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Like Job, my job on this journey called life is to not question

let the devil dare play with my emotions

let the devil do his evil deeds

let the devil enter familiar forms, family, friends, and those I know as foes

let my faith lead me

blindfolded down the dark narrow path questioning not

let the devil leave me dangling there on the edge

let the devil laugh as vertigo makes me waver

let my faith steady my heart questioning not whether I will fall or fly.

—Charles Portolano
Fountain Hills, AZ
THE DREAM OF MEANINGS

Listen.

I don’t know if I’m speaking to you before or beyond the grave.

Words lose their path, like walkers in a dark wood. Some say words never find the way back, never join the things they mean: cirrus cloud, mercy, foal, seashore, eyelid, grace, not even love.

They say each word is elegy to what it signifies, marker of loss, a gravestone.

I don’t doubt our words go astray, miss the crossroad, sit down in the rain and cry. But sometimes I dream, and in that dream, words mean everything we want them to mean.

Sometimes they reveal the griefs or hopes we kept secret from ourselves, teaching us as they pass over our lips, like a lover’s kiss. Sometimes they are precise as the knife we use to gut the trout, separating white flesh from dark entrails to feed our children.

Listen, for our time together is brief, and passing. In the dream of meanings, I learned what the words meant because I believed that the words meant.

I offer no proof. You must have faith, or be silent.

The ones who speak of elegy, of loss and confusion, say words are a blackberry bramble collapsed upon itself, unable to bear fruit, though I doubt they would ever kneel down before a bramble of blackberries,
such pliable, thorny wood, such unrefined sweetness,
a shelter for rabbits and mice.

But in my dream, the word is epithalamion to what it signifies,
the wedding-song
our breath takes up as it marries the world,
bride and bridegroom indistinguishable in cool afternoon light,
their nuptials joyous and bountiful,
filling this life and the next with laughter, nighttime crickets, sounds of
   water, the descant of birdsong.

In my dream I could feel the weight of each word,
its pleasant coarseness, its heft and lug,

and so could you.

Those who say our words are a bramble
are afraid, as children often are
when they reach into that thicket the first time
to pluck a nipple of fruit so ripe it seems drenched with the seasons that
   made it grow.
They fear thorns and wounds, and tell themselves it is impossible to touch
   the fruit, let alone taste it.

Listen to them. You need to understand
it is impossible,
   it is a miracle,
and you may savor the meaning of that word any moment you choose.

Reach through,
grasp what was hidden, never mind the cuts, they are part of the whole,
hardship joined to peace, suffering wed to joy,
and taste the promise.

The words mean just what they say.

Listen.
SITTING WITH WOMEN

My mother’s voice came from deep within, her timing, inflections, in sync with the rhythm of her heart. I began to love the sounds of words, the words strung together, followed by a laugh or sigh. No gestures from hands in soapy water, in gardens, gliding with a sewing machine needle, hands around coffee cups and around children—just words.

While friends gathered beneath the shedding mulberry trees forming mounds of yellowed leaves into the blueprints of houses, I would claim a sore throat so I could stay in and sit at the kitchen table with the women. I’d curl my way into my mother’s lap, ear against chest, and pretend sleep, letting women’s voices enter my ears and get under my skin.

VIGIL

In my garden on Snowden the air hums and clicks and tweets and smells of warm iris and rose. A chubby lizard darts through the sage and stops to assess me. Up, down, up down, a little sentry in a foxhole, he does jerky push-ups to take my measure. Safe? No. Safe? No. Safe? And he fixes me with one eye, blinks, and moves on to nestle in the daisies.

My cellphone breaks the symphony, briefly I hope, and you tell me your prognosis is uncertain, not to worry, more tests, not to worry. And I listen and pace, up and down in the soft grass, trying to hear what you are saying, trying to know what comes next, trying not to.
Sometimes as 1 am, tossing,
turning, I hear the low mean whistle,
a train, freight not passenger,
beyond the scruff of farmers’ fence row.
Lying alone, it makes a body wonder
where it’s come from and where it’s headed.
Sun and palm? Bluff and mountain?
Like an old country song nobody now plays,
it makes a body itch to rise up and follow,
follow those steel rails beyond sense,
beyond boundaries and borders.

But my people are not a runaway people.
We are nine to five at the dinner and thrift store,
we are PTA and tilling rows without complaint,
we are granddad’s second cousin and mom’s
nephew’s wife woven.

