

We Speak of Sacred Things

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a poem for my brother Eric Gerard

WE SPEAK OF SACRED THINGS

“I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction.”

And upon finding a feather in the street, we say, “Our angels are with us.”

The Bakhti poet with a cardboard sign recites Kahlil Gibran for an offering of a one-dollar bill. Over the street noise, a harper singing for loose change, pigeons' wings lift so near you hear the wind carry their fragile bodies skyward.

so many wings come here dipping honey

And I am smitten by the order of the universe. I hear the singing of the planets, the low, deep roar of stones, the high-pitched song of green, and the beauty of this order –

and who was it that said, “Beauty is reality seen through the eyes of love.”

to look into one's heart

Sadako Sasaki was two years old when America dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. Sadako was a little over one mile from the site of the explosion. All around her, adults and children –

and this is where you should speak and there is only silence

Eighty thousand to one-hundred-forty thousand men, women, and children were incinerated, paralyzed in their daily routines like the victims of Pompeii, their internal organs boiled and their bones charred.

I remember the flash of light. Then a blast of wind came into the shelter and I was blown on to some rocks. I lost consciousness...

then somebody called, "Are you all right?"

When I looked out the window, the leaves and trees were flashing with an inner light. I saw light shining from the skin of people, pouring off their hands and faces – like shining from shook foil – all haloed.

And we speak of sacred things occasionally -
the presence of messengers between heavenly worlds.

Nine years later, at the age of eleven, Sadako collapsed in the schoolyard. She had fallen ill from what her mother called “an atom bomb disease” and was confined to a hospital for care.

“Look. Look at the light,” I would say. And then I realized that other people didn’t see it flaming off the vines – the earth flaring with this living light.

to wear one’s heart

One day, her best friend Chizuku visited her, carrying a gift of golden paper, and from this paper she folded a long-winged bird.

“They say, Sadako, that the crane lives for a thousand years, and if someone who is ill folds a thousand paper cranes, she will be cured.”

And I have a desire to believe in the miraculous, and there are times the morning light or a flower blossoming in a light rain seems nothing less than an angel unfolding its wings.

And fortunately or unfortunately, God has given us this thing we call hope to balance our existence. Even when we see only a constant continuum of unhappiness or loneliness.

to take heart

I am putting myself into your capable hands for a while.

Sadako began folding paper cranes.

And I remember when you were a child, hospitalized, and you believed an angel sat on the edge of your bed. No one else could sit there, not our mother, not our father, – and he, this angel of luminous presence, asked you if you wanted to stay or go -

And in this place I am totally protected. Life has been simplified to merely existence. This hospital, a refuge from the harsh weather that awaits us on the outside.

And even the nurses felt the presence of angels in the room.

And all around lies darkness and rolling black clouds, and suddenly the sky is torn open by a sheet of lightning and there exposed before you is the whole valley – trees, pastures, woods, streams, hills.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God, It will flame out like the shining from shook foil.”

“Do not believe me simply because I have seen Heaven & Hell, have discoursed with angels....”

And when he turns, the light is gone.

And when the Virgin appears, the visionaries go into trance state: they do not react to light, sound, or touch. Their eyes do not blink. "We see the Virgin as we see other people," said one of the visionaries. "We pray, speak, and touch her."

The lightning ends. You are plunged again into darkness.

This is the way artists see. I was reading Tolstoy's *Resurrection* at the time and could take in only a few paragraphs without putting it down, it so affected me.

to have one's heart in the right place

“What we would like to do is change the world – make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. But, the more we do, the more we realize that the most important thing is to love.”

But when he turns the light is gone. *Is he wrong to say there's nothing there?*

And since then I have glimpsed it in a veiled or shadowy way, a passing, fleeting, quickening of light flaring in another person and dying down again.

And the children were chosen to receive the visions, the Virgin says, "because they were ordinary."

And for years your grave did not settle, magpies flew so near we could hear their wings beat the air.

And although she had free time during her days in the hospital to fold the cranes, she lacked paper.

And I recall a chair nailed high in a tree, *a chair for our angel*.

She would use medicine wrappings and whatever else she could scrounge up. This included going to other patients' rooms to ask for the paper from their get-well presents.

“What I did,” Gandhi explained, “was a very ordinary thing.”

to give all your heart

And I wonder, do prayers have the power of a thousand paper cranes?

And they say, "Each one prays to God according to his own light."

And I find it difficult to believe there was nothing I could do to save you.

Her classmates, so shaken by Sadako's death, told other children of Sadako and the cranes. They raised money from over three thousand schools, from school children in nine other countries, and with that money they erected a monument to Sadako in the Peace Park of Hiroshima.

On the top of a paradise mountain, Sadako stands, and in her outstretched hands -

a golden crane

“Epics shall someday be written on the Indian satyagrahis who withstood hate with love, violence with nonviolence, who allowed themselves to be mercilessly slaughtered rather than bear arms.”

in her outstretched hands a golden crane -

And I wonder, do prayers have the power of a golden paper crane?

And there is the memory of Maria Corretti who at the age of eleven, after she was stabbed fourteen times, forgave her killer, stating that she wanted him in heaven with her.

And prayer is nothing more than thought. *It is a yearning of the heart.*

And the cranes bow and bob, throw their heads back and trumpet, throw grass, stones and feathers into the air, leap up and parachute back down on their broad wings.

And I recall when we were children and you kneeled in the backyard offering prayers to the statue of the Blessed Virgin, and when I asked what you prayed for -

you said you prayed for me.

And why do some stay and others go...

“There was a flash of blinding light. Window-pane glass rushed in with a frightening noise. A giant hand seemed to grab me and hurl me from the room.

Fragments of glass flew about like leaves in a whirlwind.”

to break one's heart

And what I did or did not believe, with you there was no anger, only the absence of -
when I turned my head, you were gone.

