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David Radavich

## Salvator Mundi

Where are the words  
that could save  
the world?

That could sing  
out of pain

or resurrect death  
like a daffodil?

I see the sun rise up,  
the moon, as if

no one had suffered,  
no jobs had been jerked,

surgeries botched,  
wives beaten,

children abandoned  
as limp dolls.

The murderers,  
the plutocrats, the liars

rise again  
like mushrooms  
after the rain

and yet

this family of deer  
stand momentarily  
alongside the fence

eyeing  
their options

before the neighbor's dog  
barks like Cerberus

and they  
scatter into green.

Jacqueline Jules

## A Legible Mark

Ironic.

How a woman who leaves her desk  
once an hour,  
padding down the hall to the ladies,  
can't pee on demand in a doctor's cup.

Ironic.

How the rain whips the roof till it bleeds  
in my hurricane soaked state  
while flames eat homes in Texas.

Ironic,

My grief over an empty fountain pen  
for scribbles I will type when finished.

Powerless against my body, the weather,  
or even the moment the pen runs out of ink,  
I press harder,  
scratching the nib across paper,  
in hopes of a legible mark.

Jacqueline Jules

## Poet Laureate from Yugoslavia

He stands at the podium,  
a white-haired professor,  
reading in a language  
he learned in his late teens  
but miraculously plays  
like Yo-Yo Ma's cello.  
The sensuous melody  
imbues me with hope  
for the boy from Bolivia  
who joined my class yesterday  
and can't yet tell me he has to pee.  
Will I see one of my students  
at the podium one day,  
sliding his tongue across  
the English language like this?

The poet from Yugoslavia  
humbly shrugs his shoulders  
and thanks the assembled crowd  
in a Tom Brokaw accent,  
neutral as the color tan.

Janet McCann

May 21

I am in a basement, where I see all my words I ever wrote in piled moldy heaps of old school notebooks and paper-clipped manuscripts and loose papers, and they all start coming apart, tearing, swirling around, disintegrating. The whole basement floor is now covered with torn, wet papers and blurred words. Then they are a pile of illegible compost, a papier-mâché.

But now someone opens the floodgates of the Mississippi, and a huge wave sweeps through the basement, washing away the wall, and the ceiling collapses around me, miraculously missing me, and the sunlight blasts its way in. And everything swirls down a hole, dark mud with occasional scraps of paper in it. There is a hoo-ing sound like wind on a prairie.

And now it's a flat bright field and something is gathering in the center, like an uprush of earth, and then a shoot, then a stalk grows there. It divides into leaves, and finally a flower buds and opens—it is breathtakingly lovely. I try to find just a few words to describe it and I can't. I can't even name its color, which is nowhere on the visible spectrum.

Joy Robinson

## Samsara

Merit in a small wicker basket,  
The tiny bird awaits the next chapter  
In its endless cycle of release and recapture.

One riel, one kip, one dong buys the purchaser its freedom,  
Expecting by this unreflective gesture to advance a step  
In his own scaling of the ladder of destiny.

But released by cruel fate from a pleasure boat on the Mekong,  
The tiny being, weak and starving, cannot reach the shore  
But alights instead on the unforgiving ribbons of the river  
Where it is released at last from its own small cycle of suffering  
Drowning in waves of ignorance and superstition.

Emily Shearer

## The One you Feed

The legend is handed down of an old Cherokee chief who told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. "The battle is between two wolves," he said. "One is Evil. It is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is Good. It is peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, joy, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith." The grandson thought about this for a minute and asked, "Grandfather, which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee chief replied, "The one you feed."

We inherit stories like torn quilts and black and white photographs in tarnished frames. On a lucky night, crickets, cicadas, and stars lull us to sleep, but some hours before the dawn, their songs grow utterly silent. It is up to us to give voice to the stories, to tune our ears to the music between the hush. To open our eyes to the owls, bare our souls to the wolves, love the predators and the prey, and choose the right one to feed.

Perhaps a wolf is an owl who has looked in the mirror and added an element of sel/f/.

Ask me about owls and wolves  
and the love that evolves.

Stormy prophets of the night,  
edified.  
Owls and wolves don't own much.  
Touch  
stone  
touch wood  
balance all you can with all you could.  
Hunter, treacherous and sly,  
the shadows of the clouds pass by.  
Release the weight  
upon your breast plate.  
All the fables we create  
the animals we imagine  
hear the sounds of skitterfeet  
still beneath snow mounds  
or leaf piles.  
Wolf styles. Pack size: average - five to eight,  
as few as two or three,  
as many as Montana.  
;;

Owls live alone, or with one other.  
Some species  
live in large groups. Their bones are hollow.  
They keep their skeletons light for flying,  
and they do not build nests.  
Roaming the landscape traces,  
they look for nature's own sheltering spaces --  
a tree, a cliffside, the ground itself.

Some nights you hear the howl.  
*prana*  
tremolo  
wake your truth up, yo.  
A single, high pitched sound  
that rises sharply then slides down  
in rippling waves. *le chant de loup*  
giving voice to  
stories *déjà entendu*:  
boat stories  
rosetta stone,

scrambled eggs, brown whiskey, oyster shells

torn quilts  
river rock (in the palm of your hand) the size of an elf owl  
the size of what all we can hold.

