

Boston Radiation Poems

Harry Strachan, 2008

During our two months of Medical Sabbatical in Boston in October and November of 2008 Sandy and I took a poetry writing seminar at the Cambridge Adult Education Center. We were often given assignments to write different poetic forms: metaphors or narratives or sonnets or sequence poems.

In Mt. Auburn's Cemetery

The second day of radiation
Under a gray sky
I walk among the tombs
Of the famous and forgotten,
Shouldering a heavy backpack of worries.

Will my poor Costa Rica
Catch pneumonia from
America's subprime cold?
Will partisan posturing ensure
Jobs and pensions are lost?

How do I cope with cancer's undressing,
Learn to love myself and others,
The key to healing,
According to surgeon Bernie Siegel
And Smiley, my inner hunchback gardener?

Suddenly around the bend a small Maple
Brilliantly red, orange and yellow
Every leaf radiantly happy,
Branches thrust triumphantly high,
Oblivious to the dead on her skirt.

Though she carries no name,
Unlike her stately, still green, brothers,
Curran Sugar and Red Japanese Maple,
She casts her reflection into the pond
And free coins of light all around.

“How can you be so happy?” I ask.
Her answer, “I don’t need this gold.
Summer was great, winter will be good.
Come Spring I’ll be bigger and stronger,
With even more to give.”

My walk among the tombs ends,
Though my backpack hasn’t emptied
And my questions are unanswered,
My spirit sings the hymn,
“It is well with my Soul.”

Metaphors

Normally in my walk along the river
Up one side, down the other,
I watch the emerging sun excite birds
And make red leaves glow with happiness.

To approaching joggers and bikers
I give an experimental ticket
“Hi! Have a Great Day!”
Many reciprocate with big smiles

And I think, “A miracle!”
Like the 5 loaves and two fish,
We’ve created from almost nothing
A banquet of good will.

Today, though, I have an assignment:
Find a metaphoric poem.
Bang! My imagination hits a wall,
Ideas flee like the birds into the bushes,

They race away like the sculls
On centipede oars.
Even the sun hides its face
Saying, “Leave me out of this!”

Caroline and Zeth Graves

(A sonnet)

Three friends, a sugar maple, gnarled oak,
Weeping willow, bow heads together, strain
To read blurred letters under lichen's yoke
Of Caroline and mate Seth's claim to fame.

She "ministered to others," while he "stayed
The difficult course and fought the good fight."
We're not told whom he fought, what course he braved,
Nor whom she cared for throughout the long night.

The four smaller stones behind make no claims,
Only Joshua outlived and likely knew
His parents dashed hopes, deep sorrows and pains,
Of his own grief and shortened life, no clue.

While nature pays homage with golden leaves,
"No one escapes life free!" 'fore winter's freeze!

Moses and the Burning Bush

(Moses, in the Bible, in exile from Egypt while tending his flock, notices a burning bush that is not consumed. He approaches and is called by God to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and lead them to the promised land. In the encounter, He learns much about God, resists the mission, but finally obeys. Thanks to Martin Buber.)

You're familiar, my children, with the written story
But ask, "What was it really like?"

The fire was not one you see on TV
Consuming the pines, rushing upon houses,
More an orb of bright light enveloping the thorn bush,
Inside a messenger from outer space,
And a voice I recognized instantly.

It addressed me, told me to remove sandals, show humility.
I didn't have to ask Who (the written record misleads),
I knew it was the God of our Fathers
My question was really, 'What are you like
And what do you want of me?'

The answer, 'I am the always present, but uncontrollable, One,
The ground in whom you live and have your being.
I'm aware of the trials of my people,
The subprime crisis, the war in Iraq, climate warming
Get thee up ... Help me solve these.'

My excuses: too old, not a leader, persona non grata at court
Too ignorant of both problem and solution, He brushed off.
'I will be with you and on the march you'll know the path.
You will join others and they will join you. My rod
Will strengthen your limping walk and weak arms.'

The written record exalts me as the leader,
But doesn't tell you others had their flaming bushes,
Each of us began alone, but ended up marching together.
We even had our allies among the Egyptians.
Victory, though, (the record is correct) was a miracle.

I asked for confirming evidence of His promise at the bush.
Ironically the sign He gave could only be known at the end.
'You'll know when free, for we'll be reunited on this mountain.'

Up & Down (A Sequence Poem)

1. Yoga

Arms held high,
My rotator cuff screams,
“Put me down!”

Arms stretching down,
My rusty back squeaks,
“Where are those shins?”

2. Zephyr

Through an open tooth he lisps,
“Grampa Harry, listen to my poem:
‘I go up, up, up.
I go down, down, down.
Twirling up, twirling down.
The end.’”

His hair is a nest of reddish curls,
His bright hazel eyes seek mine.
“That’s wonderful!” I beam,
“I like the twirling, twirling.
Yes, it is up and down.”

3. Memories

Down in the marsh between river and sea
I recognize the brown and yellow leaf
Floating above, jarred now and again
By spotted fish seeking a morsel.
I am no longer clear, aged a tannic brown.

Up in my stream home eons ago
I asked about the yellow shells floating by,
Watched for hours on end
Wiggling tadpoles turn into tiny frogs.
Fresh from the spring, I was clear as light.

Between, in the rapids I twirled up as spray,
Twirled down a hidden chute to smash
Into turbines almost too heavy to move,
Developed muscles strong enough to carry
The gray steel barges from mill to city.

Now I am allowed for a short while
To rest still in these marshes
And think about the ocean that will swallow me.
Will I remember the tadpoles, the yellow leaf,
The twirling up and twirling down?