

The Temple of the Word

Lyric Poetry and the Conservation of the Self and the World

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1.

WHEN GOD WANTED finally to cut Job a break, He gave him a Natural History lesson, and he gave it to him in poetry.

Times like Job's come to most of us, often in midlife: grief and depression, an unravelling of self, a sort of exile from one's self and one's world. And they've befallen me these past few years, and that's the territory, read one way, many of my recent poems explore—a long unhearing, a fracturing of my self it has been hard to get to the end of. I scatter some lines from those poems, moments of anguish and few footfalls toward a new hearth, through this essay.

The Book of Job, according to Tennyson the most beautiful work of poetry in all of Western Literature, is a consideration in sustained metaphor of a theological question: "Why do the righteous suffer?". I don't put myself in Job's righteous shoes. What triggered my crisis—if it did not begin way back at my birth and before—was the end of a marriage, for which I was to blame, and the shattering of a family, which I have labored hard to mend. Though Job wails "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, / yea, are mighty in power . . . their houses . . . safe from fear?", the truth is all of us get to suffer, some of us profoundly, the meek and the mighty; and the worst of suffering like Job's is what happens afterwards in one's mind.

The suffering that is the unmaking of the self is bedded in psychological predisposition, and manifests as a neuro-chemical disruption in the brain, which we are only at the start of understanding; it is an encounter, unavoidable for some of us, with the shadow-side of consciousness, a darkness that living wide awake will always come to in the end. It may be set off by trauma, however caused, whoever is to blame, by cruelty or betrayal or loss or illness, by the alienation of one's children, by any of the many kinds of misfortune that are in the nature of things. These digital days, it may be induced by the internet, by the incoherence of the world and one's identity in it, the pixilation of reality that is a particular aspect of contemporary existence.

Despair like Job's may be understood, whatever causes it, as a falling out of wonder with the world, out of awe, a catastrophic failure of conviction about one's own miraculous part in the larger scheme of things. Life loses shape and refuses form; the hearth that held you lets you slip. One is unhoused from one's days and tortured by one's nights. One is beyond one's own or anyone's reach.

My version of Job's lot has felt like profound disenchantment with myself and my work. Even the world of birds and ridgetops and rivers and trees lost its magic. Each morning I wake and my life is something less than a theoretical proposition. My unhearing is a spiritual distemper, to which, perhaps, the most wondering minds are most prone; it is a loss of one's grip on the meaning of a life, a nihilism to which, perhaps, those of us most dedicated to the making of meaning are most vulnerable. And it falls especially hard on those who never learn how to care for themselves, who never, early, learned to *feel* what they said they knew—that the nature of the universe is love, and that some of that love was meant for oneself and, a birthright, and secure.

The worst of the anguish is not the loss of one's actual hearth, one's people and their love, though that is bad enough; the worst of it is how one comes unhearthed in one's head. The worst of it for Job is not that he's persecuted, but that he persecutes himself; among all his losses the chief is his loss of belief in his own worth. And so depression goes.

The shattering of a self. Loss of life's lyric. A self and a world evacuated of all meaning for a time. A long time, sometimes. Where there was joy, there is panic.

Job loses his hearth, and he loses heart. He is "broken in pieces;" he loses his means and his way, his fortune and his family's affection; "my breath is strange to my wife" and "Yea, young children despised me; I arose, and they spoke against me." As Job puts it, perhaps not realizing what he says: "All my inward friends abhorred me." Job, in his travails, lost the capacity to be a friend to himself, to father and console himself, to remember what he belonged to, the family of his affections, and how to delight in it. He forgot how to be grateful for the gift of his own life.

Job finds his way out of woe by chance. By grace. God relents. The unhearing ends, and he is home again and rich in days. But not before he gets the lecture in natural history and natural justice. He comes good when the world in the words of God reminds him of the arrogance of Job's pity and humbles him back home—puts him back inside the wonder of things. God, the embodiment of the mind of the world, wants Job, wants each of us, even in our despair or perhaps as a way out of our despair, to wonder again. At the beauty of all Creation. Job is asked to remember his own life, blighted for a time, as part of all that God hath wrought. He wants Job, to make his life now worthy of his suffering, as the Buddha put it in another faith system.

