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Mark Levine

Being Late

It seemed rather late to get started.

Those who were expecting us would be gone by now and would not be returning. We had our chances.

But we were in no hurry. The animals, if animals they could be called, would not be disturbed by the sun, and those of us who made it this far had hoarded protective garments.

We had no illusions; we no longer bothered looking up to check the sky. The abandoned milk truck in which we huddled still smelled like milk.

We tried to recall the past with nostalgia, the months in the forest when we ate what we killed.

We had fuel back then, we were always on the move, scraping lush moss from beneath fallen trees.

The vacant towns hadn't all been looted. Once we found a ham that had been buried in the snow.

And here and there we still found damp corners, beneath bed frames or staircases, damp corners that smelled like people.

I like to take notes. It passes the time.

I wish the girl would stop dancing, stop making that dizzying noise with her feet.

Her brother spends too much time drawing outlines in the dirt. I don't think they get it.

There's much to do, and no time to explain.

I say to the girl "I'm too busy to explain"

and she stops moving and kneels by her brother.
The boy is good. The outlines he draws
look like bodies, without any illusions,
and he fills in the outlines with colored glass,
leaving the faces blank.

Later I hand out pink cards with today's prayer.
We stand in a clearing and sing it. Then we try again.
It took me all day and most of yesterday to come up with
it.

It's beautiful.

And we mean it. How could we not?

How could we not mean it, and remain here, standing
beneath the obscene sun
with so little room for error?
With so little time left?