John J. McKernan

## A Large Sheet

White paper  
On the white desk

Hiding  
A shadow  
Angstrom-thin Speaks

"I am the Platonic cloud  
I was once a tree  
A tube of shadow  
Nest of bird song

Sweet  
I miss my leaves  
Eating & drinking  
Sunlight  
Ping Another photon"

Karen Kowalski Singer

## Equation

*Who will walk between me and the crying of the frogs?*—Edna St. Vincent Millay

Compared to 12,000 years since the last glacier melt,  
millions of years of land heating, icing,  
stone lifted, thrust, heaved, collapsed,  
earth dragged, shifted, sifted, and spun  
from inland sea to desert, forest, grassland;

Compared to the nine million years  
sandhill cranes ranged over these skies  
above subtropical rainforest,  
before the prairie opened into bloom  
here in glacier-dragged flatlands,  
while their ingrained map  
grows patchy as the old  
wild spaces lose ground;

As those creaky calls rusting  
in the wind worm cracks into ice mind,  
as the brook splinters  
to a scrawled map, landmarks  
dissolved, the rush of running  
water freshening as I stand struck,  
strummed by an ancient ache  
that tugs threads of my young  
wanderlust from its hardened knot;  
what is a sixtieth spring?

Karen Kowalski Singer

## Love Note from the World

*For Gabi on her bat mitzvah*

What is your favorite place?  
Piny woods in muted fog light,  
prairie taller than your shoulders  
swept by wind,  
rocky cove with bright-cold waves  
tumbling over your bare feet?

You need to hear this—  
Once your heart's longing  
is untangled by fluting birds  
once wind has tousled your hair  
once you've invited the churning  
water roar to fill your ears with song  
for even five minutes,  
that place becomes your  
heart-sized universe.

Fold it all up—  
water, grass, sky,  
rocks, redwoods,  
sound, movement, longing,  
this love note from the world.  
Carry it in your palm,  
tuck it in your pocket.

In blaring street, dusty road,  
in your evening rooms—smooth open  
the creased page—unfold  
the spirit of grass, wave, wind.

Nadia Ibrashi

## Ave Marie by the Nile

It is 1974 & the great river runs north  
as it always has, to merge with the sea

Tonight, traffic is slow by the waterside  
Cars, bikes, donkeys, motorcycles & thousands

of people stop—gaze at the night sky  
wonder at the spotlight / mysterious light

that flashes over the ancient church  
The air smells of roses, startled doves fly in pairs

People prostrate themselves  
*The lady has appeared*, they murmur

Hope thunders & echoes in space-time  
I relax the clutch of my small Fiat & look at the light

The round-about is packed, overflows to side streets  
Stars above & thousands of breaths below

erupt in fiery, almost tangible trails of faith  
I barely manage to inch on the crowded road,

young & eager to go home after a long day—  
dissecting corpses, tracking nerves & muscles

studying hearts pulled out of formalin tubs—  
absorbed in the mundane life of a medical student

bemused by yet another miracle in this land of miracles.  
The moment lags behind me & fades—

even as it sneaks in a corner of my mind  
where talismans and secret hymns live forever

Linda Bryant

## Learning to Sit

Teacher asks me to consider  
the Creator of the wind.  
Sit still, he says.  
The wind comes to you.

No thrashing about  
like the flame.  
No reaching forward  
like the bird.

The wind is just there,  
a ring of Saturn,  
a swallow returning.

\*\*\*

The quiet creases  
in my mother's hands  
like rivulets. Her eyes,  
dormant volcanoes.  
I am not gone,  
she whispers  
I am the shine  
on a serving spoon.

Listen, Teacher says.  
The wind is always spinning  
towards you  
You don't have to do a thing.

Margaret Vidale

## Fishing

Settled in my recliner  
with paper and pen,  
I extend  
a tendril of my mind,  
like an amoeba's pseudopod,  
into that vast mist  
of shifting genesis.

I'm an obsessed fisherwoman  
casting my line further and further,  
desperate to snag  
the exact rhyme,  
an unexpected break,  
the sharp gasp of an ending.

Encapsulated in my craft,  
I'm oblivious to  
the soft lapping  
of minutes into hours—  
at last my husband's voice  
breaks through, *Time for bed?*

Weary now, I leave pages of  
jottings, crossed out stanzas,  
lines connected by  
looping arrows  
and prepare myself for sleep,  
where I will become  
the fish,  
darting through  
oceans of neon words.