Hearken unto this, O Job:

stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God.

Dost thou know when God disposed them,

And caused the light of his cloud to shine?

Dost thou know the balancings of the clouds...

when he quieteth the earth by the south wind?

God asks Job: “Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days?” He asks him, unrelenting: “Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth?” and “Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid of the grasshopper?” “Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south?” Beautiful and petulant.

Then God calls Job to action, back into the world. He reminds Job that he, like all of us, has in him the power and the duty to save himself, and to save some others in the process: “Gird up thy loins like a man...Deck thyself now with majesty and excellence,/ and array thyself with glory and beauty”—one of God’s creatures and therefore holy; a human being and therefore compelled to act with conscience: “Look on every one that is proud, and abase him... and tread down the wicked in their place... Then I will confess unto thee/ that thy own right hand can save thee.”

God’s concluding remarks bring to mind Seamus Heaney’s in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Poetry, said, Heaney, “satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust.” Poetry’s work: to hold the world to account and at the same time to hold everything dear, including oneself. Love’s work, too; and the work the unhearthed self must find a way to do, though he finds it almost impossible to get out of bed some mornings and get on with it, with anything.

2.

Most people, as William Styron writes in his luminous reflection on his own affliction, *Darkness Visible*, come through depression in the end. The return of wonder is a sign one has bottomed out, like Dante at the end of his downward pilgrimage through hell. The beloved shows, and the heavens throw light again. Just how and when the capacity for wonder returns is another of the mysteries God would have Job respect. Science still knows little about Depression, how it comes and why it lifts. One thing I know, and *The Book of Job* seems to say, is that there’s more than grace involved in its passing: there’s time, a lot of it, and there’s work, and it may be the hardest you’ll ever get to do.

Here’s the work: Still your mind; find home again among all that you belong to. Healing has to do with making in your daily life and in your habits of mind a new and coherent shape and asking yourself to believe in it and live it out. Healing is making your life a poem again, in which all that you

belong to is implied, all grief and all joy, birdsong and books. Healing is a hearth you fashion to replace the one you lost.

A hearth once lost is hard to find again, and harder yet to hold. The loneliness that comes with being dispossessed of yourself, the exile from all that loved you once, is a condition that in its nature refuses the very work that would make it well. It takes Job forty-two books to make his peace with the god in him. To stop fighting the river. It's taken me long enough, too.

3.

Hearth contains “earth” and “heart” and “hear” and “art”, as many others, I’m sure, have noted. To return to health (of mind and body), is to become whole again: “health”, a word so close in form to “hearth” is etymologically related to “whole”. In returning to health of heart and head, one comes together again; all your several and severed pieces find home, and the home, yourself, finds a world to hold still in, to serve and save and celebrate...

To be truly at home in yourself is to feel you belong to something more than yourself. As David Hinton puts it in *Hunger Mountain*: “Things are themselves only as they belong to something more than themselves: I to we, we to earth, earth to planets and stars...” (p3). In *Hunger Mountain*, Hinton walks the mountain near his home in Vermont, giving thought as he walks to the poetry he has translated so limpidly from the Chinese. “Wisdom for [the ancient Chinese poets],” writes Hinton, “meant belonging deeply to that cosmology of restless hunger” (p4) that is the landscape and all of us within it.

It is precisely that sense of belonging that is lost in depression. How do you conjure belonging back? The hearth where the outer world meets the inner, where all the selves you are, inside and out, is remade, I think, mostly by faith and hope. One of my recent poems, “Back When,” puts it this way:

Love's work now
Is five parts hanging in there, and four parts
hanging on. Waiting

Out the fracture. Sweeping up the mess.
Backfilling every rift, meantime,
with awe. Keeping faith in silence.

