

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



On the Shoreline

Her vision is unreliable, as are her prayers.
She begs the lake to guide her, but expects nothing
more than this mantra of lapping. A boat
trolls by, the fishermen nearly indistinguishable
from trees. In this light, the great blue heron
on the dock could be anything: a child, or lovers
folding themselves into each other. It opens its wings;
the span is alarming. It beckons, urges her
to walk upon the water. She offers her foot to the surface,
and for a moment, she believes it is possible.

Laura Van Prooyen¹

Reflections

This is a poem that feels as much about possibility and hope as it does doubt and uncertainty. That might be one way of saying that the poem is about what all poems are about to some degree: the space between what is, what isn't, and what could be.

It's a poem about the blurring not only of images but of desires. Just as the speaker's "vision is unreliable"—she mistakes the fishermen for trees, the heron for a child or for "lovers folding themselves into each other"—so too her wish is an ambiguous one: what is the true "it" she believes is possible? And what will she *do* with faith? It is a rich offering to consider.

And this is a poem of interior questions, too, even if they remain silent. The speaker considers her prayers "unreliable"—an interesting adjective that connotes irresponsibility, fallibility, inaccuracy. In other words, these are imperfect prayers. What we know of this particular desire is that it includes begging (for "the lake to guide her") though her expectations of any response are low; she "expects nothing / more than this mantra of lapping."

What's most interesting to me in this poem is the final image. It unfolds line by line, an echo of the heron itself *un*folding its wings, the lovers folding *into* one another. Over the course of

¹ "On the Shoreline" by Laura Van Prooyen from *Inkblot and Altar*, Pecan Grove Press. Used by permission.

the poem, we are led toward a resolution, a calming of anxiety, and it is delivered by way of the heron—by something external the speaker witnesses and with which she identifies. This feels like a really important gesture: we do not know what becomes of this woman, whether she takes a step or not, or what she considers next. Instead, we are invited *in*, to step *with*. We are less the observer and more the participant. Perhaps one question the poem asks of us is concerning the difference in resolution and conclusion.

The heron, she thinks, does more than simply *call* for her to walk on water; it “beckons, urges.” This is perhaps an explicit reference to Jesus’ miracle, of course, but the metaphor seems to me much more than a biblical parallel. The moment, though fleeting, of believing she herself is capable of the impossible is particularly relevant to a poem interested in unreliability, uncertainty, the vanishing of one image into another; in this moment she identifies with Christ in a moment of ecstatic clarity. I appreciate this kind of brimming climax: what the poem has been praying for (guidance, a sign), the speaker receives. And yet, now that she has been given what she asked for, she is faced with the responsibility of the next step (in this case, a literal one.)

I am led to think that each of us might “offer [our] foot to the surface”—daily, moment by moment—and the whole world is suspended: to step forward or to stay still. To believe or to doubt. In this way, each moment of our lives is its own call to faith.

✧ Other questions to consider

1. This is a poem that urges us to think about the moment *just before* and *just after* we take a step. It extends and expands a single moment, a single decision. Of course, all of us are taking *figurative* steps each day, each hour; we may not be walking on water, but we’re also not drowning (though it might feel like it!). What do you make of this kind of equation? What consequence are we left with and what image does it provide for you? Treading water? Swimming gracefully? Gasping for air? If this poem continued, what might happen to the metaphor that is, in this case, walking on water? If she takes a step, she will likely be reminded of her human limitations. What might this open up for us as a way of thinking about faith? What do you think the speaker of this poem would conclude if she steps out onto the water and fails?
2. Though the speaker prays what she considers an imperfect prayer, she is still granted that which she desired. What have you asked for that you did not expect to receive? What is something you received that you did not know you needed? These questions remind me of one particular prayer that resonates with me: “Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask...”
3. The title of the poem—“On the Shoreline”—is an evocative one for me. The delineation of where the shore ends and the ocean begins is as blurred as the images the poem conjures and is, for some, as mysterious as the question of faith. The distinction between

solid ground and water, though, is at the heart of the miracle the poem references: walking on *water* is the miracle; walking on *land* is the ordinary business of humans. How do you connect the title of the poem to your understanding of the poem's emotional tension?

✧ Writing in response

1. I'm concerned lately with poems of ecstasy and I could make a case for "On the Shoreline" being among them. An ecstatic moment is one not necessarily of bliss, but of clarity. Have you had an experience like this? See if you can express it in writing. A greater challenge may be to express it in as few words as possible.
2. Write as a poem a prayer you might otherwise utter silently.
3. Consider a poem, or reflection, you have written before. What happens to the *subject* of the poem if you title it as a prayer?
4. One privilege of the reader is to imagine the roads *not* taken by the poet. Here are some specific examples for doing this: What else might the heron have urged? What other sign might the speaker have received and what might she have missed? If this poem continued for three more lines, what would it say? If the title were instead "Faith" how does it affect the final image? What if it were titled "Doubt"?

✧ About the poet

Laura Van Prooyen was raised in a tight-knit Dutch community just outside of Chicago. She now lives in San Antonio, and works as an independent consultant in the health and wellness industry, specifically with active-service members, veterans, and trauma survivors. She is the author of two books of poetry, *Inkblot and Altar* (Pecan Grove Press, 2006) and *Our House Was on Fire* (Ashland Poetry Press, 2015).



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