, says hello to the man and woman sitting behind us.

I pull him back down, whisper in his ear, plead with him to be still as he wriggles and twists.

He laughs, thinking I am trying to tickle him.

The woman behind ducks to where he can't see her. He steps on my leg to peer over the edge of the seat. She jumps up and whispers, "Boo!"

He falls limp to the seat below, convulsing with laughter.

She does it again. He does it again. She does it again. He does it again. Laughter.

His sister, five months now and well-practiced in laughter, stares intently at her brother. Her eyes radiate something I want to call admiration. Each time he falls to the seat beside her, she laughs heartily, uncontrollably.

By now passengers in front of us are turning around, not only to watch, but to laugh. The woman behind us laughs as she peers around the side of our seat, as she varies her timing and sayings, making animal sounds and creaks. Pato roars like a dinosaur and jumps up and down hiding and seeking and laughing. Everyone in my family is laughing. My daughter now laughs when Pato falls, when he gets up, when he begins to climb. Her laughter is bright and clear and pure and unselfconscious, and I understand why a cool mountain brook might be said to laugh.

People behind us are sitting up tall in their seats to see the commotion. Some are standing, watching the tireless boy and asking to see the beautiful little girl who is laughing. They laugh with him as they are entertained by his antics. They laugh with her as they are infected by her wonder. "Is that her?" someone asks. "What a beautiful girl," says another. Across the aisle a teenage girl makes faces and laughs. "Quack quack," says the woman behind.

Pato (whose real name is Patrick, whose mother, who speaks Spanish, nicknamed him *Patito*—little Pat—to distinguish him from me and my father and grandfather, who then shortened the name to *Pato*) means, in Spanish, "duck."

And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, . . . I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed.

—Genesis

In a Bible in which references to laughter mostly point to it as negative—laughing to scorn, the devil laughing—the story of Abraham's reaction to God's news is full of good laughs. I enjoy this passage of scripture, and the one immediately following where Sarah (formerly known as Sarai) also laughs at the prospect of bearing a child at her age (ninety, according to the record), as much as any. I think it is because here God is so accessible, speaking to Abraham, straight-faced, telling him that he will have to put off his retirement plans to raise a child. The cause for laughter is the impossibility of the miracle, the weight of the responsibility if it's true, the awakening to God's ironic sense of humor, his trials, his special kind of love. It's

not easy being chosen, Abraham is beginning to see, and though we know there must have been a glitch somewhere in the translation, we can't help noticing the pratfall; we imagine a dumbstruck Abraham, mouth agape, hair turned just a shade whiter, stumbling and falling as he reels from the news and falls upon his face. That the God-chosen name Isaac means "he laugheth" (not so bad when you compare it with the name God chose for Isaiah's son, *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, which means "the spoil cometh speedily, the prey hasteneth") only heightens the comic effect.

What is this strange relationship between laughter and misfortune? Where is the border between laughter and pity or worry? When a man trips and falls (Bergson's first example of a laughable event), is it always funny? Is it only funny if he is not hurt? When I was younger ABC introduced its sports programs with a montage of different athletic events and a narrator highlighting the action with general commentary about "The thrill of victory . . . and the agony of defeat." And with this line the television showed a ski jumper precariously off-balance on his way down the jump; then he falls and flops like a ragdoll as he careens over the edge. I always laughed at that, but I wondered if I should. My father has since told me, without citing his sources, that "That guy really got hurt," and I feel almost guilty. What is it then? Disequilibrium? Strange poses? A sigh of relief that it happened to someone else?

At age twelve, I am riding a Frankenstein bike that my friend John made from salvaged parts on some dirt mounds in a new development of houses near where we live. It's got springs under the vinyl seat and curvy touring-bike handlebars with white hard plastic grips. I'm standing on the pedals, pumping hard to get up an especially steep mound, my thighs burning, arms taut, pulling back, and all of a sudden the grips come flying off the handlebars, simultaneously (I couldn't believe it either), and I'm on my back in the dirt, legs tangled, bike on top of me, two white plastic grips still firmly in my grasp.

We laugh at, with, about clowns, jokes, funny faces, children, ourselves, contortions, misfortunes, wordplay, irony, other laughs, others' joy, good fortune, madness, sickness, health, debilitation, recovery, things we can't change, things we can change, sports, games, circuses, animals, drunkenness, sobriety, sex, celibacy, errors, equivocations, mistakes, blunders, bloopers, boners, double meanings.

With laughter, you often "had to be there." Sometimes even if you weren't there you laugh, but the effect wears off with repeated tellings so that, once again, "you had to be there." I think this points to the difficulty of conveying real experience with language, to the weakness of imitation, as well as to the disparate range of our senses of humor. It means that laughter is often contagious, often set by a mood more than the joke itself or the situation, that experience is never cut off from the sum of prior and concurrent experiences.

From my youth, the funniest in my father's repertoire of childhood stories was this: One day my grandfather bought some fruit trees to plant in the back yard. Among them was a pear tree which, he thought, would soon bear fruit. But the pear tree was barren. In the first year, nothing. Likewise the second and the third. The family eventually gave up hope for fruit from the tree; at the same time they had grown rather fond of it. One afternoon my father, his father, and his brothers were tossing the football around in the back yard. Tom goes long for a pass, back to the corner with the pear tree, and when he misses the ball, he falls down flat on his back laughing uncontrollably and pointing to the branches. Everybody runs to him, curious to know whether he's laughing only because he dropped the ball or for some other reason. When they ask him what's up, he replies breathlessly, in between convulsions of laughter, "There's an apple on the pear tree!"