Somehow, you hold open a space for your whole self, not your old one, but one more at ease with the way things are, with the sorrow of things, to return—a space like a garden in which a renewed

belonging takes root and leafs out. And perhaps the work of holding open that space—refusing the doubts that shut it down and close your mind against it; the despair and self-pity that are the prevailing weather—is itself a hearth, a poem, a place of welcome waiting for you to be ready to feel it.

And one day, as for Job, the future does return, and you find yourself in it, with “world enough and time”. For the belonging never really ceased—no matter how one was defamed, abused, disparaged, or exiled, no matter how deep the grief ran, and how long the despair played, that disappears the truth. As my unhearing persists, I experience moments of ease, a few hours here and there, sometimes half a day. And mostly those moments of coherence and something close to joy are brought on my reading or writing poems, by acts of friendship, and by walking out into the world.

4.

Self is a verb; through our lives, we selve.

In his pioneering psychological writings, William James proposed that the self is never whole. For one thing, one is the knower and the known. For another, one is a being among many: family, community, peers, society, lives past and present, stories, times, moments, all beings. All we belong to is who we are. We compose ourselves, James meant, and we do it in a daily conversation with all that is not merely oneself. We are not merely subjects (victims, heroes...); our selves are intersubjective. In particular, James emphasized, the self is a state that includes the world around. One negotiates who one is in conversation with where one is and how one adapts. Job’s world comes to an end when he loses sight of the world, when what afflicted him became all he was.

Self is a hearth you make and keep making, like a fire. Selving is the work of *re-membering* all that you are. The hearth of yourself is not all your own work, either, but the work of that constellation of belongings you share, which after a time insist on your presence among them again. Your self is an accompanied place, a meeting house.

When you lose touch with the world around and dwell too much in your head, you lose your mind, you lose your self. “When,” as I put it in my poem “Frog Nocturne”, “you were out there, everywhere.”

5.

Coming back into the ground of one's belonging is a matter, in the end, of grace. So it felt for Styron. But grace, as Norman Mclean has put it (word's I've lived by without understanding quite how much they meant), "comes by art, and art does not come easy."

And my art has not come easy these past years—neither the art of living nor the art of writing, which had, till now, been a world of wilderness and play, a deep consolation I could find without working too hard for it. It is a myth, I think, that artists prosper on adversity. More truthful are Kyo Maclear's words in *Bird Art, Life*: "a mind narrows when it has too much to bear" (p7). Writing these words, for example, has not come easy; writing these poems has seemed almost to cost me myself. But I know the only worse thing would have been not to write them at all.

If it was hard to make, then at least it got made, and I am recharged in the process—and perhaps, who knows, others will find some healing in the reading. Writing to the young poet, Rilke says that only poetry that comes hard, poetry that had to be made, is worth a damn. Or words to that effect. "Hold to what is difficult," Rilke also said. And I've held.

Most of the time, these past years, my mind has run like Elizabeth Bishop's Sandpiper:

He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake...

...Looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!

Too often, these past years, my days have felt as I describe them in "When the Panic":

When the silence grows shrill in you and won't be said;
When the sadness grows deep in you, like winter, but will

Not well; when the panic rises, like the past, and won't
Be shaken; when five years of untaken sleep become

A nightmare of doubt, a life in drought; when the fear
Wakes before you with the scissors in its hands; when

Hope becomes a harder case than you know how to make;
When the floor drops from under everything you thought

You were and meant and knew; when the world shrinks
Back to shibboleth and nothing peaceful anywhere knows

The letters of your name...

Such is the perpetual slow-burning emergency of the unhoused self. And this is the cruel truth: the stillness of mind art requires for its making is never harder to achieve than in those times when you most need to make the art. A poem is hard to make in catastrophe and hyper-vigilance, but the best way back to the quietness art requires is art itself. The making. And making poems under the weight of despair requires the will, a blind faith and more courage than you feel. You must sometimes force yourself there, and open the space, and swim against the tide of panic. Remembering my children has fired my flagging will. The thought of them has sometimes brought enough stillness to raise a poem and bring the calm it requires for its making.

