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The Fire on the Path

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The Fire on the Path

JOY: I think it started at the dinner table outside, beside the bay in Miami, laughing together as small ships glided by, one with a man and his dog both in matching life vests.

CARYN: Or it started in Colorado – you and Scotty performing “The Gospel According to Poetry,” something I was very freaked out about seeing because of that gospel word, but when you did it, the love – the faith – of poetry shone through so much that I started to wonder....

JOY: And then I found out you loved Win Wenders films too...

CARYN: And you loved Alicia Ostriker poems...

JOY:so what if we started a conversation with poetry?

CARYN: What if we each jumped into our cars, got on I-70, you a western Kansas girl living in the mountains and me, a Jersey girl living in eastern Kansas and aimed toward each other?

Joy: Caryn, tell me what do you believe in?

CARYN: I believe in the beauty we see together:
the granary made into a cabin, haunted by a dozen kittens
who tumble into our laps as we write to each other in late fall,
and later, in early spring, the small café table
where we contemplate the pink marshmallow concoction
at the salad bar while talking of how scripture is
or isn't engraved in the language of our hearts.

And I believe so much in the wind
and the tumbleweed that follows it, the night and the stars,
the last coherent thought, and especially
what comes next. I believe in the blue bird quick
past the window, a secret pond to gather at
in our dreams. Arms wide open, breast plate leading
into the wind, a lifting of the uncontainable
out of the contained.

JOY: So many of the wind words whisper *yes*,
peeling back the thick carpet of buffalo grass,
thirsty ground beneath.

I believe in free-falling forgiveness
when your eyes are op`ened from startling starlight,
wherever it comes from, whoever it comes from,
when soul-slumber falls away from you

like a heavy cloak of woven autumn leaves.
What mystery swirls thick like the invisible air,
breathes into the spacious breath, convinces us
of what we cannot see?

I love the wide open invitation of Central Park,
or the split-rail fences of Colby, Kansas, the rustle
of the silver maples outside our leaded glass windows,
the moment of poetic connection when your head
hallelujahs as loudly as your mouth.

I believe in the braille of the heart, teaching us to read.

CARYN: The open heart,
the open heart
the open heart spacious as prairie,

the pain of keeping the open heart,
the pain of losing the open heart,
the pain of praying for a way through
the darkness again, and especially the importance
of the open eyes,

the closed eyes, while the soul dives into
its secret pond to find forgiveness
in all forms and all its true disguises.
The lessons that come regardless
of what we do or think, like childbirth,
the pain, the motion you can't stop
no matter what you pray, meditate, curse or sing,
whatever it takes to break us open.

I believe in the ground and in what groundlessness teaches us,
in the miracle of everything from red seas parting
to forgiving my father for calling me a jerk.
I believe in dropping the storyline, picking up
the pace, sleeping on the job, waking up a million times
to ourselves. And to love that courses through us,
that runs river-like through our lives in all its daring.

JOY: Love, of course, like a dangerous river
rushing outside these splintered wooden doors.
"Whatever the river says, that is what I say." Yes?
What wildness within us would embrace *this*?

Love hurls me off my feet, hurtles me toward
The sweeping current of the flowing storyline.

I believe in singing loudly in the dark, losing your fear of the dark,
braving the forest with a well-used lantern and friends.
Tapping the path with your toes, touching each
pebble and rock as you walk, walking into the clearing,
seeing the fork and taking the path less chosen.
And choosing.
It is never too late to turn around,
walk a different way, take another road, arrive here.

CARYN: To arrive here.
Most of all, friend, I believe in this clearing
where we come empty and hurting
to fall and hold ourselves back up.

I believe in the wind that makes the clearing,
the trees that frame it, the sky that holds
the heart, the angel that meets you there,
and what Jacob knew when he made the angel
he fought with bless him before he could let go.

JOY: Can we dare wrestle the angel who captures us,
walk away lame, humbled, changed, new,
named again?

How lovely are the ears
who love the love of listening,
who know the burning words of the heart
can fasten themselves to chariots of fire,
slowly flying toward heaven. Are we headed toward heaven?

How heavenly are those who honor the limits of earth,
who delight in the winsome wisdom of children,
who hold the hands of the trembling woman
still praying on her knees.

Could it be that the violent do not bear it away,
but the meek, so strong when they appear weak?

How strong and meek are the poets who tell of
the lost coin, the lost sheep, the persistent widow
who will not stop knocking until her cry is heard,
who long to write of life, glistening, ripe, or sorrowful.