Paul Sohar

## The Silent Lyre

I stare at the strings of my lyre  
the still and blank lines of my notebook page

Quick!  
give me another word for *sad*  
not *sorrowful*  
it's too statuesque  
not *dispirited*  
too long and loaded like a freight train

*sad* is too curt for a friend I need  
someone to nod and complete with one word what I  
want to say  
and not explain it away winking at another word  
before I stop talking

of a feeling I detect on the margin of my notebook  
hanging from the virgin lines  
the strings of the lyre I pluck with my pen

a feeling that builds heavy monuments inside me  
until I feel like a cemetery

I need a word as carefully formed as the fingers of  
an angel about to touch the strings of a lyre

the neurons of the paper before me  
do not pick up the tremor of the pen

quick!  
give me a word or at least a nod  
before this feeling slips out of my hand  
and the hard covers of this notebook close over me  
flattening my soul

Paul Sohar

## Wounded

a poem is an open, undressed wound  
the poet inflicts on himself  
while trying to dig up  
a screeching-piercing  
thorn from inside another  
inner wound  
using words for scalpels  
and lines for cuts  
but every new word wilts in his hands  
every new line festers into a maggot  
crawling in and out of that wound

every metaphor infects the blood  
with another virus from the outside world  
and in defense the blood keeps pumping  
its rhyme and rhythm  
only to make the wound bleed more

a poem is the battleground of the inner  
and the outer world  
no man's land between the spirit  
and matter  
where the poet has the poetic license  
to bleed to death

Sarah Rehfeldt

## Confession

Knowing this place to be not hurried,  
I came for darkness—  
for the temporary shading and softening of shadows,  
the thought of cold, night air moving in,  
its thickness settling and staying  
for the duration of sky  
or as long as it was needed,  
Stories must be told and retold many times.  
Forgive me, but this is how I remember.

## Born

To Everything that Grows and has Wings:  
It is time—Awaken!  
The breath that shapes you,  
moves you in mysterious and intangible ways,  
is pushing forward.  
The seed and seeking: pulling with the earth.  
The voice inside you: fighting  
darkness, and the light surrounding it.  
The words,  
gone all these long months,  
are threatening to exist.  
It is time—Become!

Sheryl Nelms

## Lord Byron's Dungeon

in Chillon  
on the  
lake

deep under  
rock

bare  
walls

bare  
floor

in Bonivard's dungeon full of mold

he served  
his time

days  
weeks  
years

he was chained

carved his message  
in sandstone

on the fifth pillar

his freedom finally given  
when the castle  
was

captured by Bernese  
liberators

Susan Moorhead

## Release

Maybe it's like that, orbiting  
into a great, dark open, some  
fantastic incomprehensible.

Such gasping struggle in the attempt  
to get back, no calm acceptance. Like one  
tethered to the mother ship, lifeline snapped,

is it that kind of terror? Or just  
one last reach for what remains  
in sight: small, cloud-swirled, perfect.

B. E. Stock

## Love

Hot mysteries amid soft padded sheets  
Giving rise to sonorous new combinations  
Of words, unforeseen realities that multiply,  
All from sitting alone with abstracted gaze  
(No TV, no computer, unplugged from the chatter  
In the living room) – could this be love?

O to die in the bliss of that encounter  
And rise to my author, gathered  
In those competent hands, revised  
And redone, a fair copy on parchment,  
Rolled, sung, danced! To be seen  
And to multiply amid the radiant scheme!

Contemplate a moment how long  
A poem can last, how from a sleep of centuries  
It can rise, and place a tear on your cheek  
Or a smile on your lips, can speed  
Your heart or nerve your arm.  
The words you despise every day, the books  
You ignore, could open up like flowers  
On your path, unlock the cage  
That blocks your access to the soil and sky.  
Could this be love?

B. E. Stock

## The Poet

The poet is like a thunderhead gathering  
In plain sight, ready to rain.  
He looks through you, he watches the child  
On the sidewalk and says nothing,  
He stands there talking to peonies and robins  
As though no one else existed.  
Do not be fooled, he is a dangerous lover,  
Who will make you shiver and waken  
In the night with questions you cannot answer.  
You will glow with his caresses, made  
Of nothing but words you hear every day.  
Ask, he will fill the air with his kiss,  
And break the back of every enemy.  
Listen, he will spill his soul in your ear,  
And adorn you with centuries.  
Open your hands, his letters  
Will overflow in your empty places,  
Watering the gardens of your soul.

Miriam Hall

## Speaking Up

*Although at times the mind may not be clear, compassion is always the appropriate response. To have mercy on our mercilessness. To leave nothing unhealed.*—Stephen Levine (Healing Into Life and Death)

I teach Contemplative Writing, my take on Natalie Goldberg's Zen Writing Practice. Awhile back, I wrote an essay entitled "Listening In" and posted it on my blog. It was in response to a student's question – "Can you tell us more about how you listen, and why your feedback is so different from ours?" I had hinted before at the key components of well-boundaried feedback: don't make it about you; make it about what you heard, not the person who shared it; no need to criticize or edit, simply point out what you noticed. Since I distributed the essay to my classes, the feedback in the classes has improved dramatically. Feedback has improved because *listening* has improved.