Most of the time, I have lived these past few years out of step “with all that escapes me,” as Seamus Heaney puts it in “Postscript.” Making poetry, though, (and sometimes taking a walk, and sometimes receiving love), has from time to time led me back into the lyric of everything else I am, which poetry overhears. It is my blessing that poetry, a poetry of necessity, has kept insisting upon itself, waking me hard from the dread lethargy of depression.

Art—letting rhythm and metaphor rock me back to the world beyond my head—can become a hearth you can dwell in, a tent and a fire-place under stars, while you wait your homelessness out.

One Saturday morning in August, staying in a friend’s spare room, a cabin set down like a Japanese temple in a water garden, a poem came, “Morning Doves, Zen Garden.” And writing it, sitting outside, carried back toward the grace the poem describes:

At a certain point,
If you can’t forget, you can’t get by; remember instead:
The music of the mind of things—birdsong, frog plunk, cloud
 shadow. Lines that hold; children who grow; things as they are. Leaves
Have fallen like pirate pieces on the pebbles by the pond. Something is strong in you
 and won’t stop: water
 on stone, summer holed up inside the fall.

6.

The science of psychology is beginning to acknowledge the role of poetry, reading it and writing it, in helping sufferers survive their depression and remake meaning. A search under “poetry therapy” in Google will yield a wealth of research literature—most of it unreadable. There is even a

Journal of Poetry Therapy. A poem, Robert Carroll writes in one paper, “gets into us and plays through our psycho/neuro/immune-sensory selves.” There is some sense in this literature that the shaping of traumatic experience into the sculpture of voice that is a poem, and the way a poem engages musical and linguistic brain-functions at once, reconciling the two hemispheres, have something to do with a poem’s power to heal. Poetry orders the chaos of experience into lyric sense; it even pieces our minds together again. Russell Mearns has a wonderful book on this subject, *The Poet’s Voice in the Making Mind*, which argues that the metaphoric mode poetry employs, the play it makes in and with language, the leaps of connection it allows, distinguish poetry-making and -reading as essential in the making of a mind, and in the remaking of the broken self.

Perhaps that’s why God spoke to Job the way he did, in metaphor and meter.

Gregory Orr writes beautifully on this in his book *Poetry as Survival*. As a boy, Orr shot his brother dead in a hunting accident. He found his way out of despair, his parents and all those around him being utterly unable to comfort him, when a local librarian suggested he read some poetry. “We often experience the world as confusing and chaotic, especially during crises. This confusion can be outside us, in the objective conditions of our social and political lives, or it can be inside us... Our day to day consciousness can be characterized as an endlessly shifting, back-and-forth awareness of the power and presence of disorder in our lives and our desire or need for a sense of order...” and “in certain existential crises disorder threatens to overwhelm us entirely...” “Human culture,” Orr concludes, “invented” or evolved the personal lyric as a means of helping individuals survive the existential crises represented by extremities of subjectivity and also by such outer circumstances as poverty, suffering, pain, illness, violence or the loss of a loved one.”

That survival happens in two ways in the making of a poem, Orr writes: first we shift the experience a “bearable distance” from us into the world of language; second, the poet has “made and shaped” her experience into a form, has brought order to disorder, rather than “passively” enduring it. As Shakespeare puts it, the poet gives to “airy nothings” (not so airy, sometimes) “a local habitation and a name”. Poems make places out of emotions and ideas. Though it’s made of breath and words and implications, a poem is an architecture, and it will hold you. A poem is a garden you that will tend you.

7.

And why, among the many forms of utterance, literature and the other arts, does poetry have this special power? Form is a large part of the answer, and also the depths and breadths to which poetic form

and structure make our thinking and our speaking run. We are linguistic beings, as Hinton puts it. To find oneself again through language, in thought and feeling rightly voiced, is to truly home oneself again.

Poetry can make one's suffering habitable.