Look at these words we find between us –
words of consolation, or hope, or warming, or warning,
words, words in the wilderness, words in the promised land,

words behind us, before us, among us.
We are crying aloud in this clearing,
in a place that only wildfire could have forged.

I came here long ago.
First, God was in the sunset,
in the molten meltdown of orange and grape,
every night a sherbet sky I savored.
God was a *why*:
“Why is church always a building?”
“Why can’t we talk to God outside?”

Wheatfield outside my door, seed to sprout to
bare ground again, wheat-whisks singing a
song I kept humming,
earth murmuring a story much larger than Oz.

Sometimes, I would even whisper to the old oak tree,
tell him how glad I was
that he was there.

CARYN: For me, first god was in the trees.
Don't ask me how I knew. I just did.
The tree would shake. I would shiver.

Where I grew up, the landscape was filled,
disgarded, buried. We measured our days in highway exits.
But I fell in love with trees anyway.

Sometimes the tree would blow against the window
of the synagogue prayer hall, and I would shiver again.
A good coincidence, I told myself, for this to happen
in what they told me was the house of god

although I knew the house was a tree, the wood rooted
in the earth, flourishing **downward into secret roots**
that drank from underground rivers
rushing slow motion upward
into a house of stories full of birds
shivering just like me
as I watched the tree also
from my bedroom window in Brooklyn
or stood beneath it while I was supposed to be walking
to school, touching the bark when nobody was looking,
asking, in the chill that touched my spine,
god not to leave me,
the open canopy of leaf or bare branch

to wrap around me like a prayer,
the words of god blowing through me
without words.

JOY: Trees, sky, wheat, questions.
Jesus, lover of the questions, now real to me. Fifteen.
Silver sparks, liquid lightning
lighting cradles, corners, candles, Christmas.
I loved Him.
I loved everyone.
I loved even the battered stop sign at Larry's IGA,
festooned it with garlands of greenery and gratitude,
heart thirsty to give thanks, to offer thanks
for those small town fixtures, or those people
that once slipped by me unseen.

Then, a flurry: Thick, white flakes of poetry,
poetry for the shadow with her martini glass
flirting with the family,
poetry for the tango and the lemon-tang
and the terrible twilight of loss. Poetry in bright,
or night. Poetry in parables
and in psalms and in proverbs.
Poetry.

CARYN: Poetry for me too, that constellation
of words that lit up the darkness, that kept me
from killing myself or living deadened as the broken branch.
It was the way words spoke to the shiver that ran
.....
through me, the electricity on the page of the journal
I held in my lap, sitting up in bed with a candle
while the tree battered the window in storm
and my family hallowed out from the inside.

How art could make something holy from paper.
I knew love, I know love in the words that come in the dark,
that don't call darkness wrong but see it as another moment
we can wake up to that shiver.
Like when my first child was placed on my chest
at birth, opening his black eyes wide
to burn into mine
before he almost died, and years later,
once he had words, asked,
do all babies go back to god after birth
and then return to their moms and dads?

I knew love, I know love when my husband
wraps his long body around me, and we fall into
outrageous laughter about the antics of the cat
at 2 a.m. when we're supposed to be sleeping.

I knew love, I know love in the circle of friends
who hold me in my living room, each placing
a hand on my arm or leg or forehead,
to help be less afraid before surgery
or in the middle of chemo.

I knew love, I know love
in my mother's voice on the phone, laughing
in a Brooklyn accent.
In my father's breathing easing into nothing
as I held his knee and watched him die.

I knew love, I know love
in the wind and the rain,
the first snow and the last
climbing rose, the blanketflower,
and come spring, the fire
I drag along the prairie with my kids and
friends, with my husband
to clear it for new life.

Joy: I knew love, I know love at
the dish-clanking sink—not even
washing or drying, smiled at by a husband
with kind and curious eyes.
My brother, retelling the story
of his boyhood arrest with a sling shot
--for shooting crabapples
into the Colby community pool.
Shiny heart faces, nieces, nephews, godchildren,
A cloud of balloons to the one we lost to cancer,
separated by miles or the heavens, not hearts,
a re-reading of all stories ever told in crayon.

Love in the face of a friend,
praying, pouring hot spiced tea,
reminding me depression always flees
from the hushed arrival of the pink delphiniums.

Love gathers the heart.
Love gathers the sweet yellow roses, the honeysuckle,
the mint and the dill,

these pine cones scattered
under fir trees on white winter snow.

