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Rise and Go

Poems

Bird

*A good journey begins with knowing where we are
and being willing to go somewhere else. Richard Rohr. .*

A morning mild as milk. Open the window and a bird flies in.
A bird in the house means a death in the house. But who
believes old wives' tales? The road past your door is crowded:
travellers with crude or hand-carved walking sticks, backpacks,
a pebble for luck, an aching heart, a destination to reach
before the sun goes down. The bird, a finch, claims the linen closet.

Odd birds, those pilgrims on the way to holy Canterbury,
each with a narrative. The gutsy Wife of Bath, duplicitous Pardoner,
eager Squire, a Friar with pious passion. They covered miles by day
Open the door. When you have washed the calloused feet of strangers,
towelled them, offer bread and water. They will speak to you

about the ash heap where the school burned down. Rotting road kill.
A shrinking river. Dust shrouding the toppled towers.
Flies buzzing infected eyes of children. Inscrutable faces of officers
at border crossings. They will say they might have been afraid
(as every traveller is) of death, had not that thing with feathers
travelled with them. Next morning

sun once more ascends, the sleepers wake
and when the finch begins to sing
you too lace up your boots. It's time
to rise and go.

The road

We laced our hiking boots, grabbed poles,
 stowed maps and bottled water in our backpacks.
 A flag at half mast made us pause, not halt.
 A siren screamed. Our carefree children asked:
 Where are we going? Can we bring the dog?
 A day of sunlight lay ahead or so we fondly thought.
 We slammed the door, shielded our eyes against the sun
 and saw in front of us an open, uphill road .

At any point in time, in one hemisphere or the other,
 An urgent percentage of the world's more than seven billion
 people are on the move, travelling on air, land, water,
 in an overcrowded boat, firm or flimsy aircraft, on a freight train,
 flat on the wind-buffeted top of a container, on bleeding feet,
 through tangled jungle, on washed-out roads, on burning sand, steep
 mountain trail, bearing the unbearable weight of a piece of bread,
 a few coins for something to buy, someone to buy off, a child
 too sick or too little for one more step. You must carry it
 on top of the weight of fear: the over-burdened boat will capsize
 in the ocean-swell, pirates will climb on board, the plane will stray
 into forbidden airspace and mysteriously disintegrate,
 the train will be derailed, your strength will fail.
 At the border there will be a wall.

We climbed the narrow trail. Streams of clear water trickled down
 from pools we could not see. We sang a travelling song, told stories
 about youth and love and bravery. Higher up, the air was thin. Circling
 silently, the raptors waited for our steps to falter. Clouds covered the sun.
 Our children were hungry.

By the time dawn breaks across the violated skyline
 of a broken city, children have absorbed blows,
 breathed gas fumes, gone hungry, died of thirst, perished
 in winter's cold. There is no escape and no one comes
 to wash the wounds, offer a cup of water, sing a song.
 Smoke fills the air. Sparrows huddle in blasted shrubbery.

We came down from the mountain, entered a forest,
 watched sunlight filter through shimmering aspen leaves,
 leaving the forest floor dappled with gold. We crossed a river,
 and arrived at the desert, the land of thirst. Our eyes burned,
 dust filled our mouths, under our feet sand shifted.
 In this Lenten landscape our children cried for water.

(The Road--continued)

We looked around for palm trees and acacia.
Where are the cypress trees? We asked.
Where is the Tree of Life?

Travelling with Children

Are we almost there? the children ask.
 They are counting SUVs. Red winged blackbirds
 perch like sentinels on posts. The car is a cage,
 crops on either side, short and green.

Was seeding late this year?
 Will pounding rain flatten the grain?
 Weeds choke the wheat? Will there be blight,
 a plague of locusts, early frost?

We fled the city's humid torpor, dull tick of time,
 raced through almost non-existent towns,
 past single-pump gas stations, a white wooden church,
 bedraggled grass and a cohort of graves.

Beside a lake we unpack our loaves and fishes,
 bottled water. Unfold the folding chairs.
 Already the children's laughter wafts toward us:
 music from the water's edge.

The sand is warm and we sleep.
 Yellow canola, blue flax blossoms fade,
 grain turns from green to gold:
 it is harvest time. A dream

from which the screaming seagulls wake us.
 We watch the white-capped waves, alarmed
 to see our children swimming way beyond their depth.
 Come back! we cry. We are afraid

the offshore wind, the sullen undertow
 will pull you deep, drag you from our sight.
 We want you here beside us on the sand.
 Come, eat and drink and laugh with us.

