

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, three separate and very different books, during September 2016, poem after poem, day by day, an amazing, exhausting, darkly cathartic paroxysm of grief over my wife's passing. 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 overfill 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.