Jesus.

Every season,
Jesus gathering my heart whether
scattered, plucked, or spilled;
Whether luscious, sweet or full-blooming.

Jesus, crying, dying,
speaking a final word against death.
Leaping flame-lick from the tomb,
rising, rising, a vast pillar of fire
hovering over desert hours.

Jesus, shrewd and sweet,
with his paradox and poetry,
fiercesome, frolicking,
frying up fish for friends at breakfast.

Jesus,
even now turning over all the tables
in my soul.

***To truly see I saw through the eyes of another.
To truly live I lost my life to gain a new one.***

CARYN: But how to see, to hear through another?
How to come to the place before the Tower of Babel?
We were divided. We are divided.
I was cut off from you – hundreds of words apart –
Christian, born-again, church, gospel, Jesus.

The words used so casually by others
as if they were statues of cement withstanding
centuries of seasons that everyone saw.
I was and still am the New York Jew in the Christian Midwest,
the one bowing my head obediently for the opening
prayer at the conference, the reunion, even the support group,
trying not to flinch when I hear, “In Jesus’s name we pray.”

I wanted, I still want, to pray with you
but beyond anyone’s name, knowing
we can never name the holy, hold it still
enough, like trying to hold water still,

but only circle around it with prayer,
intent, presence, hoping our circling
will outline it – a burning bush,
a fire we can see from a long distance
once we lead ourselves with outstretched arms.

Now what do I do with the scars
of invisibility, the seed lines of division,
the “you dirty Jew” and “Hitler was right”
along with the far more pervasive
“what church do you go to?” and “Yom Kippor? What is that?”

What do I do with the stories of how my grandmother,
as a child, hid under a blanket in the small house in Poland
while the pogrom came, and this time, killed her mother
in the very bed where she stayed as still as could be?
What do I do with the losses that traveled through her
to my mother to me, the relatives the Holocaust erased
from our living memory?

What do I do with these scars held lightly
here in my heart, the quiet lines that place you here
and me there?

I bring them here to you.

I cup the scars like trembling small birds
in my palms. I lift them out of me
and feed them into this tree of life
growing right here in the clearing
above us, below us, right now.

JOY: I step into this place, trembling like the birds.
May I cup them in my hands as well?
May I release them to this sky above us,
a billowing scroll soon rolling up?
I choose not to forget,
forget you and your people.
Each stitch of loss,
or healing, we help mend this fabric that
stretches between wars and worlds and even words,
a hammock swinging between two trees,
a place of rest under golden shade.

Across the yard, hope,
tulip of this spring
pushes up from the earth,

green with trust, with promise,
sheltering the irrepressible yellow bud beneath.
Oh, the seasons it takes to learn the stories,
the losses, the unbearable weight of the scars...

CARYN: To unearth the hope in this place
to our find our way to each our own clearing
where you meet someone I don't know
who holds your heart, sets it free,

For me, it's Dina or Esther or Daniel, all ordinary people.
It's Miriam who reminds me we're all here
learning of the stark beauty,
the wild blue of the charging sky, the dry hard survival
of living in desert times
singing and dancing anyway before
the fractured landscape of our collective souls,
the bleeding and dying, the suffering
more vast than infinity,
of this world

to say some small word,
some small gesture
of our lives,
to save something
and make a new name for God.

JOY: And don't forget Sarah,
Bone-dry laughing, blessed with children
as plenty as the blowing sand storm of stars.

A path less chosen.
The names forge a clearing,
water a wilderness
with small words, small gestures,
save our souls from a life without naming.

Walk slowly into the tender places,
the tender, tender places,
where the psalmist sings:
Faithful are the wounds of a friend.

And the wound is this: love heals.
Is this when the angels come?

CARYN: Some you can see, some you cannot
like the women standing around me once in a dream,

old Jewish women who held me tight before
all my surgeries, fed me rugulah, and soothed my forehead
as if they were smoothing wrinkled pages of a manuscript,
who have lived through the loss of everyone
they knew and somehow survived,
or who died but came back anyway
as I lay down with death, as I woke close to it.

I believe in real healing,
in the long silences involved in changing your life.
In putting down the sword and shield
so that purple iris, Asian lilies, white gay feather,
red poppies, blue dianthis, crazy honeysuckle
wind around it, bind it
to the living, breathing earth.

JOY: Words take us to the underground river,
to the life thrumming under this dry ground.
I did not awaken as you did,
Gulping life and death in one moment,
but I have stumbled to the edge
of certainty and jumped off, holding others' hands,
all my trust dancing on air, swirling
silently into faith.