It's getting late. Let's pack up. Let's leave
 before the sun is low and the grave stones
 cast long shadows on the grass.

Travel Advisory

1.

It happened that a traveller
 wrapped his thick cloak tight
 against the gale force of the north wind.
 Only the noonday sun's warm rays
 were able to persuade those rigid fingers
 to unclench. Without a hint of protest
 the cumbersome cloak dropped to the ground
 like a giant insect's cast-off shell.

2,

In high school we were taught German
 literature by a German-speaking teacher
 who read to us an ancient ballad:
*Die Sonne bringt es an den Tag, **
 in which the sun, pouring warmth
 and light on the breakfast table,
 brings to the mind of a man his past sin. A crime
 concealed in his heart; a secret that has torn
 and tormented him as he travelled,
 brought at last to light. Our teacher said
 we should never forget this tale
 of guilt and punishment or underestimate
 the sun's power.
 A sharp bell rang, books slammed shut,
 we switched to English, raced each other
 out the door where there was nothing
 between us and the sun.

*The sun will bring it to light.

3.

The sun is a star. Or if you wish,
 a wheel of fire.
 In less than ten minutes
 its hot rays reach the place
 where children play games
 or huddle to plot mischief.
 The mother warns her children:
*Wear a hat or else
 you will burn.*

(Travel Advisory—continued)

4.

Nothing is as silent as the light
that interrupts the gloom of night,
streaming through the window,
pouring into breakfast bowls.

We feed on light, cry out for more
until our emptiness is filled
and we hear singing. How could we not
have been aware,
there would be angels hov'ring near?

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Fire

The children want a bigger fire,
sausages for roasting, marshmallows to burn black,
charred sticks, each tip a glowing ember
able to inscribe the midnight sky with messages
as private and as precious as a name.

One morning on a lakeshore in the middle east,
an unexpected bonfire. Fish for breakfast.
Nets, worn and water-logged, spread out to dry.
Around flames and fish, the conversation falters.
Nothing can obliterate the fear

that hovered over last night's lake,
the blackness of the sky, the slow, slow hours,
the rocking of the fishing boat on troubled water.
Death, burial, the astonishing quantity of fish
raised questions:

Where do we go from here?
What have we left to hope for?
Who built that fire?

The one who last night, numb with grief
and guilt, announced: *I'm going fishing,*
hears, as the fire dies and lake waves lap the shore,
his name distinctly spoken, followed by the question:
Do you love me?

The kids have had their fill of sausages,
their hands are sticky; they are tired.
Let's go home, they say.

Rise and Go

A patriarch, told by a Voice to rise and go
into untravelled territory, walks with his wife.
His servants and his animals surround him. He has no son
to wrap his arm around. If anyone should ask: who are you?
what could he possibly say?
At night he pitches his tent and waits for the dawn.
He is far from home, has miles to go
and does not know the destination.

A prisoner in a barren cell asks: *Who am I?*
The answer, because death is near, is urgent.
Years of practicing peace, opposing evil, praising love,
can never be proof enough. He's been a good son,
a faithful lover, loves his country..Fellow prisoners
admire his composure, his stalwart step.

But at night his heart beats at the bars of his confinement;
he is nothing but a broken reed. His knees are weak,
he is sick unto death. He hears the hammer blows
of new construction. A chapel? A house? A gallows.
Before it is morning he will rise and go,
naked, empty-handed,
to somewhere he has never travelled.

Higher

*You yourself are even another little world
And have within you the sun and the moon
And also the stars. (Origen)*

Hunger for something more than bread
drives you to rise up, rise higher
to where the air is thin as a newborn's cry,
the view pure and unobstructed. At this height
solitude will be your soul companion. You ascend
a mountain towering up from the wilderness,
climb a ladder, shimmy up a pillar in the desert.
You are prepared to leave behind what you cannot carry
on your back or in your head. You cannot bring the children,
Keep both hands free: one to hold tight,
while reaching with the other for the next rung. Up here

there is no escape from silence. It surrounds you like a wall.
Therefore you must listen to your own breathing,
give ear to the alarm within: a congregation, a quarreling crowd
of shoppers, a kindergarten class. Wisdom vies with triviality,
doubt with trust. Rage wants to outshout praise. Are you surprised
that you have hauled up with you to this altitude, a multitude?
The whole world sits at the centre of your self, waiting to be loved,
forgiven, reconciled. Morning comes. Sun rises.
The desert wind blows where it chooses.

