The Telltale Bat

For the past three years, the coronavirus has plagued the world, and though vaccines have come out and quarantine mandates were lifted, the effects of the crisis on personal perspectives and experiences remain. In "The Fairy-Tale Virus" (2020), Sabrina Orah Mark remarks on the ubiquitous nature of the coronavirus and recollects her experiences from before its conception to the ongoing present. In this excerpt reflecting on the bat that started the virus, Mark reiterates the unforeseeable trait of geneses and mirrors the chaotic state of the world through her writing.

Mark navigates the reader through her passage through the careful use of articles which establish the unawareness the reader may have about origins, not of coronavirus, but of anything. Mark begins her paragraph with the declaration that she "keep[s] thinking about the bat" (2). Using the definite article "the" implies a familiarity with this bat, and while the readers may be familiar in the sense of it being the determined source of the virus, it also stands as a symbol for the origin of anything, even if this association is not made yet. Mark develops this latter meaning for a bat through the rest of the paragraph, mentioning how, among a list of all differing aspects in life, "the soup you'll eat tonight is a bat;" "the moon, the sun, and the stars in the sky are all bats" (2). Reflecting on the motives of her language, by prefacing the subjects in this list with "the" and bat with "a," Mark associates these familiar, but vastly different concepts to the singular, unfamiliar idea of "a bat," posing the question of how all these terms could relate. Since the literal definition of a bat as an animal does not fit the circumstances, the role of the bat as it was first introduced within Mark's piece, as the genesis of an unpredictable event, can be applied in its stead.

In this sense, this excerpt is not about bats at all, but rather the extension of the butterfly effect in how large events can chain from seemingly insignificant ones. Examining the role of "the bat that started this cavalcade of coughing that shook a whole entire planet," the bat had no control or awareness of what came of itself (2). The contrast between a single bat and the grand scope of the consequences "[shaking] a whole planet" not only conveys the unlikeliness of such a chain of events, but even a certain unreasonability in expecting such an outcome. Applying this concept to "your mother," "my mother," "you," "every action we've ever taken," "death," "birth," "God," and even "not believing in God," all of these represent the debatably blissful ignorance of what may result of its direct actions or wills (2). Just as the bat had no choice, neither does anyone or anything else. Just as the bat, everything becomes a part of something larger than itself, having an influence, even small, even unanticipated. Furthermore, the unassuming role of the bat is emphasized by Mark's initial wanderings of "what it felt like when she wrapped her wings around her thin body like a cloak," and if she "swoop[ed]" or was "frightened" (2). Specifying a "thin body" paired with the image of having to wrap something protective and warm like a "cloak" around herself while potentially being "frightened" creates an idea of fragility, and even delicacy. This, by extension, paints the bat as harmless, and including the imagery of it "swoop[ing]" through the air, even elegant. Yet despite its nature and its intentions, the historic chain of events led to a global pandemic.

Additionally, Mark's actual organization of the individual items in her list also contributes to this idea of unpredictability she develops through the bats. Within her list, rather than the scale gradually increasing or decreasing, Mark jumps from herself and the reader to "every action we've ever taken" to "the soup you'll eat tonight" to "this virus" to "poems" to "our lungs" to "death" and "birth" to "the moon, the suns, and the stars" to "when you cannot sleep at night" to "your fear" to "God" and "not believing in God" (2). By consistently jumping between topics of personal to global scales, Mark equalizes these concepts, mimicking the indiscriminate existence with its consequences she is speaking about. The deviation of listing items all jumbled in scope also works to produce an unfamiliar, even jarring, sensation which further mirrors the nature of the future. Moreover, including herself and her family alongside the reader at the beginning of this list establishes the social arena of everyone being together in facing something as imposing as the coronavirus because these ideas are also equalized.

Finally, the syntax of the paragraph establishes another layer of connection between herself and the reader. The list is composed of short, mostly simple sentences, making the text sound choppy and rushed. This, combined with the aforementioned sudden shifts in subject matter, conveys the writing like a train of thought. Rather than a calmer, composed reflection explaining her reasoning for calling everything a bat, Mark just states her thoughts and leaves the readers with them, as if she herself came to the discovery when she was writing. For the reader, the work feels not like a lecture or story, but as if Mark is rambling, and the initial confusion felt when everything is likened to a bat contributes to this. Taken in with the cultural arena of this piece in the world quarantined by coronavirus, the words are rushed, and a bit chaotic, reflecting the frantic feelings felt by Mark, the frantic feelings felt by many within the pandemic.

Through her extended metaphor of all things around us being a bat, Mark implores readers to reflect on the unpredictability of life and sympathizes with her audience by mirroring through her text that the frantic state brought on by COVID is felt by everyone. For Mark, her motives were not a lecture, or advice, or entertainment, but just her own recount of events and thoughts as one among many affected by the global pandemic.

Works Cited

Mark, Sabrina Orah. "The Fairy-Tale Virus." *Happily.* 6 Apr. 2020.