

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



After an Illness, Walking the Dog

Wet things smell stronger,
and I suppose his main regret is that
he can sniff just one at a time.
In a frenzy of delight
he runs way up the sandy road—
scored by freshets after five days
of rain. Every pebble gleams, every leaf.

When I whistle he halts abruptly
and steps in a circle,
swings his extravagant tail.
Then he rolls and rubs his muzzle
in a particular place, while the drizzle
falls without cease, and Queen Anne's lace
and Goldenrod bend low.

The top of the logging road stands open
and light. Another day, before
hunting starts, we'll see how far it goes,
leaving word first at home.
The footing is ambiguous.

Soaked and muddy, the dog drops,
panting, and looks up with what amounts
to a grin. It's so good to be uphill with him,
nicely winded, and looking down on the pond.

A sound commences in my left ear
like the sound of the sea in a shell;
a downward, vertiginous drag comes with it.
Time to head home. I wait
until we're nearly out to the main road
to put him back on the leash, and he
—the designated optimist—
imagines to the end that he is free.

Jane Kenyon¹

¹ "After an Illness, Walking the Dog" by Jane Kenyon in *Poetry*, October/November 1987. Used with permission.

☪ Reflections

It is likely this poem needs no commentary; it feels to me so whole, so full, that I worry my saying anything at all about it risks breaking the spell of that final image: the inexhaustible and steady canine oblivious to its sweet bondage, obedient without consciousness of obedience.

The primary tension that resonates with me is that of “freedom” as it relates to the human-divine relationship. I am reminded of Robert Frost’s poem, “The Silken Tent”; in it, a tent is held by its poles and ropes and pegs, anchored securely in the ground. Of course, on a fair and windless day the tent remains so still that it appears to be standing of its own accord in a field and that its poles and ropes and pegs are entirely unnecessary. But, as soon as the wind blows, it becomes clear that the tent’s strength and stability depend entirely on the bonds that hold it. That is, its free-standing-ness is but an illusion and its ability to stand at all only possible because it is held fast.

I think also of Wendell Berry’s essay on marriage and poetry, in which he argues that the true value of form—in poetry, in marriage, in life—is that it paradoxically grants us more freedom: “Well used, [form, bounden duty] may be the means of earning freedom, the price of admission or permission, the enablement to be free. But the connection may be even closer, more active and interesting, than that; it may be that form, strictly kept, *enforces* freedom.”

In this season of Lent, I am drawn to the ancient stories of exile, of bondage and liberation, of wandering and return, of wilderness and sanctuary. Jesus spends 40 days in temptation, in hunger, in turmoil and anxiety, only to learn once more that indeed, even in his agony, he was never alone, never abandoned, never divorced nor orphaned from the One to whom he had always belonged.

And neither are we.

☪ About the Poet

Jane Kenyon (1947-1995), born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is the author of four books of poetry and a book of translation, *Twenty Poems of Anna Akhmatova*. While a student at the University of Michigan, she met the poet Donald Hall; they married and moved to Eagle Pond Farm in New Hampshire, a landscape that features prominently throughout both poets’ work. She was named poet laureate of New Hampshire in 1995, and died later that same year of leukemia.



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