Even when we go, we always find our way
back to these woods and creeks,
back to moonlight clinging to the clearing.
Back to a somewhat peace,
back to silently wondering, listening.
EBB TIDE

Leaning arm-to-arm against the railing
as the four o’clock ferry cut
across the sound, you boasted,
“A few years from now, I’m coming back.
I’m going to live here.” I ignored you,
because that was my plan, too.
I didn’t want to think of us
leaving that Saturday,
our parents’ two station wagons loaded
down with towels, umbrellas, sun block,
aunts, uncles, cousins younger than
us, man-child, woman-child, fourteen, twelve,
rivals, though our parents were best friends.
What you were to me: unsettling
as a riptide current, something I couldn’t quite surf.
As the soft-shell crabs, I burrowed, I hid.
I stared out across the shipyard and swooping gulls,
across the wave runners, wind-salt-spray
tangling my bangs across my face, I wanted
belief that we’d never leave, that we’d come back
as you said. “Look, a dolphin fin!” You pointed
at a gray dorsal arcing up through the glittering
blue. We were leaning in, our two faces almost–
I turned. Peering into the absence.
“It disappeared,”

my voice strange, worn
prickly like a sand dollar’s surface,
trembling in the heat. You whispered back,
looking out over the sea, “Yeah,
it’s gone now. Definitely.”

KEEPSAKES

They outlast our human weakness—
our separations, long or short,
the earnest pledges that we could not keep

So perhaps we honor them too much
as if they breathed or loved:
the abalone ring
the crystal heart
the figurine with the sweet
chipped face, set for eternity

I would not consign to storage the battered desk
a dear one owned— with brass pulls
she attached “to soften up the image.”
her small hands curving to the task

“Put it on the porch,” a friend says,
seeing nothing special in it,
not understanding
that its aura helps to ease my lonelier hours

A navy captain told once
of a sailor from Vermont, who slept
each night at sea, on a dainty pillow
stuffed with balsam boughs

“Remarkable,” the captain said, that no one ever
 teased the sailor
or ever touched his tiny pillow

Shared among us is this truth of
objects kept, that they warm the blood
on winter nights
On oceans of uncertainty they hold
the scent of home
The old Faith Lutheran Church floats by
on Highway 87 at 15 m.p.h.
like some celestial funeral
The hearse a huge flatbed pulled by a semi
The procession flagmen with *Oversize Load* signs
Montana Power employees with cranes
and a road crew to stop traffic
when power lines are lifted

Onlookers line the highway
that slices the town in half
The church cuts too
Into the hearts of those who mourn its passing
Children of immigrant parents who came to farm
and formed community in a prairie church 89 years ago

Who rode every Sunday in horse-drawn buggies
or sleighs in their only good outfits
Sat in fourteen wooden pews
in front of a wheat-cross over the organ
Took turns every Christmas Eve
ringing the bell in the three-truncated steeple

(Continued...)
They who ate sausage and sauerkraut
at church potlucks and sneaked
kringle cookies under tables at bake sales
Who moved into town or away to city jobs
Leaving finally three families
to padlock the doors and decide
the fate of Faith Lutheran
To choose between vandals, decay or conversion
to coffee shop, beauty salon or saloon

Or to slash the communal heart even deeper
in the way of King Solomon and the two harlots
The good-mother congregation
giving up its creation to save it
To watch its history disappear
into 300 miles of highway and gravel

Knowing it will be buried in a beginning
Born again to other Lutherans
Who will bless it as the holy hub
of their senior assisted living center
Glass hallways leading
from their apartments into salvation

RENTERS

Our roots never took. We’re month to month.
Knowing the burdens of lifting what we own,
We slip our lives into used hollows
Fill spaces as delicate as beehive cups
With our dazed necessities;
Settle in to sit out the landing stage
Of our perpetual half-time.

We know well the phases of flight:
The tape-scarred boxes fed to the moving truck,
The keys handed back like silver coins,
The small square of earth left in offering
Chaotic and spent with the seed-dreams
Of our fellow rootless, weaving their presence
Dreamily into the sallow dirt.

In wait, we watch the neighbor’s bird
Tense and exuberant in her holding cell
Scanning the streets with her oily eye
Until she, too, is lifted in passive flight.
And where once sat a dresser and bed
On the limp carpet burns the ghosts of their weight:
Eight ashen squares pressed in like footprints.
REMEMBERING A MORNING IN ARISTOTLE’S GARDEN

Small birds were hopping madly in the trees that day, and when you called them seekers, therefore not fulfilled, we heard them singing and I asked, is that the burden of their song?

Above there was the gift that day of upward drafts clear road beyond, and the ecstasy offered the lustful searcher, but even they could not quiet the birds.

Then, on a swaying sprig of elm, for a moment free of every urge, there was a still and silent bird for whom I felt an empathy when it, like all the others was compelled to leap up for the sky.

THE BLACK LEATHER-BOUND JOURNAL WITH RED-STITCHED BINDING

How will I ever describe you, inanimate object that begs to come alive with words, a black ribbon falling on a white page, bookmark for thought?

Black tabula rasa
Empty slate.
Well, I will tell you, dear journal, sometimes you will be empty in favor of a lived life.
Still, your red edges will always invite me back in where I belong.

Sometimes you will be full, my tribute to the lived life, worth examining.

But as I look at your closer, I see how you work on me. You are not ordinary paper at all. You are lined, have purpose.