The main thesis of that essay is that by listening "perceptively" (noticing what we notice, including what we notice in our bodies and minds as we listen) and giving only that as feedback, we can help the writer, and keep good boundaries. For instance, a woman writes about being raped, which is a hard thing to hear about and also, to have written. Especially in volatile situations like that, the best feedback—if she desires feedback—is simply to echo back words or phrases ("recall" feedback) or, to note when, for instance, she changed from first to third person in the piece, that she referred to a dog four times, that she spoke about the sun in the beginning and the clouds at the end. If she prefers not to have feedback at all, which is often the case with such emotionally strong pieces, sitting with her, trusting that she knows you heard her and are holding her in the space, is a huge practice for everyone, and challenging. We want to rush in and console, assure; in fact, we want to reassure ourselves – that we are helpful, that we can make it better for someone. Silence is a huge healer, when it is charged with the intention to hold.

However, an aspect of classes has still haunted me at times. I offer time in the beginning for "check in and announcements," and sometimes the check-ins become long stories or explanations, or even conversations. If someone is struggling with an on-going issue, it's hard for me not to let them talk it out. Yet, it does take up time in classes that are in fact quite short, and, much more importantly, it does what Natalie Goldberg called in her recent Writing Practice weekend teaching in Madison: "Giving away our stories."

Natalie spoke to the tendency—particularly among women, to say too much. What did she mean by that? We talk about our pain, instead of holding it, giving it space, witnessing it. Often we think we are doing exactly that when we share – giving it to others to witness. However, the stories themselves can protect us, shelter the actual raw pain from others' gazes and most especially, from our own awareness. The difference between simply saying "My dog died last week and it's been hard for me," and explaining in detail the way you buried the dog, how your ex called afterwards and how you aren't sure if you should buy a new dog, is huge. As well, since we are in practice to write, and only for twenty minutes, all of that energy, *Juriki* (Soto Zen term), needs to stay in the belly. "Fire in the belly" some teachers call it – we can actually blow it out by saying it aloud. The process of the writing should benefit from it, rather than clearing the air before writing. Save the story of the funeral – or even if not the story, the energy of it – for the writing, and express it, unhindered, there.

What this also does for the listener is a huge act of generosity – offer them a chance to be with mystery, to be with what is not being said. Being that I am a "splicer," as a friend calls me, I wish to union, join, heal all I can. He's a splitter, and so he sees solutions in the exact opposite way – the more we can separate them, the better. Somewhere in the middle is the path, of course – recognizing that we are all interdependent and trusting that. We do need stories to join us, and yet, we can our stories individuate us in a healthy way.

Somehow tied to this is our tendency *not* to speak when we *should*. We don't let our teachers, fellow students or even ourselves know when we feel uncomfortable. We are afraid to say anything about it, lest someone else feel uncomfortable, and so it grows inside us, completely unrevealed. It comes out (or doesn't, making us sick) passive-aggressively, or in avoiding class, or in not coming back at all. This process is far from easy. I realize more and more that I have chosen as a career to be constantly submerged in the sea of our stories and sometimes it is hard to come up for air. And yet, when we speak too much around something and don't say exactly what it is, we all suffer. The students know it – can see it in each other's and own writings. "I know I am dancing around this," "I don't want to go there," "I heard resistance in your writing," "I can't seem to stop thinking I have nothing to say." These kinds of signs, flags poking up from the subconscious that we stop to regard as a group, often hint at a larger iceberg below, needing our acknowledgement. My students have matured a great deal as a community, and can often see these in writing. Speech is a whole other level.

At retreats sometimes I will ask folks to speak as little as they can, though rarely requiring silence on a short weekend. I will remind them to use "Mindfulness of Speech" and you can see faces squirm. Women feel guilty – *She's talking to me because I spoke too much over lunch*, for instance. We think that we should

speak *less*, and being told that noticing what we say is a good idea seems to reinforce that idea. Only it doesn't. Speech is very powerful, and every time we speak, we are either sharing or dumping our power. If we see our own speech as a resource rather than a burden, we can suddenly envision speech as a precious exchange. Trust is a huge part of this – trusting that we can say what we need to say with less, trusting others to make do with less from us. More precision in less speech, in this case, is more – more power, more connection, more space and room for experience.

I have reached this point in my teaching through an accumulation of events. I have listened to, heard, a lot of political discussion in my classes. Madison, Wisconsin, in later winter to spring of 2011 was a hotbed of discussion. My classes all take place on the East side of Madison, which has been, and remains, hippie leftist central for all of Wisconsin; to some, for all of the Midwest. In Wisconsin in general, the red/blue balance is pretty even, but in Madison and Dane County, these numbers skew to the Left – 70% Democrat or Green, 30% Republican. As a student joked the other day, East Side of Madison must skew even harder – more like 90/10. Not an easy place to be a Conservative.

The first weeks after the protests began, students had lots to write about their experiences, of course. I encouraged the writing, though never actually gave prompts that referenced the protests or politics. As my shop-owning friends, café-owning friends and fellow teachers of independent practices struggled, so did I. I didn't take sides, tried to stay neutral, listening perceptually, rather than with my politics. But sometimes the conversations and writings got heated, and, as is often the case with opinions, it's hard to hear the form and not talk about the content. Class after class revealed themselves as "mostly" or "all" Lefties, but a noticeable minority stayed silent. I encouraged less discursiveness in check-ins, in fact redirected those conversations, or demanded that we just sit with the issue (especially after the controversial elections, still unresolved, in early April). What I didn't know was that, in one case, maybe others, it was too late.

