

# **In the Dark**

**Poems**

**by**

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*"They make the backs of my arms cold and my feet numb  
and then my head feel like a planet."*

John Kennick

## Preface

I wrote over a hundred pages of poems during September 2016, poem after poem, day by day, an amazing, exhausting journey. On the morning of September 24, I woke up after a fitful sleep with the first two poems in this series fully composed in my head, waiting there in the dark, thus the title. I have no idea how they got there like that. I just went downstairs and typed them up. The rest of the series came to me just like that, out of the dark, though mostly while I was awake, inviting me to type them up. As I thought about this later, I could see it was the classic "descent into the underworld" that is conventional to epic poems, even its duration, three days, standard for a trip down to the dark. I love "dark" poems, both reading and writing them. I hope you will find something to love here, too.

## 9/24: In the Dark

This morning I wrote a poem  
so dark I knew I could not  
allow you to read it.

So I erased every word,  
starting with the last,  
the end, where everything  
always starts, not letter  
by letter, delete, delete,  
delete, until nothing is there  
but white space, no, I feared  
each delete might leave  
a shadow deep enough  
to decipher in the right  
kind of light until, yes,  
there is that word again,  
and that one, and that one,  
drawn back into the open,  
so I changed every single  
one into another, not opposite,  
or one a parlor game clue

might open a track back to,  
the enigma machine of my head  
spinning in a code even I  
could not calculate until  
one by one by one, each word  
was another that it could not  
in its wildest dreams believe  
it could become, "tomorrow,"  
say, made into "clouds," "fear"  
into "into," just examples, those,  
so you will not think that "fear  
tomorrow," is now "into clouds."

Then I gathered up every copy  
of every word I had typed,  
burned them, and it worked.

Except for these traces  
left on my fingertips  
that will not wash off  
no matter how hard  
I try, and all they can do  
is wait until tomorrow  
when I might type

a whole different poem  
that deletes everything  
of me except  
these fingertips,  
now forever mine  
because they cannot forget  
what I asked them  
to do today, for you, so you  
would not have to read  
the poem I wrote this morning.

## 9/24: The Hard Part of Being Alone

I am alone now, I say,  
to myself mostly, because  
alone is one word no one  
else can hear, silent  
in every sentence that says it.

And the more I say it,  
to myself, the more  
it sounds like the only word  
I no longer need to know.  
In the middle of the night,  
say, while I dream, of her, you,  
everyone never again here,  
when I eat, you with me even,  
my food turning only into me, never you,  
when I talk, say, the sounds  
of my words echoing in the places  
they came from until they make  
no sense even to me, take up  
all the space between us,

and then when I listen, ear so clear,  
so near to your lips, only one  
or two of your words turning,  
quickly as they can, into mine.

Alone, the word  
we are born with,  
the language of I am;  
the language of "you,"  
of "together" of "share,"  
the one we work  
so hard to learn . . .

and today that foreign  
tongue of mine, tied  
in knots, no matter  
how hard I try to say  
I am not.  
I am not.

## 9/25: A Hole, A Hill

### 1.

Today on my way to work  
I notice that big boulder  
built into the bottom of the hill  
has been pried out and rolled

about five feet off to the side.  
Behind it is a dark hole  
receding into the hill,  
a crowd gathered around it.

Someone says that last night  
they saw a blinding light,  
just for a while, then nothing  
but a winding sheet in a pile.

Someone says they saw  
something moving around  
but by the time they got there  
it was too dark to tell what.

Someone says that while they slept  
they heard a beautiful music  
in their dreams and thought  
they were making it themselves.

Someone says he lost his voice.  
Someone says she found hers.  
Someone says they smelled roses.  
Someone else felt their soft petals.

Someone says they saw the sky  
opening its eyes, the moon,  
just glued up there before,  
dancing in circles with clouds.

Someone saw a shaft of light  
coming down like a long pipe  
from a single star. Someone saw  
a dark ladder heading only up.

Everything, they say, is about to change.

2.

A little girl, three or four,  
short black hair, peddles  
her trike down the hill  
on the other side of the road.

She has fierce, wise eyes  
and says she is not lost.  
She watches us as if  
she has seen all of this before.

No one seems to notice her  
so I go that way instead of this,  
walk back up the hill with her  
to her grandmother's house.

She will not let me  
push or pull her little  
bike, peddles hard  
the whole way.

I smile, exchange pleasantries,  
"It's a nice day, isn't it?"  
"You are very strong  
for such a young girl."

I laugh because she does not,  
not at anything I say,  
just fierce eyes, strong legs,  
determined to do it herself.

She says the crowd  
around that hole in the hill  
was there yesterday,  
is there every day.

She says the same people  
come out of their houses  
and look wide-eyed  
as if they never saw it before.

She says they always say  
exactly the same things,  
and by the end of the day  
the boulder is back in place.

She says she will ride down  
the little hill tomorrow  
to see it all again. No matter  
how often it happens,

she says, nothing ever changes.

## 9/25: This Dark Is Mine

Every night in the woods  
these trees reach out,  
caress one another,  
leaf to leaf in summer,  
shadow into shadow  
twining on the ground  
all winter, multiplying  
moonlight, starlight,  
what care is, not giving,  
taking, just there, always  
in the air, a way of prayer.