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.*

I cannot see the meek inheriting the earth,
but I believe it just the same.
The lamb and lion lying down together,
swords turned into ploughshares,
every deep valley exalted, every shining mountain
glimmering with purple and gold-crowned hope.
I believe in my women speaking just as yours did.
I believe in your speaking.
I believe in you.

I know what it is to forget
the delight of this sunshine splashing lemon air,
or twilight melting sky into
violet and fuschia and orchid mist.
A friend can help you remember.

.....
CARYN: And to remember this place
where the sky is so large it's clear that it

is what holding the earth,
I had to leave the landscape of my own
childhood where the ocean breathed onto
the edge of continent in regular intervals
while I waited, holding my journal and writing
my way toward some new way of listening
to the sky, to the sea to find home
through what I saw, what the wind told my skin.

I believe in what I know in my senses, in my body,
like how I know birth – the smell of it, the fear
tightening the body, the absolute
impossibility of large things coming
through small openings.
I remember the moment each time,
pushing out my child, caught in the place
of death and love and god and nothing
and wind and no name
and then, so fast, we're both on
the other side of the world
crying and holding,
blood and heat, our eyes open.

JOY: I don't know birth but I do know love,
know the heart stretching, breaking wide open
only to admit the smallness of this space,
the need for grace. I know the
embrace of blood and heat and water
in newness, in bawling lungs of freedom,
in death as the beginning of life,
in rising up when the cantata of crows
arrive, unlikely praise awakening silence.

I know the slow turning of the body
toward the lover, seeking to cling until blessed,
clinging until the whole house is shaking
with unnamable blessing.

I know the mysterious visitation of the angel
to the fractured family,
halo of hope glowing steadily in darkness,
silent father now singing in the black choir,
drunken mother's wine now living water.

Ordinary life is so merciful.
His mercy endures forever.

I will give thanks with all my heart for
your remembrances,
calling us to remember again
even the painful memories,

For his mercy endures forever.

.....
CARYN: I know such mercy but by another name –
the rising back up after my father’s death
of something shining like forgiveness,
the lily-of-the-valley each spring,
the lost child found – my own and myself,
the terror of dying and then
the rapture of twirling in the wind
near the wild cedars,
the dream of love and the awakening
into the arms of my husband,
the dream of loss or attack or fear
and then the sweet night waking
in a house made of love.

JOY: *I am listening. I am listening.*

CARYN: Speak to me, Leah of your mercy.
Tell me how you survived in the forever of
being second fiddle to Rachel
.....
and living with that maniac Jacob.
Tell me who you wrestled with
to find your blessing, or how you lived
.....
without one.

Come back, Miriam, show me
the years organizing with no burning bush to help
so that Moses could lead them out
with your words. What fire warmed you?

What is your true name, Bashiva?

Come into my arms, Ruth, and call out
your grief over losing your land, your husband,
and then having Naomi take your babe off with her
to the women.

Return, Dinah, and cry with me over
not being able to stop the bloodshed
in the holy land.

Shine a light, Hannah, so I can see
how to walk on this high wire
over the old battles that scar our land, our people,
that break tracks of pain all over my heart.

Sing the story inside the story, Joy,
the one made of heartbeat and loss,
the love inside the love.

JOY: The love inside the love? A larger story:
Esther bears beauty for a greater good.
Deborah's brave heart beckons on the battlefield.
Hannah pours out her yearning
like wax, flame never dying, wavering.

Women walked ahead of us,
survived storms, sang, regardless of the scars
all around them, the scars
we carry – I carry, you carry....
Remember the small retreat kitchen in Colorado
where the women told stories,
reverently traced one another's scars,
hearts overflowing with June woods and fern.
There was a woman there calling each of us by name,
saying,

beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

Help us remember
we are more beautiful
together than we are apart,
that beauty will blaze
through our joy, through our scars.

CARYN: The scars sing our stories – in our bodies, in the land.
The place two sides meet, how wounds love themselves
toward healing. I trace the scars
across my chest or belly, the long lines
that tingle with feeling, no feeling,
all the ways this body opened itself, and lost something.
I trace out my wishes for long life
in those purple blue lines,
to survive what would otherwise have killed me.

The lines in the land, the excavated sides
of hills, the seams torn apart,

the rain meshing together weeds and low grass,
this whole world, this body poisoned and cut asunder,
the breaks and empty places in us
numbed into distance.