A woman named June stopped coming to class, and I hadn't connected my intuition that maybe she was conservative (from her non-responses to political conversations) to her absences. She has a sick mom, herself struggles from severe depression and anxiety, migraines. Her life, like so many lives, is hard. So when she called in week after week to say she couldn't make it, I didn't question it. She was back for the last class, and the prompt, to consider the last week as the end of a journey together and process what has happened and what you will take with you, engendered no political discussion from anyone. Except June. She went last, and her voice shook from the first word. She was angry, I heard it by the second word. I was proud.

“It’s true I haven’t been in class because of the typical issues – my mom, migraines, etc. But I also haven’t been here because of agitation.” I knew immediately where she was going, and she went straight for it. She stayed light on the class, calling out her classmates and me for assuming that everyone agrees, that there is even an “us,” that conservatives, like June, aren’t a part of. Mostly she emphasized her out of class experiences, also very negative and isolating. This place, which for years now has been a safe place, now suddenly wasn’t, and it really got to her. The message was clear: that while speech is so powerful, assumptions can rip power away.

Listening begins the moment we enter any situation. We can begin to notice and collect information with little bias, if we choose to, especially as we interact with others. The problem with political debates in any situation, but especially in intimate interactions, is that they overlook, disregard, subtleties. Our desire to assume, our desire to box everyone in and make a comfortable grave in which we can languish is anti-creative. If we wish to cultivate and nurture creativity, then we have to be receptive. We have to be sensitive – or rather, sensitized. Not taking it personally, but at the same time, accepting responsibility for the myriad data points given to us by each being we interact with, and the information we dole out to them in return.

This is a practice of acceptance and experience, not arguments or opinions. At any stage in the process of communication we can practice saying “Yes,” allowing what is to be just as is. It is a profoundly huge experience to hear someone say something that disagrees with your views, contradicts your experience or even offends you, and, in the right situation and with the right understanding, not take it personally, and hear it for what it is, without the need to counter, reject or react.

This is not a practice of restricting freedom of speech.

This is not a silencing of people’s sufferings.

It is, in fact, quite the opposite – in the structure of a compassionate listening environment, we allow for more variation, more room for everyone’s differences.

*“Discursiveness is not actually perceiving what it is reporting.”--Andy Karr*

In writing practice itself, we can let it all hang out. In writing you aren’t addressing anyone, you are observing your own mind. It is when we are addressing someone – in giving feedback, in responding to someone, that we need to work with speech as a practice. It is a natural extension of our writing practice. A necessary extension.

Care about our speech becomes a simple and profound task with attention. If we notice the effect of our words, and the effects of others' words, then we are less likely to say damaging things, and more likely to point out to others when they speak in a diminishing way. In this way, our writing becomes more open and nuanced, as do our minds. In this way, we work more directly with reality, and developing Enlightened Society.

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Karen Yochim

## Channeling Harlan Howard

I'm a songwriter. One day I picked at my Gibson, trying to write a new song, but no lyrics would come to me. Frustrated, I looked up and asked the late, very prolific Harlan Howard to channel me a song. Immediately, I started "getting" and writing down a country lyric: "There's No Getting Around it."

This song, about a mountain wife whose husband is having an affair with a woman in another town down the road, came to me intact and entirely all of a piece.

The song I channeled came through with the melody, three verses, the bridge, and the chorus. I had the entire song written, worked out musically, and arranged within a half hour. There was nothing about the song that may have been in the back of my mind. It was like nothing I'd ever written before. When I told a musician friend about the remarkable experience and played the song for him, Dave said, "That sounds like something Harlan Howard would write!"

I have always been convinced we get help from artists who have passed, but never did I have such a dramatic illustration of this belief before the uncanny event described above. If the reader is skeptical about my interpretation of the writing of this song, I would add that when I write there is *always* something going on in my life that is the basis and emotional catalyst for the lyric. And yet, in this case, as I've mentioned, there was truly nothing I'd heard or seen that had anything to do with the story of the song.

Whether Harlan Howard was helping me out that day, or whether I drew from Universal Mind is unprovable, but I prefer to believe in the former.

Susan Moorhead

## Egg on a Biscuit

She read a story that made her sad. It sat inside of her for a few days like something she shouldn't have eaten, some indigestible morsel that irritated her stomach and made her feel bad until the feeling gathered itself up and crawled into her head and made her feel a kind of sad angry, the only kind of mad she ever really got.

The story was about a man who suffered terribly at the hands of another man, and how both men changed, and how the one who had suffered became a deeper if sadder person, and the one who had been cruel did not become deeper, but became sad as well, left alone with the terribleness of who he was.

She wondered why it seemed that everybody did better as victims, how people, especially on talk shows, always said how they had learned from the bad and sad experiences and that they would even choose them again for the life lessons.