Distances

Reeds mirrored in the lake. This one, bent,
completes, with its reflection, a perfect circle;
that one, a shimmering ellipse.

Three muskrats leave a wedge each in their wake.
Pelicans on rock islands resemble clustered cotton balls
or round white stones heaped up.

Back-lit, below the rapids, a blue-grey heron
plays tricks with that retractable, amazing neck.
A pelican stares with staunch attention into turbulence.

And now the forecast rain arrives, big scattered plops,
water on water, on us in our aluminum canoe. We head for haven--
a cabin we cannot see but keep eyes open for.

Returning, we are told, is swifter than the journey out.
Paired, the distances complete a life-
span of travelling. You will need a decent craft,

the patterns reeds and the rain trace on water. You need
the muskrats' wake, the pelican's hypnotizing gaze,
and wind to trouble the water.

In Memorium

They are no longer with us, cannot walk beside us on the road
 or take us by the hand and lead. Emily, whose imagination
 valued every slant of light, called hope a thing with feathers.
 Ettie, who in Westerbork saw beauty everywhere. Who wrote,
 before boarding the east-bound train: Our only duty is:
 to find within ourselves large areas of peace, reclaim them
 and reflect them to the world. Julian of Norwich believed
 all things would be well. Chekhov's Sonya told Uncle Vanya:

We shall rest! We shall hear angels!

Ghandi questioned worship without sacrifice, politics without principle.
 Menno argued faith cannot lie dormant, it must feed the hungry,
 clothe the naked, shelter the destitute, serve those who harm it.
 Martin knew darkness cannot dispel the light and only love can drive out hate.
 An author, before he died, wrote: All of us are better when we're loved.
 They marched in heat toward the salty sea, across a bridge in boots,
 in a horse drawn wagon. They feared for their lives and fled.
 At the lakeshore a man who preferred to travel light said: *Come,*
Follow me.

Crossing the Bridge

1.

Winter, and you're wary of the slick bridge
spanning the river, arching over ramshackle ware-houses.
Terse office towers loom. Oncoming headlights,
portents out of purple darkness.
Snow falls: a benediction.

You think of consolations left behind:
cat in the blue chair licking her fur,
purring beside the telephone.
Chekhov stories, the unfinished
crossword puzzle.

You almost couldn't find the tickets
to the concert, blue fuzzy Wal-Mart scarf,
car keys. Now you navigate
as if convinced harm hovers
at each intersection.

Brahms' Requiem was first performed
late nineteenth century. The composer
--having pondered Hebrew scriptures,
gospel stories, revelation,
having felt creation's pulse, its yearning--
heard in his blood the oboe, tympani and harp,
and found himself
inspired to forego the *Dies Irae*.

You may find in this
composer's curious omission
comfort.

(Crossing the Bridge-continued)

2.

It has stopped snowing.
The bird of peace has folded
immaculate wings around
the tarnished city.

Moon has risen, luscious,
in the east. Its pale light
illuminates the homeward flow
across the bridge.

Tranquility (like snow
or sorrow) finds an entrance,
floats through the dark like music
from a Requiem.

The haloed street lights sing
and you hum quietly along.
Not yet midnight.
Days are lengthening.

The cat,
purring and purified,
waits for you
beside the telephone.

Night

Was it what we carried in our heads, a groove worn over time deep in the brain? Was it tainted blood our hearts pumped night and day until the whole body pulsed with wanting everything on offer? Was it the heart itself, overwrought and desperate? Did darkness make its home there?

How we strove to depose the evil king, shut our ears to the tirade spewing from mouths of false prophets, vote out corrupt candidates, execute every terrorist. They say it is darkest before the dawn, or in the deepest ocean trough. From the bottom of the well into which you have fallen--were thrown or freely leapt—

lift your head to that hemmed in patch of sky, sunlit or overcast. By night a pitch black canopy seeded with pinpoint stars, lit by the light of a dying meteor, a wispy comet's tail, a satellite in endless transit. Tonight the total darkness is interrupted by blinking lights of an aircraft coming home to land.