To make a poem is to escape your head, and thinking alone won't get one made. Poetry is what happens when we ask more of language—to ourselves as readers and writers of language and to the world—when more is asked of language (by form), than we ask of it in our daily discourse. In poetry, form and discipline let language do its other work: hymning, singing, incanting, invoking. Jane Hirshfield puts it this way: “a poem begins in language awake to its connections.” Poetry is more like what Verdi defined music as: noise organized by wisdom. And much of the wisdom belongs to a mind beyond your own.

Making a poem, or reading one, one can be reawakened, though wakeful language, to all the rest of what we've forgotten we're connected to, inside ourselves and beyond. Poetry can do this because it refuses, as Seamus Heaney has put it, “the intellect's eagerness to foreclose.” Through metaphor and rhythm, through trimness and the refusal of cliché, poetry invites more world into our head and onto our tongue than ordinary thought permits.

Through giving ourselves over to language that leads us beyond where language normally takes us—and sometimes leaves us for dead—poetry can make a hearth we can share with all the rest of who we are.

8.

“Mythologies that shape primal cultures,” as David Hinton puts it in *Hunger Mountain*, “typically embody a sense of deep kinship with landscape.” (p45). This is true of the Indigenous cultures of the traditional peoples of the continent I inhabit, and it is true of first peoples around the world, a wisdom we are only learning to acknowledge even as we risk wiping that knowing from the face of the deep. Poetry has never forgotten our kinship with the rest of the more-than-merely-human world; nor has Buddhism; and ecology is helping us remember in the West, almost too late.

Dualistic Western thought has manufactured a breach “between consciousness and the empirical landscape.” It has orphaned us, culturally, from the family of all things, and banished our minds from the wisdom embodied in places and the natural order of the cosmos. We live in our heads;

we inhabit, we are, our thoughts. We can't easily access, indeed we feel excommunicated from, the wisdom inherent in places hold, the wisdom beyond language that will earth us in our lives again.

“For the ancients, the elemental silence of things is the perfect wisdom that we, as linguistic being, have lost,” Hinton writes (p47). And it is that silence, that deep knowing, classical Chinese poetry, and all lyrical poetry in all traditions, seeks to utter. This is a paradox, of course—to seek silence through utterance. But as Jane Hirshfield writes in *Nine Gates*, poetry practices in language what meditation practices in silence. Poetry is a broad church in which many things are told and sung. But to all lyric poets, in particular the Chinese classical poets Hinton studies and translates, and to me, poetry is “nothing less than a sacred medium. . .capable of bringing us as close to that lost wisdom as language can.” (p47)

Two small poems from those I've written recently almost carry me out of my head and sit me for a time on the hearth of all things.

The first is a Sijo, a Korean form, in spirit and shape and spiritual aspiration, kin to the poems Hinton loves.

Under a thin crescent moon, I walk the mangroves with my friend
At dusk. A single heron stalks the flats, and bats stream above
The river into town. After years, at last, my heart's at peace.

The second, “Freeway Pastoral,” is a poem in a Chinese style, written—paradoxically— in my head, as I drove the freeway north.

A dozen (free range) cattle were re-arranging
Twilight into a perfect asymmetry beside
The freeway north, as I drove it toward
The city to meet my love, and day died
Back among the Picton Hills.
The dams were over-
Brimming after weeks of autumn rain; black
Ducks, out late, fretted the silver shallows,
And not a keystroke
Out the window was out of place.
In my heart, too,
The weather was still and the night swelled. Later,
We'd take this road together homeward
In the dark, and the new moon would fish
A thousand stars like supper from the stream.

Chinese is a pictographic system, of course, language made of visual metaphor. In it, the characters that combine to say *poetry*—what it is and what it does—are “Temple” and “Word.” Poetry

makes of speech a prayer, as Hinton figures it—for that is how the ancient Chinese poets understood their art as a bowing into the unknown, into the holiness of things, into the incomprehensible coherence that we have the privilege, living, to dwell among. Poetry makes a small temple, in which the cosmos we inhabit, in its and our apparent confusion, is gathered into holy order for a while. A poem is a place of pause. A belonging together again a moment in the grand and unsayable scheme of things.