She wondered what God was thinking setting up the world like that anyway where you had to have bad stuff happen to you in order to learn and grow, catastrophes and heartbreak, big earthquakes and little tremors, failures and loss. It seemed to play out that you had to lose what you had in order to appreciate what you now had, which seemed like a sort of cosmic carelessness to her, all this coming and going. Why did you have to be unhappy to know happiness? And was it even true? Or was this just stuff people said so you didn't know how really crummy they still felt and you bought into it so you could just walking forward yourself, one little sturdy footstep after another?

She called God up on the big blue telephone, tilting her head back so her voice would rise clearly through the clouds, and she spoke at length about the story that had upset her and what it made her think about, and what was the deal anyway with the stickiness of the soul and how trouble seemed to glob on it like old gum and how everybody was supposed to be okay with that.

People walked by, some of their stares and small remarks sticking to the sides of her coat like post- it notes, and some like butterflies, and some like burrs, and one left paper money at her feet while she talked to God.

Eventually God answered in his usual way, wind waffing through trees, a white cloud seeped across the sky like a cup of spilled cream, the musical honking of passing cars. A bird flew overhead just as she thought of the shape of the word bird and how it almost looked like two birds standing end to end, they were just sort of beakless but you could draw beaks on, and then, just then, she became aware of the beating of her own heart, and the blankness and press of her own thoughts, and knew the conversation was over.

She hung up the big blue phone and stooped down to pick up the paper money, thinking it was a good thing that it had rained just a little bit that morning so that the money had stayed put by her feet and not blown away with one of God's answers, the wind in the trees.

And she thought, huh, this was one of God's answers, too, the money on the ground and the way she had to bow down to receive the money on the ground. And she said to herself since he wasn't listening anymore, that God got pretty darn tiresome with all his symbols and metaphors and parables. Just once, she thought, she'd like a straight answer from God.

She went to the Chicken Shack down the street and ordered a fried egg on a biscuit, but before she took a bite, she said thank you to God for all of it, even the parts that seemed annoying, because she reasoned you've got to work with what you've got, there was just no getting away from that, was there?

Edward A. Dougherty

## Kamakura

After the vast stillnesses of the north country, we passed through Tokyo and Yokohama to spend the day in Kamakura. The stations were crowded, and I felt like a rock in a great stream. I did catch wonderfully enigmatic English, like the woman's T-shirt that read, "Juicy Culture" or the young man's directing us to "Locate Blissful Graph." Freshness Burger was just up the street from Pub Twinkle. The sporting-goods store Golf Paradise had the slogan "meet together and enjoy our golf-style."

On trains, I could see that Japan is mostly mountains, dotted with plains or river deltas where most of the people live. Just a little way out of any major city are farms and villages.

black plastic trash bags  
might frighten the crows away—  
not my hungry eyes

~

As in daily life, we must decide what to give ourselves to. Sorting options and choosing avoids aimlessness, but wandering enables unanticipated discoveries. Either way, I want to learn to delight in the experience at hand and so drink the antidote to a life of regret.

In Kamakura, we decided to focus on a single Zen temple then walk the Daibutsu Hiking Course through the hills to the Great Buddha before visiting Hasedera with its 30 foot statue of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Mercy or Goddess of Compassion. The slower pace and more solitary approach suits us; taking in too much without time for reflection wears me down and blurs experiences, like running your hand over freshly inked words.

her finger outstretched  
pointed out a butterfly—  
one more lands on it

\*

under straw sandals  
larger than any I've seen  
—a green grasshopper

~

Engaku-ji, the Zen temple, was impressive, not because of its massive two-story Sanmon, or main gate (though we did snap pictures of it), and not because of its enormous bell forged in 1301 (though we did climb the 133 steps just to see it), and not because of its Buddha relic shrine which is a National Treasure.

The signs that read “Private” or “Keep Out” barring us from buildings or whole areas indicated that this was a place where Buddhism was being practiced. The grounds’ reverence seemed a presence and invited us to slow our racing, tourist minds.

a calm teaching hall—  
as I stepped toward the Buddha  
his eyes searched me out

~

Instead of the shrine dedicated to Hachiman, the God of War whose summer grasses grow thick, we found our way through woods on the Hiking Course where our only companions were birds and cicadas. We got turned about and ended up standing gratefully in front of two vending machines, selling cold drinks. A stranger set us straight, down the road, to a tangle of wooden *torii* gates. The shrine to Benten, the Goddess of Peace and Prosperity, was a natural bowl in the hills. Small shrines, complete with bridges short enough to stride across in four steps, were pressed against the high walls. A narrow waterfall, no thicker than my arm, made a cooling music.

What draws nearly a million visitors a year is the central cave, the Money-Washing Shrine, where coins are rinsed in the presence of Benten to bring her blessing. I ran water over five-yen coins to give to friends.

the Goddess’ cave—  
dripping from the wet ceiling  
strings of folded cranes

~

Aesop made his fox leap at grapes dangling just out of reach while in Japan the Fox is the messenger of the God of the Harvest, Inari. What is it about foxes that awakens the human imagination? Since a good rice crop ensures the health of the nation, this communication is important enough to raise shrines all over the country. I’ve always wanted to see an Inari Jinja, to make myself available to such fundamental forces, but like foxes themselves, the experience eluded me the whole time I lived in Japan.