The black, elegant pen with red stitching down one side matches you, and I can open you up like a gift, close you as I do now, like a book.
AT HOME

Thanksgiving Day the sweet smell of pine
rises past the tallest tree,
the wind whispering:
You are nobody’s daughter, mother, aunt, niece.

Out of town now near the California coastline,
your past rises above the mountains in mist.
You walk, and with each step you take,
you are not you.

The ocean moves away from you.
You take another step towards it as the fog rolls in.
Coast less, you feel a chill that is yours alone, like footprints.
No mother tells you to button up; you’ll catch cold.

While the seagull lifts its wings above you,
the constants come back,
a litany of smells: turkey, cranberries, pumpkin,
and drift away into snow and long walks.

You are at home far away
with this feast of solitude that needs no dressing.
The wild gull soars:
You are sister to the sky, the ducks,
the cold embrace of ocean wind,
blessed to move in with this family.

WINTER IN TAOS

haibun for my husband

First frost: I ask you to take down the ancient pine, so tired and gnarled,
we can no longer see beyond its lank branches, folded-in needles. We’ll
burn it in January, tock-tock of piñon mixing with smudge and sage.

You prophesy an easy cut— just 13 whacks of iron-handled axe and bow
saw, then speckled frog trunk should spindle into tender pieces. Start

with the longest limbs, crooked at bottom, easier still, brittle boughs
giving with the silver of back and forth, mottled lichen and memories
tilting up-sky for the time of standing still.

I watch you shift jade bundles (once struck by high-desert lightning),
bark and snag for hand-pricking, nuts shriveled by years of frost melt,
pitch ooze, strings of fireweed and colored lights, 2 dead bees, before

arc of your god arms begins the topping: Rough saw-play slices heat
through thick canopy, then all at once green tomb spirals, spirals until

hard ground blesses soft surrender. Next day, speckling, the stone walk,
your work. I collect firewood to stack, splinter on smooth in finished
rows, yet ringing each cut, this translucent necklace of opal tears.

snow falling over-
night is not as jeweled
in sadness
LOST HANKIE

It started like a lost wing feather floating to earth, the wind roared, the temperature plummeted and snowy white down fell from heaven
Blanketing earth in a white duvet.
It was cuddle up with hot chocolate and book weather
But the outside chores beckoned.

All season long the cattle were fed, moved to pasture, barn, corral. Snow drifts had to be shoveled as the county plows scraped roads clean
Leaving traveling trails.
I slipped and fell, wiped my runny eyes then watched the wind Carry my hankie across field and lane.

Each day routine, until first thaw when rivulets made new rivers And mice tracks in the remaining snow spoke of underground mysteries And new wonders revealed themselves.
Walking pastures there was the abandoned nest, the first stalk of greening grass And there at my feet, a long lost hankie.
THE MESSAGE

Steepled churches deliver sermons from their pulpits in the air preaching to the hurried to the worried, look up, look up.

Gently pointing beyond earth and earthly matters. When you pass them think of your life passing—whether tall, massive, awesome, humble, old, and nearly tumbling—reflect a second more.

Faith comes in mysterious ways. Offer what you can and offer what you cannot. He will take what He will and make you better for it.

—Connie Lakey Martin
Orangeburg, SC

SURVIVAL

Survival. Rhymes with revival. For me, survival depends upon revival.

Revival signals change. Change of outlook, change of circumstances, change of mind, change of heart. The very last thing some look for is change. But know this, even if you aren’t looking for change, change will come looking You! If you have any hope of surviving the hand life deals you, brace yourself, and learn to deal with change. You may even learn to appreciate the joys of surviving reviving change.

Things need reviving every now and then. I have revived my livingroom more times than my husband’s back can recall. You know your husband loves you truly when after he’s changed everything around you say, “You know, this just doesn’t work, would you mind putting everything back the way it was?”

If only we could put life back the way it was after we make desirable decisions with undesirable outcomes. Decisions made at a point we don’t think we can survive one more day without change. Decisions to change career, sell a house, buy a new car, quit school, divorce, max the credit card, bend the rules, break the promise, discard a friendship. Disruptive, damaging decisions.

So how do you know when change is a good thing? You don’t. Not always. And if someone asks me for advice, I always ask them how they feel. I never want fear of the unknown to keep me from plunging when I feel positive.

Survival. We want to believe we’ll survive our days, the airplane trip, the ride across town, the daily grind, rejection, loneliness.

Heartbreak. Heartbreak. Heartbreak. Some say only the strong survive. I say the soft will revive. What makes you soft? Understanding. Being someone’s soft place to land when they’ve fallen. Forgiving others, and forgiving yourself. Patience and tenderness with those you love, patience and tenderness with those you don’t love. For this, your heart will be in constant need of revival.

People need reviving too. Resurgence. Revitalization, reclamation, rehabilitation, restoration. Returning to the point where you were surviving or once felt alive, needed, blooming, bearing fruit. Change you can sink your teeth in.

I will survive. I will revive.

by Connie Lakey Martin, Editor
“...He knows the secrets of the heart.” ~Psalm 44:21

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