

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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Mosaic of the Nativity: Serbia, Winter 1993

On the domed ceiling God
is thinking:
I made them my joy,
and everything else I created
I made to bless them.
But see what they do!
I know their hearts
and arguments:

“We’re descended from
Cain. Evil is nothing new,
so what does it matter now
if we shell the infirmary,
and the well where the fearful
and rash alike must
come for water?”

God thinks Mary into being.
Suspended at the apogee
of the golden dome,
she curls in a brown pod,
and inside her mind
of Christ, cloaked in blood,
lodges and begins to grow.

Jane Kenyon¹

Reflections

As we enter this season of Epiphany, we are invited to pay attention to and delight in divine wonder and manifestations of eternity—the stretches of our imaginations. Epiphany (with a capital E) is a Christian festival, observed on January 6, which commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles. Of course, the lower-case epiphanies of our lives are those experiences of sudden and striking—often ecstatic—insight, moments of clarity that may offer us a glimpse of something holy.

¹ “Mosaic of the Nativity: Serbia, Winter, 1993” by Jane Kenyon from *Collected Poems*, Graywolf Press. Used by permission.

This poem by the late Jane Kenyon is, in some ways, representative of her hallmark style, connecting the small to the enormous and reminding readers of the value of careful attention. She leads me to consider the mysterious ways in which, if I'm *expecting* the beautiful, I often *notice* the beautiful. Those peculiar epiphanic moments of beauty as there; the work of our lives is to experience them, witness them. As scholars have noted, Kenyon's work is held together by what she coined the "luminous particular," a way of invoking something specific, small, and particular, in order to transcend it. It's one way of thinking about the divinity—or luminosity—of all things.

"Mosaic of the Nativity: Serbia, Winter 1993" is an example of an *ekphrastic* poem. That is, a verbal description of a visual work of art. The poet's muse is a separate art form and the result is that the two forms—in this case the mosaic and Kenyon's poem—are in a sort of dialogue with one another, two voices of one choir. The use of mosaic itself feels metaphoric to me— notions of assemblage, collection, accumulation seem to me an interesting way of pondering a relationship with the divine, with the supernatural, with the imaginative realm, this clustering of beauty. What Kenyon *sees* inspires what she *writes* and a new marriage is made—or, interestingly, *born*. (Considering that the poem, and the art that has inspired it, center on the nativity—the origin, the birth [both literal and metaphoric, physical and spiritual]—it is fitting to think of the poem as its own kind of birth.)

The poem is much more than description, though. It may begin that way—"on the domed ceiling"—but Kenyon immediately moves away from observation and toward imagination, speculating about what God is thinking, what God knows, and then, at the end of the poem, what Mary may be thinking "inside her mind/of Christ." I am drawn to the idea of God thinking us into existence... like a dream, realized. And I especially appreciate, in light of that line in particular, what Kenyon argues is the backbone of all poetry: "brief musical cries of the spirit...the inside of one person speaking to the inside of another."

✂ About the poet

Jane Kenyon (1947-1995), New Hampshire's poet laureate at the time of her death at age 47, was noted for verse that probed the inner psyche, particularly with regard to her own battle against the depression that haunted her. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Kenyon attended the University of Michigan and while she was a student met her future husband, the poet Donald Hall, who taught there. Hall and Kenyon moved to Eagle Pond Farm, a New Hampshire property that had been in Hall's family for generations and where she would spend the remainder of her life. Kenyon published four volumes of highly-lauded poetry: *From Room to Room*, *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, *Let Evening Come*, and *Constance*.



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