I was therefore thrilled to see the stack of vermilion *torii* gates, to climb the stairs from one animal statue to the next, and to stand before the 800-year-old Fox Shrine, Sasuke

Inari, in the still shade of Kamakura. There were hundreds of white porcelain figures, offerings left by pilgrims and others, symbols of human longing deeper than words.

the shrine's caretaker  
with squirrel photos behind him  
sold me fox figures

\*

in the forest shade  
we paused to feel the quiet  
—slapping mosquitoes

\*

beyond the foxes  
the trail bore up, up, uphill  
—sweat dripped down my back

~

The Daibutsu Hiking Course dumped us beside a highway humming with diesel trucks and countless cars. We followed signs to the Great Buddha, cast in bronze in 1252. Even in seated meditation pose, the statue is about fifty feet tall and ninety seven feet around at the base. Shortly after being finished, rumors of its daunting size reached a whale, who became jealous and demanded to see for himself. The whale donned magic boots and walked ashore, but it could not squeeze itself into the building the statue was then housed in. A priest came out and—with surprising aplomb—asked the whale its business. “I want to know the Daibutsu's height and girth.” With that, the statue rose from its meditation, stepped off its pedestal, stood before the whale, and consented to be measured. The priest, using his Buddhist prayer beads, found the sea creature two inches taller and wider. The whale also found more respect and humility. I never saw the Daibutsu as much as flinch even with all the flashes and people paying ¥20 to climb around inside it.

we watch each other:  
cameras to our faces  
backs to the Buddha

~

Our day began to feel like a pilgrimage since we hadn't had a meal and still had more walking to do. After trying to find within me the stillness and concentration I witnessed at the Great Buddha, we strolled to Hasedera to see its Kannon statue, which was carved in 721 and is as tall as five people standing foot to shoulder.

Kannon, the Buddhist figure of compassion, is sometimes depicted with many arms, each ready to save, or sometimes she simply holds a lotus flower to say that beauty and

purity are possible even rising from the swamp and muck of your life, of this world. The Hasedera Kannon is shown with smaller heads emerging from the top of hers, all inclined to people's cries. In her right hand is a walking staff, as if she's ready to set off at any moment.

As I walked toward the altar, bit by bit, Kannon was revealed, but the figure seemed to go on to beyond the room's capacity. When the full statute was before me, I was stunned, breathless, and could only pray.

~

Grace and discipline. Divine mercy, human effort. Compassion, wisdom. Love, truth. The two feet of spiritual pilgrimage, through the self and through life.

In Kamakura, I stood before the manifestations of these principles. Somewhere, I learned the saying, "When Kannon arises in your mind, you are in Oneness with Kannon," and hoped to engage in the first task of compassion-work: learning to call it to mind so that it arises naturally.

a boy on a bike  
covers his face with his hand—  
the sun gets him too

\*

I drink the cool glass —  
a stranger gave me iced tea  
at the hot bus stop

Emily Shearer

## Writing into the Intersection

Every poem is an act of prayer. With pen in hand, I know the truth: words are like swords to be extracted. The toil of it breaks my nails made dirty and weak from digging around in wells and dark places. Searching for words and turns of phrase that transform language into gold, writing is the work of alchemists and spelunkers. Writing as worship, writing as craft, writing as a means to get through the day, all of it lies at a crossroads of spirituality and personal expression that arcs us toward the more human side of the spiritual existence. We are spiritual beings, yet we breathe and cuss and blog and have another cup of coffee.

Though now, the saying about the humanness of our spiritual existence versus the spirituality of our human existence has been made into a bumper sticker seen on the backs of Subaru Foresters and Toyota Priuses, (Priiii?), I first encountered it tacked on the wall over my mother's desk. I saw it there every time I pilfered her drawers looking for a pen or a stamp, shoving aside crumbled packets of Saltines, rumpled dollar bills, mismatched socks. The words impressed upon me the notion that indeed, every breath we take is a spiritual act. Every word we write, as well. As I go through the motions of my adult life, I try to feed my consciousness with breaths of compassion - by loving my children unconditionally, breaths of intention, by reaching for my highest Self, and with breaths of gratitude for the beauty of the commonplace as well as the wondrous. And as I breathe, so I write.

Faith is saluting the sun before the sun rises. Faith is words of prayer sent up to No One, hoping that Everyone will hear.

Yesterday, we spotted a cardinal, decorating the branches of a lone tree at the top of our driveway, like the last red glass ball on the Christmas tree after all the other ornaments have been removed. I had barely shoved the gearshift in Park before Ian, my four-year old, had bounded out of the garage and run around to the backyard. There I met him with a bucket of birdseed, just as he had asked, so he could scatter it in the grass, still wet from the week's earlier ice melt. We stood together in the cold January air, listening to the calls of birds throughout the neighborhood and the woods beyond. "Let's go back inside, Mom, so we won't scare them away."