She is a beautiful woman with black curly hair, pale eyes, a crown of stars. She wears a blue gown. She floats on a cloud, surrounded by angels. The visionaries feel they are outside of time and space when she appears, and those who are nearby, although they cannot see the Virgin Mary, are touched by...something.

“...Believe me because I tell you what your consciousness and intuitions will tell you if you listen closely to their voice.”

Sadako wrote of her cranes, "I will write Peace on your wings and you will fly all over the world."

And I have wondered if I could write a prayer of peace for the grieving.

He walked me partway back, and said, "Aren't you afraid to walk alone?"

And the cranes bow and bob, throw their heads back and trumpet, throw grass, stones and feathers into the air, leap up and parachute back down on their broad wings.

And the gulf I perceive between myself and the world grows wider and wider.

And the ink from your journals has begun to fade, damp from a flood the pages have begun to mold – yellow, black, and rust where the binding holds you.

And because it was so dark, I decided to take the road instead of the shortcut...I was talking to myself, "Don't let these thoughts in. Don't ruin a beautiful walk."

Who was it that said, "Beauty is reality seen through the eyes of love."

And you would stick to your story even years later, that yes, an angel had sat on the edge of your bed.

whatever one loves, is

Takashi walked to the site of his home and found his beloved's charred bones amidst the wreckage that was once their kitchen. Kneeling beside her, he discovered the remains of what had once been her rosary – his wife had died praying.

And the powerful wings of the crane are said to convey souls to Paradise.

I was singing to myself. Ten minutes from a village is a rope footbridge over a canal, lit by a bare light bulb, and this side of it a cemetery. Near the bridge were these windmills. Mama had told me her husband was buried there.

And I wonder if you ever prayed -

Suddenly I heard a scream. I froze. It was so horrible. It scared me stiff. I was frozen to the road.

Not the rosaries that we said with our mother, but the prayers you speak at night when the silence of the empty room unfolds around you.

“In the name of Christ, save me,” I began repeating like a mantra.

“...dispelled by the brightness of light, washed away by the flood of nectar-of-light, wiped away with the wind and the brush of light, or burnt down with the fire of light...”

I call it “he” but I never saw anything. I didn’t see anybody. He came down from up above and lifted me under each arm. He lifted me off the ground about six inches and carried me to the bridge with the light bulb and carried me over the bridge.

Except for the birds there was no one to witness.

What was strange, it was so familiar. It was like the most normal, right occurrence, with nothing unusual about it, and a feeling of utter peace...

And I am smitten by the order of the universe. I hear the singing of the planets, the low, deep roar of stones, the high-pitched song of green -

“We have too many men of science, too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

What was strange, it was so familiar. It was like the most normal, right occurrence, with nothing unusual about it, and a feeling of utter peace. It was as if your mother picks you up as a child. As soothing as that.

in one's heart of hearts

And I have collected so many feathers from the streets, as if this is proof they watch over me, and I wonder if I could have sent them to you, my angels, – to you, my brother, walking through the darkness.

Alessandro Serenelli dreamed “Maria Goretti gave him lilies, which burned immediately in his hands.”

Then he dropped me. On the other side of the bridge...

She wanted him in heaven with her.

And the Bakhti poet with a cardboard sign recites Kahlil Gibran for an offering of a one-dollar bill.

My only regret is the pain I cause you and the rest of my family. For a while I decided to live to protect you from the pain, but I can't bear life any longer. I'm sorry.

And I remember the flash of light.

Forgive me.

And then I got to my feet and ran like a jack-rabbit, like a deer...and up to our house and up to our room and onto the terrace where my friends were.

Then a blast of wind came into the shelter. Fragments of glass flew about like leaves in a whirlwind.

I lost consciousness then somebody asked, "Are you all right?"

There was one girl, Rowena, from Israel. She pulled me aside. "You've got to tell me what happened," she said, and I wouldn't, and she kept insisting.

"You have to tell me. You saw God out there."

And a harper strums and sings for loose change.

And the Bhakti poet begins, "Open your heart wide unto the body of life."

I love you more than words can express.

And the pigeons' wings lift so near you hear the wind carry their fragile bodies skyward.

"You have to tell me. You saw God out there. When you came in, the light about you was so bright we couldn't look at you."

and this is where you should speak

And the cranes bow and bob, throw their heads back and trumpet.

The light about you, my brother, was so bright, like the sky torn open by a sheet of lightning and there exposed before you is the whole valley – trees, pastures, woods, streams, hills.

The powerful wings of the blessed -

“...like flowers blossoming in the warmth of the sunlight.”

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Notes: "We Speak of Sacred Things" is a polyphonic collage created using the poet's original work and quotations of and/or excerpts from the following sources:

Journals and Personal Letters of Eric Gerard Knotts

A Book of Angels by Sophy Burnham, pgs. 3, 6, 7, 11, 13-16, 22, 27-33, 36-38

"A Loving-Kindness Meditation" by Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, pgs. 30, 38

Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda, pg. 20

"Aztec Poem," pg. 2

"Catholic Saints & Other Christian Heroes: Takashi Nagai," *The Word Among Us*, pgs. 5, 29

"Children of Hiroshima" by David Smith, pgs. 5

"Love Is The Measure" by Dorothy Day, pg. 15

Emmanuel Swedenborg, pgs. 12, 25

General Omar N. Bradley, pg. 32

"God's Grandeur" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, pg. 6, 11

The Law of Love by M.K. Gandhi, pgs. 1, 18, 19

The Story of Sakado Sasaki, pgs. 4, 7, 8, 17, 19-21, 26

Rabindranath Tagore, pgs. 3, 28

Visionaries of Medjugorje, pgs. 13, 16, 25

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