

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 29, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

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



The Third Day

When they came to the tomb
What did they see?
Only what they could not say.

Too empty, too cold
To say what they saw,
Too full to say empty

And cold, but full.
They said what they said,
Saw what they saw,

And knew they could not
Say what they saw.
They did not know

That whatever words they found
To say would fill the world
With those very words,

The best they could find
In that place, that time,
When all words fail or fall.

After the stone is rolled away,
After the sky refuses to reply,
Comes the heaviness of being here.

Phillis Levin¹

¹ "The Third Day" by Phillis Levin from *The Afterimage*, Copper Beech Press. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

Last week's *Wellspring* featured a poem by this same poet, Phillis Levin, and I have loved, over this last week, with Easter freshly arrived and spring at full blast, thinking of "The Third Day" as a companion to her poem "End of April." There are of course some striking differences between the two: this poem is less a narrative and more a song; this poem lacks pronouns (there is no clear "you" to whom it is addressed and no identifiable speaker); and, this poem is more overtly religious, referring explicitly to the tomb, now empty, where Christ's body once lay. But this poem, like last week's, seems to me to be motored (in tercets, three-line units) by the same invisible forces—awe, wonder, and the sobering effects of having witnessed a miracle. Much of what I admire about "End of April" I admire here as well: formal control, an understated but reverent tone, and a last line that feels at once startling and somehow also inevitable.

Like many of my favorite lyric poems, this one is difficult to summarize. Its repetition has a rhythmic effect that is not so much cyclical as accumulative, and even "when all words fail or fall" the poet does indeed have something—and something important!—left to say. And that is, essentially, *now what*. After the beauty and majesty of Easter Day, the stone on all our hearts rolled away, the darkness brightened, the fire lit, what will we do with what we have witnessed? How will we live now? What is to become of us and with what words can we ever describe or predict our becoming?

The title is brilliantly deceptive as the poem is, for me at least, as much about the day of the Resurrection as it is about all the days afterward, the fourth day, the fortieth, the four-hundredth, four-thousandth. The "heaviness of being here" implies a tremendous responsibility about how we are to live, the weight of a recognition that we are—thanks be to God—participants in the daily, ceaseless, perpetually unfolding miracle.

☞ About the poet

Phillis Levin is the author of several collections of poetry, most recently *Mr. Memory & Other Poems* (Penguin Books, 2016), a finalist for the 2016 Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Among her many honors, she has received fellowships from the Ingram Merrill Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Born in Paterson, New Jersey, Levin earned degrees from Sarah Lawrence College and The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. A professor of English and the poet-in-residence at Hofstra University, she lives in New York City.



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