The light we reach into  
day after day, not  
destination, wisdom,  
I hear them say, simply  
where we find what  
we need to survive.  
Down below, in that dark,  
we are rooted, share

everything, care  
for each other, rear  
our young, prepare  
for storms, wind, cold;  
there, the trillion tiny  
highways from here  
to everywhere,  
how we live as one,  
out of your sight,  
not out of ours.  
Look now to what  
holds you deep down.  
There the dark is yours.

At the top of the hill  
where I always first feel  
what today I decided to call  
a holiness in this place,  
the tall, lean poplar  
on my right, speaking  
for all the trees,  
their collaborative voice,  
said: Take care now,  
Paul, this dark is yours.

Show no fear.

It was always there  
waiting for you, the way  
from where you are  
to where you go.

Take heart from us.

We will meet you here  
every morning, cheer you,  
the September daylight  
so bright, so clear,  
this light we love and use.

But we are specialists  
of the dark, know all  
its ways. Remember,  
so do you, so do you.

## 9/26: Just Between You and Me

A little vortex of wind  
in the corner of the stone wall  
swirls up a few barely-there  
petals fallen from the fading  
planter-box impatiens.

They twirl around in circles,  
wild with desire, chase  
one another, fast forward:  
"Be with me! Be with me!"

Then it all settles, as it always does  
after a few seconds, separate petals  
lying stone-still, nowhere near each  
other, nothing moving, not even me.

## 9/26: Too Little, Too Late

Just when I walked into the woods today  
it started to rain, light, a few drops,  
smatterings. Then it got real dark real  
fast, the rain coming hard, heavy,  
big, black sheets of it, like when you walk out  
waist deep into a settled sea and all of a sudden  
dark waves are breaking way over your head  
and you need to decide right then  
what you're going to do about it.

I took a few more steps, but soon as  
I heard the first rumble of thunder  
I turned around. I don't think I'd mind  
getting struck by lightning, all over  
in a flash, but when you've been  
in the woods in storms, trees thrashing  
around like crazy, wishing they could go  
anywhere but this, branches crashing  
down all around you, you can't help  
but think you might end up under one,

for a day, two maybe, until someone  
came by, all that misery of waiting,  
thinking, so I turned back, headed home,  
cars throwing up wakes like motorboats  
through the water pooled up on the road,  
wondering how wet the back room  
would be, all those windows left open.

By the time I got home it had stopped,  
as it always does, everything you do  
to avoid it, too little, too late.

9/26: This is not even a half-book  
yet, but I want so bad to be done with it, because I'm  
already where I needed to get, and I really think I wrote  
enough so you can get there, too, if you want to . . .

There is a dark only poems can get to.  
I wrote as many of those for you  
as I had in me, today, this month  
my whole life, all there for you to find.

Then there's that dark another layer down,  
the one I was so hoping to find again,  
willing to write a hundred pages of poems  
in a month to get to it, and I'm there now,  
finally, there, a dark like the most perfect  
late September night of your whole life,  
10 PM and you've been out in the yard  
for two hours already, shirtsleeve warm,  
a dark your eyes are acclimated to,

watching the stars flicker on one by one  
then tons of them, overwhelming  
the sky, swathed now in layers of dark,  
a tiny slice of moon off to the left,  
just enough to overflow you with  
the dark that all that light makes  
visible, and I could try to tell you  
what it is like, a dark that makes  
no sound at all, a dark that absorbs  
and quiets all thinking, a mile-deep pile  
of soft, black velvet, say, that you just  
lay back into and you're settling  
deeper and deeper down in its warm  
embrace, or a lake no one else knows about,  
looking-glass still and you're 50 feet  
deep into it looking up and you can still  
breathe and see every bit of dark  
in the whole universe beginning to end.

Then you are happy. Then you are there.  
Then you are done with the poems  
you needed to write to get you there,  
for today, this month, next year, forever,  
having used them so beautifully, just

what they are good for, portals toward  
a dark so gentle, so sensuous, you can spend  
this night, every night, the rest of your life  
cradled, tenderly, in one another's warm arms.

## Today's Coda: Dream a Little Dream With Me

So now I know for sure I'm in the deeper  
dark, because I had this funny dream  
with "good" and "bad" and "I" in it,  
and "good" was in jail because "bad"  
tricked her and then "bad" tried to trick me  
so that "good" wouldn't get out of jail,  
and "I" got so mad "I" tried to kill "bad,"  
but "good" fixed it so she wasn't tricked,  
she is so smart, and "I" ended up in jail  
for trying to kill "bad," meaning "I" got to be  
with "good" and we made love right there  
like let-me-never-tell-you, and (unquote) I  
knew, yes, now, finally I am out of danger-dark.

...

And then I had another dream, just now,  
where "good" wanted to know why  
"I" was in jail with her, because she  
didn't know that "bad" had tried to  
trick her, didn't even know "bad" existed,

and when "I" told "good" "I" was there  
because "I" tried to kill "bad" she wanted  
to know who "bad" was and why  
she tricked her and "I" told her  
"I" would explain it all to her tomorrow,  
if she was still in jail with me, which  
"I" hope she is because when she hears  
who "bad" is and how "I" tried to kill her,  
she'll be so happy . . . and we'll make love  
again like twice-let-me-never-tell-you.

. . .

And if we do, and "you" really want  
to know what making love with "good"  
like twice-let-me-never-tell-you  
feels like, just come to my next dream  
and "I"ll tell "you," because "I" really do want  
everyone involved in this to know everything,  
and "you" are involved because (unquote  
everyone) you had to read this whole book  
to get here, so you have every right to know  
who good and bad are and how good  
it feels for me to be with good again for good.