The minute, no, the second we reentered the warm house, he doffed his coat and shoes and abandoned bird-watching for the next high pursuit: dinosaur hunting. His plan to lure the cardinal onto sacred ground, i.e. his turf, and provide it a tasty snack was not forgotten, just replaced by Faith. He had fed it. It would come. Then it would fly away. He didn't need to see it play out. It was enough for him to Know that it would.

And if Gods and little boys love the birds, how much more do they love us? Scattering seed = scattering joy. Scattering joy is also a spiritual act of faith, a buffer against loss.

Loss is a destination. One arrives at a loss, like at a train station in a new and very far-off country. Loss invokes permanence, the heart-quickenning, staring-down-forever-*without* that comes when you walk around the corner, and your child's not where he was. Your marriage is not where it once was. Your ass is not where it used to be either, but that's another type of mourning. The coming-up-empty may not be the worst of it; it's the knowing that what was once is no more.

But hope offers us free insurance. As turning points arise along the road, any sojourner is naturally inclined to look back and see how far she's come. In her periphery, she also gains a glimpse of the distance that lies ahead, and the hope she feels is not a pantomime but a promise.

You know those lists we're all asked to make: "A Hypothetical Fire Rages at Your Door. What Would You Save?" When insomnia strikes, sometimes I lie in bed and make such lists. In 2005, when a hurricane bore down on Houston, I was unprepared. I hadn't made my list. And even if I had, I wouldn't have been able to find it in the ensuing panic. Our family fled the city but not before securing the scrapbooks in the upstairs dryer, safe from water, ruin, *loss*.

We came home three days later to find our house completely undamaged. I had had a lot of time to think in those three days. My family was with me, safe and secure. We ate chocolate chip waffles and read Harry Potter books and listened to our friend play the guitar. I would have been really sad if my scrapbooks had floated away, but they didn't.

I used to put a lot of stock in things.

I had this brooch in the shape of a dragonfly. It measured about two and a half inches wide, its weight airier than sterling. Alloy maybe but definitely art, finely rendered in a delicate, craftsman's hand, with tiny veins etched on its wings, miniscule eyes on the side of its precious metallic head. In summer, I swaddled it in velvet on my dresser. Its urge to take to the air superfluous, whatwith my own wings to fly. In the colder months though, I wore it every day, pinned on the left breast of a brushed black corduroy jacket, soft and warm as the moonlight back in June. Every day I wore that jacket. I was wearing it the day I flew home and left it on the airplane.

My mother gave me the brooch. I lost it at Thanksgiving. She had died three years before.

Throughout my life, I've lost letters and money and bets and friends, but I've never lost a *thing* as dear to me as that brooch.

If you asked me to name my favorite thing these days, my most prized-possession, I might say a red mixing bowl in the kitchen cupboard. Maybe my cowboy boots, but they're down in the heel, and I've already had them repaired once, so if somehow they fell right off my feet one day, I'd get over it. I have cultivated an inherent sense

that my happiness is part of my spiritual existence and no longer intertwined with the material plane. I am not afraid of losing *things*. I lost my dragonfly pin.

I lost my mom.

All my life I've been afraid of snakes. When I was pregnant with my daughter, I was terrified of falling down stairs. One day, eight months into the pregnancy and fatter than a humpback elephant, I was walking downstairs in our vacation house. In my hands, I was carrying a book, an apple, and a full glass of water. I slipped. Down I trundled, half a flight. I called out, but no one else was in the house. They were all down at the beach. I checked my head, I checked my belly, I checked between my legs -- I was fine. So I walked back up the steps to refill my glass.

Fast forward seven years. My cat got attacked by a fox in the woods. Number Two on my list of things-that-go-bump-in-the-night: FOX ATTACKS CAT IN THE WOODS. Now, though she walks with a limp and we've taken out a second mortgage on the house to pay her medical bills, she still goes after my sewing thread and knitting yarn with a vengeance. The fox makes footprints in the snow as he comes prowling around the edges of my yard, hungry, yet the cat just sits by the window and whines to be let outside.

Okay, I've never been bitten by a snake, and I have finally stopped checking under the bed for them every night before I can fall asleep. It's the unanticipated that scares me most. Fears realize themselves without our permission. Wolves howl, cancers return. Earthquakes swallow countries already devastated by poverty, and crazed gunmen shoot Congresswomen and innocent children. Are we safe?

We are as long as we believe in love. In the end, that is all there is. And that has to be enough. But remember too, *the greatest of these is Hope*. We shed tears in mourning for the loss of goodness, but each such tear that falls hearkens goodness' return. I mourn for loss, for Tucson and for Haiti. I still mourn for my mom. I am forever trying to write her story. But in the midst of loss, there is always, always Hope.

I bought a new dragonfly pin from a mail order catalog, but of course it's not the same. It's shinier maybe, less tarnished yet less treasured. It's okay though. Letting go of loss is our only hope of holding on. We can only know how far we can go until we look back and see how far we've come.

There is a juncture in the journey where many roads converge: Life and Loss, Hope and Joy, Breath, Faith, Connection. I stake my claim upon this place and call it Spirituality. This is the intersection where I stand, watching the lights change, setting one foot in front of the other. Setting pen to paper. And feeding the birds.