Deena Metzger asks,
Can the world heal in this body?
Can the body heal in this world?

Only though letting go,
sing my flown away breasts.

Only through giving up what blinds us,
sings the broken field.

Only through creating something
to bridge this space between us,
sings the body of the earth,
the earth contained as our bodies.
To bridge between you and me too,
Jews cut off from Christians, women divided,
worlds of meaning in the high plains or
the mountains, prairie to seashore
that our lives span.

Touch the scars. Do not be afraid
of what cracks run through the dirt
or what lines are branded on a body.

Look at the story lines we hold.
Everything about flesh, dirt, tree branch,
spirit lit with sunlight or vast and inky
as the dark blue of the middle of the night
where we wake, wounded and shining
trying to mend ourselves all the time
before our very eyes.

JOY: And what of the scars that do not run across breasts
but run parallel to the heart,
naked, shivering, white in the light of day,
but are there, nonetheless, to bear witness?
To speak?
Gilded thread, gentle mending,
despite ourselves,
despite the slow embrace of the healing.

I, too, can sing of the sorrow,

the loss of the heart,
clinging fast to David's cry
though sometimes I can't help thinking
his darkness was cleaner, his mourning but
a bright windhover, hovering above his shadow before dawn.

I can tell you of not believing, too, how the doubts
swirl thick like Eliot's fog, how the willing mind
embraces the words,
but the heart stays an unwilling prodigal,
unsure of what returning home even *means*.

Woodpecker rap-rap-rapping, reminding me
the door opens to those who keep knocking.
So I keep knocking, ear cocked toward heaven, expecting
nothing but everything. Expecting God in the sorrow and the joy.
Expecting to be expected. Hoping that I am.

CARYN: I don't know how to find the way out, but I do know
the suddenness of daffodils, all open and how did this
happen when my house was falling apart?

And I know the healing temples – their wide arches
and open ceilings, the angels or guides,
imagined ones or not, right there, right here
we carry as our bodies,
we cradle as our souls

where all the sorrow of the world is seen, is held
so it can turn into whatever comes next.

JOY: I don't know how to find the way in, but I do
know how breathless jazz flings me sideways and skyward,
brightness flooding ears, eyes, lips tumbling, dancing
wind and wings and just what is it to chase the firefly?
To love the light without capturing it for your own use?
To allow it to flit above you for the sake of each pilgrim
leaning on their wooden staff, groaning
for all creation to be made complete?

Isn't life to be found in the asking?
Or do the questions lead us to life?

CARYN: What is it to wake at night not watered down
in overdrawn voices from the day, to see the space
and not the figure in the space, to fall backwards
in a dream and realize it's a dream?

What waits, wet as fire, on the end of the line?
The rushing of wings, the billowing of thunderheads, the crashing
of car into lamp post, the slivering of bark from tree,
the waking suddenly for no reason?
Meanwhile, insects reproduce themselves like breath,
birds loosen the sky with flight,
stratus clouds streak across the moon,
kisses stop, and stones break apart
so easily that it's clear they've been cracked inside
for a long time. Each life a transference of water.
Each act just a way to move light around.

Even knowing this, why can't the heart stop asking?

JOY: Rest in the asking.
No striving, scrambling up briared hills and thick underbrush.

.....
The fire goes ahead. It goes behind.
Beneath and above, it is the work of the fire.
The work is to rest.
Like this red cardinal,
tucked beneath slowly shedding leaves,
the slow pace of the older horse
who lays down in quiet trust
knowing the oats will reappear,
day by day by day.
It is the rest of the morning glory, the lily,
the fruitful vine,
who, arrayed with splendor and succulent grapes,
do not toil or spin but root and stay, bloom, bless or feed.
It is the rest of the memory,
the long story of redemption,
the red sea, the food from heaven,
the rest of the five smooth stones
tucked in a small boy's bag.
.....

CARYN: Rest here where the cedars wrap themselves
in dark – the vast black sky with so much in it
that we're spinning as we look up
and try to trace familiar diamonds or horses, red planets
or slivers of new moons.

Someday this will be a memory reignited,
a long pause strung to all other long pauses
that tell us who we are in the inside story,

and the story outside the one we write.

Someday we will light these moments,
a string of white candles
and see in ourselves what we already see
in each other:
beloved. We are beloved.

JOY: Let every breath be love.

CARYN: Let every breath be love.

JOY: Let every breath be love.

BOTH: Let every breath be love