Grounded

*Have peace in yourself and thousands
Will find salvation around you.* St. Seraphim of Sarov

The last flight has taken off into the lowering clouds,
the last ferry, half-full, is half-way across the water,
no cabs at the taxi stand, both bike tires flat as empty pockets.
And here we are, clutching our maps, our passports,
our children. There must be someone to blame
for failure. There must be a way to hold things together.
We turn, each one, to our devices, send our frustration out
into the world where the climate alters, tectonic plates
grind and shift. As far as we know the hungry
are still with us. Wars escalate. Bills must be paid.
From time to time a voice cuts through the pandemonium,
reminding us we are important. *Keep holding*, we are told.
Your plight is our priority. Someone will be with you soon.
We pace, we smoke, we go for coffee. Our children
after racing, wrestling, quarreling are still not sleepy.
They sit in a circle on the ground. They are playing a game.
The girl in the centre is it.

And Yet

The city of refuge is burning.
Smoke and panic fill the air.
Someone says: *Let not your hearts be troubled.*

Words easily spoken. A mantra
to quiet the quaking heart.
A line of poetry.

Fear makes things fall apart.
Knees like water; the heart troubled.
Even a prophet questions the chances of surviving.

And yet—beside the brook, the ravens.
And yet--the widow
and the widow's son.

Don't be afraid, the prophet dares to say.
Dip into the flour. Tip the jug of oil.
Bake bread as usual.

Arrivals

On a morning mild and monochrome, we have come to the park to ski. The trail is groomed, proper wax applied, we get a good glide. On either side, barren birch trees form a ghostly honor guard. What seemed like a patch of black tattered plastic caught in a forked branch is a raven scrutinizing us. We did not plan to think of death, its cold finality. It is the enemy we want to wrestle down, avoid, or if we could, destroy. Our passage through this wooded park is swift, we know each twist and turn, know when to swerve to avoid the oak tree that always takes us by surprise. We have never, so far, failed to return, whole, to the parking lot. To our SUVs. Our city. Our very lives.

**

Emerging from the birches, we come to a clearing. Our trail dips into a snowy bowl just when the sun burns through the mist, and monochrome gives way to glitter. We are blinded. We blink. Arranged along the opposite slope of the bowl, more vision than mirage, a silent, sentient trinity. We are stopped in our tracks. Trapped by beauty: three exquisitely-sculpted bodies, six alert ears, three pairs of brown eyes watching us. Who planned this perfect composition, drew the outline with a steady hand, gave shape and form, applied warm colours, breathed life into it? Who set the schedule for arrival at this very moment, at this precise indentation? We stand amazed. We dare not make a move.

**

In March a wedge of geese crosses the Lenten sky and veers to follow the swollen river, still edged with ice. They have left home, are heading north to where the nesting places are. An ancient map is etched in the blood and bones of these returning birds. How else would they find their way? Their haunting call announces the end of another journey. The flock has arrived at last at sanctuary.

Refuge

What song shall we sing when the journey ends
and we find ourselves in a foreign country
with our exhausted children, our pitiful possessions,
a wardrobe all wrong for the climate
a language no one understands? Our names
are known to no one, our gestures inappropriate

in this culture. We are naked. Nervous.
The overwhelming welcome breaks our hearts.
Each smile a huge surprise.
An SUV opens its obedient doors and we ride
like royalty to light-filled, furnished rooms.
We are told: *This is your home.*

If we knew the language
and had breath left to speak it,
we would ask: Where is that river
at whose banks we may fall to our knees
and weep?

New music

She stands quietly, utterly alert.
When the time is right she raises her right hand
gracefully, moves her fingers just a little
until sound swells, then lifts her left hand
and this mysteriously controls the pitch.

Music composed of beauty, grace, pure aching
fills earth and heaven with a haunting,
almost-human voice that carries you
on waves of sound, farther, higher
than you had hoped to travel

in what is left to you of years. You had resigned yourself
to bearing up beneath that same old, same old, to the end.
But then--this instrument! These skilled hands playing it
with perfect love. Your heart is open.
You believe

that wonders more amazing than a theremin
 (the music streaming from it,
 the artist playing it)
will hold the world in place.

Let all the earth keep silence.
Let every ear be open.