

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 13, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

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



"Hope" is the thing with feathers (314)

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chilliest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet—never—in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of me.

Emily Dickinson¹

✧ Reflections

I am feeling in dire need of hope these days. The land feels chilled indeed, and the sea strange. Enduring poems, like this one, have a way of returning at exactly the right time—a reminder, as a bird that startles, of grace and mercy. I first came to love Emily Dickinson by way of my first and best mentor, Claudia Emerson, who taught me more about poetry and form in one class period than in all my years combined. (She kept a black and white photograph of Emily Dickinson in her office and much of Emerson's work—especially her last two collections—have echoes of Dickinson throughout.)

Dickinson was always a challenge for me to teach; my students were often turned off by her signature dashes and atypical capitalization, her obsession with death and dying. ("Ms. Seay!" they would say, "Why do we have to read this depressing stuff?"... to which I would respond by handing them "Hope is the thing with feathers," as if to say: *Dickinson can be dark but, look, she has the antidote. And it comes with feathers!*)

¹ "Hope is the thing with feathers (314)" by Emily Dickinson. Public Domain.

In this poem, hope—an abstraction, one of those formless, conceptual, un-nail-down-able and invisible *ideas*—is now a perched bird, perfectly visible and tangible. It sings sweetly, ceaselessly, soul-warming us on land and at sea. Terrible and “sore” indeed would be the storm that ever disconcerted or disturbed our bird of hope. And, though birdsong is wordless, it is not, of course, without melody.

Dickinson is known to have drawn inspiration from the Psalms and the form of this poem mimics that of many hymn structures: iambic trimeter with an alternating four-beat line, end rhyme, stanzaic orderliness. She is known for adopting what is now known as “hymn form” and, like many hymns, her subjects are often concerned with the unfathomable, the mysterious, the eternal, the wondrous.

I read this poem at my sister’s wedding and now it stirs in me a lovely realization that the metaphor of the bird who does not ask “a crumb—of me” echoes 1 Corinthians, which begins, “Love is patient, love is kind...” and goes on to say that love “is not self-seeking...it keeps no record of wrongs.” Perhaps not only is the bird a symbol for hope, but also for love. And for God who, most especially in my “Extremity”—my time of need—seems to require nothing more of me than me; I am enough. In this way, Dickinson’s poem reads like prayer and I am reminded of what a cherished friend of mine shared with me from the writer Douglas Burton-Christie: “Perhaps poetry is as necessary to our quest for God as Prayer...I find myself wondering whether poetry and prayer are perhaps the same thing.”

I wish for you, dear reader, a hopeful and feathery week.

✧ About the Poet

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. For one year, she attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary but otherwise lived her life essentially isolated, rarely leaving the family homestead. Scholars believe that because she rarely titled her work and was often unconventional in her use of punctuation—particularly the use of the dash—she sought to counter the standardization that publication requires, among other theories. Though she was a prolific poet, less than a dozen poems were printed during her lifetime; it was only after her death that her sister discovered the breadth of her writing. Now, she is recognized—nearly universally—as one of the most significant American poets.



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