The folk wisdom that laughter is the best medicine seems so ingrained in our culture that we believe it in spite of our science worship. We needn't even see extreme examples of laughter-cured cancers or ulcers to know that a positive attitude can work wonders. We have seen it in our own lives.

Laughter is a form of internal jogging. It moves your internal organs around. It enhances respiration. It is an igniter of great expectations.

—Norman Cousins

Yet extreme cases do occur. In 1964, the late Norman Cousins, then editor of *The Saturday Review*, was stricken with ankylosing spondylitis, a severe connective tissue disease (in the family of arthritis and rheumatism). Upset with inconsiderate hospital staff, unsanitary conditions, poor nutrition, and a generally depressing hospital environment, he sought ways to help his body heal itself. He researched heavily into the possible causes and cures for his disease, reduced the amount of pain medication he would accept, increased his vitamin C intake, and (this was before the day of the VCR) got a projector and films of *Candid Camera* and several

Marx brothers movies. He also read from several humor anthologies. Soon, with massive vitamin C and laughter, he was out of the hospital and off drugs entirely. The effects of his disease receded rapidly. Eventually he recovered almost fully, was able to go back to work, and could go about his daily life without pain (he says he could even play the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, even if a little more slowly than before). Although his method of recovery is debated as anything from miracle to placebo, he lived until 1990. He was 75.

When you laugh, your body moves, your mouth forms a smile, your eyes squint, your nose wriggles. You may throw your head back, shake your head, bite your lower lip, get soda up your nose, close your eyes completely, start to tear, snuffle. Laughing feels good mostly, and even uncontrollable, painful laughter, where your gut contorts and you can't breathe, serves as a sort of anaerobic exercise. Usually accompanied by happiness, laughter causes an increase in happiness itself. It can even take you out of the doldrums and into—what's the opposite of doldrums?—a hurricane of delight. Medical studies have shown that laughter increases the immune system's activity and decreases stress-producing hormones while increasing good hormones such as endorphins. Cancer and heart patients at Loma Linda University's medical center are treated with episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* along with their regular treatments. Laughter has been known to increase levels of disease-fighting T cells, the very cells killed off by AIDS. According to the experts, even fake laughter can sometimes produce these beneficial effects.

Among those whom I like, I can find no common denominator,
but among those whom I love, I can; all of them make me laugh.
—W. H. Auden

That laughter is sweetest which is unexpected, which is inherent in its situation, which takes one unawares. "To that laughter," says Max Beerbohm, "nothing is more propitious than an occasion that demands gravity. To have good reason for not laughing is one of the surest aids." In church, then, in a foreign land, in a foreign language, one might reach such heights of laughter as to lose entirely any semblance of reverence.

In memory, it is a hot Sunday morning in Carrasco, the rich neighborhood of Montevideo, Uruguay. I am one of two gringos among nearly a

hundred Uruguayans, both of us missionaries nearing the end of two years of service. The chapel is filled with families in summer dresses and breezy shirts for a sacrament meeting, the Mormon equivalent of a mass. After a solemn hymn a member of the congregation approaches the podium to say an opening prayer. "Our kind and gracious Heavenly Father," he begins, and I bow my head, close my eyes, try to keep my mind from wandering as I listen to his prayer. Slowly I become aware of a muffled, tinny music in the air, something like the overflow from a too-loud Walkman's headphones. Appalled at the insolence, the sacrilege of playing a Walkman in the chapel during the meeting, I open my eyes and slyly look around me to find the blasphemer. All other heads are bowed and none with headphones. I again close my eyes and try to focus, but by now the music is clearer. I try to focus on the words of the prayer, but I am awash in "She's an Easy Lover," by Phil Collins and Philip Bailey. "She'll get a hold on you, believe it. She's like no other; before you know it you'll be on your knees." Bailey's falsetto is almost grating, and with another quick peek, my sono-location system tells me that the speakers in the chapel ceiling are channeling the music along with the prayer.

I slide down the bench away from my companion, Elder Lawrence, so as not to laugh. The missionary persona is serious, business-like (after all, we're teaching the eternal truths: where we came from, why we're here, where we're going), and we often have trouble with it. Lawrence is the kind of guy who can make you laugh just by raising his eyebrows to let you know he's seen what you've seen, and several times before we've lost it during serious religious discussions. The opening prayer is one of the longest I've ever heard, and my mind is slowly breaking down its resistance to laughter. I am nearly hanging over the edge of the bench, bent over in airplane-emergency-landing position, biting my tongue, when I feel the pew start to rumble and shake with Lawrence's silent convulsions. With that the dam of my resolve bursts, and so does Lawrence's, and no amount of turning away, thinking of other things, biting tongues and holding noses shut can stop the laughter. The tears roll down my face, the silent chuckles break through stifles into snorts and clicks, and finally the prayer ends. As the members of the congregation lift their inclined heads and open their eyes, every neck is craned toward us, on every face an expression of confusion and dismay.

Only the emotion of love takes higher rank than the emotion of laughter.

—Max Beerbohm

As I write—now, in this moment—I can hear my daughter's muted laughter behind me. She is lying in bed, sucking on her whole hand, eyes bright with the morning sun through the window, and she is laughing. It is not clear to me what she is laughing about, but her laughter without motive is beautiful. I listen closely, watching her, and I laugh out loud.