

# THE LUMINOUS SEAM : POETRY AS A STITCH BETWEEN WORLDS

Mary Ellen Lough, Haden, April 2024

*Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.* - Annie Dillard

*But one thing you must know: the one thing I have learned is that one must live this life.* - Carl Jung

*(& The life that I could still live, I should live. - CJ)*

*Does your prayer have roots?  
Does your story have fur?  
Does your metaphor have an ecosystem?  
Is your philosophy edible?  
What does your God smell like?  
- Sophie Strand*

A mysterious quickening inhabits the depths of any good poem—protean, elusive, alive in its own right. The word “creative” shares its etymology with the word “creature,” and carries a similar sense of breathing aliveness, of an active, fine-grained, and multicellular making. What is creative is rooted in growth and rising, in the

bringing into existence of new and autonomous being. We feel something stir, shiver, swim its way into the world when a good poem opens its eyes. (- Jane Hirshfield, *10 Windows*)

In its origin a poem is something completely unequivocal. It is a discharge, a call, a cry, a sigh, a gesture, a reaction by which the living soul seeks to defend itself from or to become aware of an emotion, an experience. In this first spontaneous most important function no poem can be judged. It speaks first of all simply to the poet himself, it is his cry, his scream, his dream, his smile, his whirling fists.

- Hermann Hesse

I have never cut feelings off. I never learned that you were supposed to contain your feelings if you were an educated person, a sophisticated person. I did learn that I had to see things wholly as well, especially the complexities of what it means to be human and the complexities of what it means to be me.

- Lucille Clifton

The main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neuroses but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy, and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experience you are released from the curse of pathology. Even the very disease takes on a numinous character.

- Carl Jung

We will turn our madness into flowers

- Alice Walker *\*(see entire quote at end of handout)*

The way I must enter  
leads through darkness to darkness -  
O moon above the mountains' rim,  
please shine a little further  
on my path.

- Izumi Shikibu

We did not come to remain whole.  
We came to lose our leaves like the trees,  
Trees that start again,  
Drawing up from the great roots.

- Robert Bly

### **Why then do we not despair?**

- Anna Akhmatova

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold,  
Death's great black wing scrapes the air,  
Misery gnaws to the bone.  
Why then do we not despair?

By day, from the surrounding woods,  
cherries blow summer into town;  
at night the deep transparent skies  
glitter with new galaxies.

And the miraculous comes so close  
to the ruined, dirty houses --  
something not known to anyone at all,  
but wild in our breast for centuries.

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A threshold is a place or moment where transformational work, learning or integration occurs. A gate is a place of initiation or entryway; it is the protecting and testing that must occur before entry is permitted.

- Angeles Arrian

Cynicism considers uncertainty a weakness and would armor us instead with harsh judgements. Yet mystery and uncertainty keep our hearts open to something we don't yet know - to tenderness, healing and the sacred. Poem-making can be a good antidote to cynicism.

- John Fox, *Poetic Medicine*

Take the contradictions  
Of your life  
And wrap around  
You like a shawl

- Alice Walker

### Autumn

- Rainer Maria Rilke

The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,  
as if orchards were dying high in space.  
Each leaf falls as if it were motioning "no."

And tonight the heavy earth is falling  
away from all other stars in the loneliness.

We're all falling. This hand here is falling.  
And look at the other one. It's in them all.

And yet there is Someone, whose hands  
infinitely calm, holding up all this falling.

## Airport

- Tony Hoagland

In the airport the fat sunburned people coming back from vacation  
look happier than anyone, with their Hawaiian shirts and varicose veins  
and faint aroma of suntan lotion.

I look down on them because their happiness is so superficial.  
It is an imaginary battle that they win without trying,  
by continuing to be themselves—

joking, telling family stories, eating nachos before lunch.  
Like it or not, oneself is always the test case for the human condition.

The baby starts out as a luminous jellybean of god  
and gradually transforms into a strange, lopsided growth:

a man who will not let himself be touched;  
an aging girl who smiles and is angry with the moon.

Underneath the smile is bitterness, and underneath the bitterness is grief,  
and underneath the grief is the desire to survive at any cost.

The music on the airport intercom is supposed to make it easier.  
That and the Southern accent of the flight announcers,

with their colorful speech impediments of moonshine and molasses.

“Where I am going I do not wish to go,” wrote Bertolt Brecht,  
but what he meant was that he did not want to be himself.

Yesterday I wished for rain, the cold clear kind that falls from very high,  
and when it fell, I felt such joy.

But it's what I don't pray for that can rescue me.  
Surprise, surprise, only surprise will help me on my way.

## **MY MESSY HOUSE**

- Kathleen Norris

When I'm working as an artist-in-residence at parochial schools, I like to read the psalms out loud to inspire the students, who are usually not aware that the snippets they sing at Mass are among the greatest poems in the world. But I have found that when I have asked children to write their own psalms, their poems often have an emotional directness that is similar to that of the biblical psalter.

They know what it's like to be small in a world designed for big people, to feel lost and abandoned. Children are frequently astonished to discover that the psalmists so freely express the more unacceptable emotions, sadness and even anger, even anger at God, and that all of this is in the Bible that they hear read in church on Sunday morning.

Children who are picked on by their big brothers and sisters can be remarkably adept when it comes to writing cursing psalms, and I believe that the writing process offers them a safe haven in which to work through their desires for vengeance in a healthy way.

Once a little boy wrote a poem called "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

"My messy house" says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?"

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## CLOSING THOUGHTS :

Let mystery have its place in you; do not be always turning up your whole soil with the plowshare of self-examination, but leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for the unknown God. Then if a bird sing among your branches, do not be too eager to tame it. If you are conscious of something new - thought or feeling, wakening in the depths of your being - do not be in a hurry to let in light upon it, to look at it; let the springing germ have the protection of being forgotten, hedge it round with quiet, and do not break in upon its darkness.

- Henri Frederic Amiel

Let everything that's been planned come true. Let them believe. And let them have a laugh at their passions. Because what they call passion actually is not some emotional energy, but just the friction between their souls and the outside world. And most important, let them believe in themselves. Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it's tender and pliant. But when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being. Because what has hardened will never win.

- Andrei Tarkovsky

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*We will turn our madness into flowers as a way of moving completely beyond all previous and current programming of how we must toe the familiar line of submission and fear, following orders given us by miserable souls who, somehow have managed to almost completely control us. We will discover something wonderful: that the world really does not enjoy following psychopaths.*

*The world – the animals, including us humans – wants to be engaged in something entirely other, seeing, and delighting in, the stark wonder of where we are: This place. This gift. This paradise.*

*We want to follow joy.*

*And we shall.”*

*~ Alice Walker*