Every good poem means what the cosmos means, a small piece of it anyway, and it stands you back inside it.

Poetry is divination: it is a *hearth*, a holiness made by *art*, a voicing that *hears* the *earth*, and puts it back in our *hearts* again. A poem rests our sorrows in the silence of all that passes away and all that is and was and will be again.

9.

It is the disciplines involved in making a poem—disciplines like those involved in love and prayer and meditation, of cooking and pilgrimage, but more so—that help one break clear of the clutter of thought, while putting to work the gifts of apprehension, of pattern-making and utterance that distinguish us human being, perhaps uniquely, from many other beings. Poetry can't make do with reason; it won't work if thinking is all it does. But it won't work either if one particular mind—a memory and an ecology of sense and feeling and emotion and utterance—are not at play; if someone is not turning, with the help of some learning about what it takes to make a poem, inarticulate conceits and concepts and dumb felt-sense into lines, and lines into those small rooms that stanzas are, and making of those rooms a home where all of us can dwell, forgiven.

A good poem says more than a poet could possibly know—and certainly mean—because poetry insists that the poet give their mind and their speech over, for once, not merely to what they want to say, but to what wants to be said.

Language is wiser than we know and capable of saying more than we can think; and form, as James Galvin said to me once, is the way we plug into language and what it knows (and we do not). Form pushes ego aside; it walks thinking outside. The disciplines of prosody help the poet escape Job-like loops of self; those disciplines act, when one cannot seem to act on one's own, to set one's finical thinking aside, and get some listening done and something said beyond the noise in one's head.

The disciplines of grace a poem entail work the way God finally works on Job—to let the world back into one’s head and the landscape and the sky back into one’s sense of self. Poetics are the fire on the hearth that turns soul into breath, self into Self, the personal into the human, and makes of a plaint a prayer, in which all of us are given back to our fortune (both our sorrows and our joys). In a good poem, the saying says what we too often we forget—that we belong to each other and to all things, and that some of all that is known is known in us, and some of what is beautiful is beautiful in us, and some of the integrity of the cosmos coheres in us, notwithstanding the turmoil in our heads.

The waters of the lake lie wide awake and worry
 the wind at dusk; like the feathers
Of the wood duck, they fret a rising easterly, which deepens their brown
To gray. These are captured waters, backed up behind the weir;
 they spread across the flats, and I sit beside them
As if beside my self (*all by my own*, as my daughter said,
 when she was young), and wonder where
The past has been, and I’ve been, all these passing
Years, pent up here this feather moment at the close of day.

I’ve come to the reservoir to be among kin,
 To sit and forget myself in birdsong. I’ve come
To the reservoir to sink: my hope is to slide from a mind
Shrill with hopeless schemes
 To put right everything that cannot be. I’ve had to let a life go,
Which had taken a lifetime to catch, and it helps
 To watch the kingfishers tie their flies
And wait. Hope is their knack, and I’d like to catch it if I could...
 —from “The Reservoir”

10.

To be found again and happy and at home is to know yourself and to be able to live, at least from time to time, as Hinton puts it, outside the merely “human realm of words and concepts” (like this essay)—“outside the self to which a name refers.” To feel healthy, hole, and maybe even wise, one needs to understand one’s self a small part of what the world knows and loves.

One poet who seems to have managed that, at least in his poetry, was known as “Thatch-Hut”. The character that names him so, *Thatch-Hut*, includes a half-roof, a hut open to the weather downwind, a kitchen vessel, and a tiger—an animal the ancients “revered,” writes David Hinton, “for the spontaneous power of its movements, the clarity and immediacy of its mind.” A poem is “a tiger that

lives in the everyday world,” a wildness domesticated; it is a household inhabited by the nature of the place. It is the outside come on in; it is the inside opened out.

The kind of dwelling a poem is, that practice of belonging, is hard place, in real life, to find and to hold. And it’s easy enough to lose, as Job lost it, when the self is disordered by trauma. But since it’s performed in poems, reading is a way of remembering. Writing is another. Each poem, even if only in the making, is a house, a thatched hut, that holds you and pieces you together again, and reminds you that who you are is much more than you seem.

