

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



The Snow Storm

I walked down towards the river, and the deer had left tracks
deep as half my arm, that ended in a perfect hoof
and the shump shump sound my boots made walking made the silence loud.

And when I turned back towards the great house
I walked beside the deer tracks again.
And when I came near the feeder: little tracks of the birds on the surface
of the snow I'd broken through.

Put your finger here, and see my hands, then bring your hand and put it in my side.

I put my hand down into the deer track
and touched the bottom of an invisible hoof.
Then my finger in the little mark of the jay.

Marie Howe¹

✂ Reflections

The poem printed here is included in Marie Howe's collection, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, a book full of treasure and magic and reverence. Some readers will recognize right away the dual meaning of "Ordinary Time": liturgically, Ordinary Time refers to the Sundays after Epiphany and after Pentecost, from the word "ordinal," which simply means "counted time"; "ordinary"—with a lower case "o"—of course means "common" or "mundane." One thing I admire about Howe's book is this purposeful blurring of Ordinary and ordinary and the skillful way she manages what might be called "spiritual poetry." Her work is as concerned with the Kingdom of Heaven as it is with the kingdom of earth; it is a kind of poetry that reminds its readers that indeed the extraordinary is always present in the ordinary, and what she calls "unromantic daily love" is at the very heart of our mission on earth—to revere the commonplace, to cherish the imperfect, to attend carefully to all the creatures of the earth, to our own lives, and to one another.

¹ "The Snow Storm" by Marie Howe from *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, W. W. Norton. Used by permission.

In an interview published in the literary magazine AGNI, Howe speaks to the ways in which *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* feeds her “obsess[ion] with the metaphysical, the spiritual dimensions of life as they present themselves in this world.” In the case of “The Snow Storm,” an attention to the tracks of both deer and birds (creatures large and small) recalls the story of Thomas, who desires to touch the wounds of Jesus in order that his faith might be affirmed. Howe’s poem shares a line with scripture: “Put your finger here, and see my hands, then bring your hand and put it in my side” are the very words Jesus speaks to Doubting Thomas in order that he “be not faithless, but believing.”

When the speaker of this poem lays her “hand down into the deer track / and touch[es] the bottom of an invisible hoof” she is made keenly aware of the presence of something no longer seen: evidence of the now-invisible. Interestingly, these marks in the snow are only visible after a storm, her awareness now possible because the skies have cleared. I am led to consider the larger metaphor—the ways clarity often comes at the cost of despair, spring blooms around us only *after* the cruelty of winter, and the darkest hour is just before dawn. In this way, Howe’s attention to a small detail inspires a call to faith.

The world is full of these reminders of the divine, small and holy moments Howe describes as the “is-ness” of the world. She devotes many of the poems in this particular collection to her musings on the existence and eventual passing of all things... “the wind, running water, voices.” “Poetry holds the knowledge,” she says, “that we are alive and that we know we’re going to die. The most mysterious aspect of being alive might be that.” In other words, we *are*. Life *is*. To *be* is its own poetry.

While it is not Ordinary Time by the Christian calendar—we are in the season of Lent, preparing to enter Holy Week—I offer this poem now because I like to return to it as a resurrection of sorts: it is always an inspiring and timely reminder to be reassured that the divine *is* real and the divine *is* near. The work of a life is but to notice it, that extraordinary ordinary, in the here and now.

✠ About the poet

Marie Howe currently serves on the writing faculties at Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, and Columbia University. She is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, as well as co-editor of the essay anthology *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Academy of American Poets. She served as Poet Laureate of New York State from 2012 to 2014.



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