11.

There is a risk, in a spiritual crisis, of making poems in which we “order our speech by reason of darkness,” as God warns Job. There must be room in poem for the whole of which one’s suffering is only a part; there must be light. A bird or two. Space. Speaking all one’s grief may be useful therapy, but often makes bad poetry. The challenge is to let the poem lead you out of your mind—to wonder and wander in the world, sometimes by dropping you deep down below the hell you sometimes inhabit. Despair is a place to start—the only poems that count are those, as Rilke says, made from necessity—but it is not a place to stop. The thatched hut is open to the world.

At close of day I watch an egret
 nail a soft landing in a ploughed field and earth
The shallow sky. The ground is scoured where she falls, a soul
Turned, like a pocket, inside out, and the bird wanders
 the black rows, scoring them loosely with its one bright note.

She makes an inverse music, it seems to me,
 plucking the furrows
For what they may yield, an improvised notation
That erases itself writing itself down, singing the earth back silently
 Into the belly of a bird, a reverie

In negative, which wakes the dawning dark
 all the way back to its beginning again.

—from “Egret in a Ploughed Field”

Nonetheless, it is astonishing the consolation the most agonized poems—which as they plunge, also fly—can bring. I think as I speak this of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “No Worst, There Is None”:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

The consolation, the cosmos, that gets in, is not in the anguish the poet speaks, but in the work beyond language that the metaphors and rhythms, the sound-world of the poem, divine. Such a poem holds all suffering and gives it form, an aspect of all Creation again.

12.

Depression, unhearing, though one would wish it on no one, has, if you can survive it, its uses. “There is a way of passing away from the personal, a dying,” writes Rumi, “that makes one plural,” and poetry is a way of doing that. And that dying and coming back with a pen in your hand leaves traces. Depression teaches compassion. In finding one’s way back from it, you find your way deeper into communion with all beings, especially your fellow women and men. Depression endured makes one plural.

Poems, handholds in a plunge, or momentary stays against confusion, as Frost put it, may save other lives, for each of us is likely to end up in some version of the trouble Job found himself in, and I did too. My sense is that poetry stays some of the confusion, orders some of the chaos, of existence, into which all of us may enter at some point, even if no one much reads the poems—though it’s better if they do. The coherence of the world wants saying, it seems, if it is to stay coherent, and we are to stumble well enough among it. So poetry needs making, even if the world shouts it out and mostly turns the other way.

Poetry in the west, while more marginal to the discourses of daily life perhaps than ever, remains vital, as restless in its hunger, as generative as the cosmos itself. Poetry will always be made; the challenge is to remind enough of those we teach and love and raise to read it—and, if they will, to make it. For, as Richard Rohr put it recently in an interview, it is hard to heal and stay healed in a narcissistic world without much of an ear for poetry. It is hard to stay whole and make healing in a world that doesn’t know how to slow, in a world that is as broken as Job or any of us—anxious, fractured, scattered like the sandpiper.

The world needs as many of us as hearth as it can manage. It needs the weary of spirit strong. It needs especially the seers—those who can apprehend and value all that is lost sight of in commercial and political and academic discourses—to feel at home in their lives and capable. It needs them well enough often enough to make poems to help hearth the world. Poetry is the way the world speaks its silences.

As William Carlos Williams famously wrote

It is difficult

to get the news from poems,

yet men and women die miserably

for lack

of what is found there.

May poetry, even just the fact that it exists and seems insistent to be made, remind us that we are clothed, like Job, in everyday beauty, that the world is in us, and that we are called to do justice however we can with our lives.

I have made these poems over the past two years. Out of necessity. They are for me thatched huts in hills. I hope they house and heal other sorrows than mine.

Note:

WHEN GOD WANTED finally to cut Job a break, He gave him a Natural History lesson, and he gave it to him in poetry. This, according to Mary Catherine Bateson, whom I heard on an On Being Podcast, is what Gregory Bateson's father used to tell young Gregory.