

# Toward a Recognition of the Numinous *for Gordon: felicity*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### I. Toward a Recognition of the Numinous

### II. Poems

1. Evensong
2. Kamigamo Shrine
3. Porridge
4. Next Door
5. The Little Room
6. Father
7. Grandma
8. Boxes
9. Only
10. Cricket Koans

## I . Toward a Recognition of the Numinous

Everyone should have their own private miracle: a suspension of disbelief; a gift from the numinous. Mine occurred, oddly enough, by the Lake of Galilee. Recently graduated from university, I was on the return leg of a meandering two-year trip around the world. I'd stayed a year in India, and its arid Ganges plain, chaos and human misery had exhausted me. Now on my way 'home' (always provisional), I wanted to see Israel first.

Israel: 'The Holy Land,' steeped in history and blood. A sense of *deja-vu* pervaded me as I walked this ageless landscape. Virtually everybody born in the West absorbs from birth an intrinsic sense of scriptural imagery. A Judeo-Christian centrality becomes hard-wired in our psyche, even though (as in my case, to my parents' dismay) we may have officially 'left the faith.' I had read and

heard of these places long before I was aware that they actually existed on a map.

Here was Jerusalem, with its massive stone walls and narrow cobbled lanes, the smell of bagels and kosher salami wafting from the shops like incense, the Muslim call to prayer blending with church bells, a jostling sharp-edged city filled with contradictions. To walk on these ancient stones was a kind of waking dream. I stayed in the youth hostels and wandered around with a guide book clutched in my hands, very much the naïve tourist. Minarets and mosques, steeples and cupolas. Rift Valley of the Jordan, bee-hive shaped, the “Golden City” hording 3,000 years of history. About 25 minutes east lay Bethlehem, where the entire Christian mythos traces its origin to a stable for farmanimals. Grim-faced militia with rifles stood on street corners, a reminder of the omnipresent geopolitical danger on all sides, a latent electricity in the air.

Soon I grew tired of the city and longed for the quiet countryside where a deeper heartbeat of the culture might reside. I took a bus up to Nazareth, where Jesus’ home can still be seen (according to the pamphlets), and from there a short hop to the Lake of Galilee, known in Hebrew as Lake Kinneret. It shone beneath the desert sun like an emerald set in the clasp of black volcanic rock. Three miles north of Tiberias, I stayed at the Magdala kibbutz to recoup my energy. I felt lost and lonely.

It was mid-summer. That morning I woke around 4, and went for a walk along the lakeshore. The dawn light went on and on forever: a hushed, hallowed out-of-time before the actual sun arose. Fields of grain lay thick and golden, beaded with dew, and the cicadas sang *Gloria in excelsis*. In a grove of cypress trees, I came across the 14<sup>th</sup>-century basalt ruins of a small Crusader chapel—the “Church of the Beatitude,” said a small plaque, built on top of one of the earliest excavated chapels, the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Chapel of the Sermon on the Mount, part of whose faded mosaic survives. Now entwined with grape vines, melting into the earth.

Back at the kibbutz, I worked and ate and talked with travelers from around the world. It impressed me that retired folk lived here side by side with babies and children. Truly the institution of the kibbutz, founded by immigrants from the Russian Revolution of 1909, represents an extension of the nuclear family, a kind of tribal unit. We know nothing like it in Canada, unless it is counter-culture communes, which invariably fall into discord.

That night I decided I didn’t want to sleep inside the bunkhouse among the snoring guys, but rather out under the sky. I tiptoed out with my sleeping bag to the lake, and kipped down in the sweet-smelling grass. I could hear the lapping of the waves, the ageless rhythm of Galilee. Venus shone bright in the eastern sky over the Syrian border where guns pointed toward us from the snow-capped Golan Heights. A few stars wavered into focus: Acturus, Aldebaron (red and pulsating, named after an ancient Mesopotamian god), and my familiar Northern constellations—the Big Dipper, Draco the Dragon, Vega in the strings of the Lyre, the Swan with its vast wings perpetually poised in the white-roar abyss of the Milky Way. . .

Suddenly I woke. A full moon floated, bright enough to read a book by. The night was flooded with stars, like snowy pollen. For a moment I didn't know where I was. Then I realized that I was sleeping by the Lake of Galilee, half a world away from my indeterminate 'home' back in Canada, alone in the dark, knowing not a soul for thousands of miles.

At this point, I felt a movement beneath my head. Still half-asleep, groggy, I reached back and fumbled, thinking perhaps that the sweater I'd used for a pillow had shifted. My fingers touched something soft yet prickly, like a stippled pincushion. It moved again, snuggling deeper into my hair. Gradually it dawned on my sleep-fogged brain that what I was touching was very much *alive*, and in fact was *sucking my hair*, making little gurgling noises.

There is nothing more effective to wake one—not even an aromatic cup of Blue Mountain coffee from Hawaii—than to discover a creature of unknown species right next to you. For a timeless space I lay there, stroking the thing. It gave a few squeaks of what seemed contentment, and burrowed deeper. Cold factuality penetrated my consciousness: *uh, dude, something is like, huddled in your hair--* and I sat up, astonished. It fell out, plopped on the ground with an audible gasp, and lay there on its back like an up-ended beetle, gazing up at me with beady eyes. It was a baby hedgehog.

Let me explain, in case you have never had the honour to meet this particular creature, precisely what a hedgehog is. Known also as an 'urchin' (from Norman French) or "furze-pig," the hedgehog (family *Erinaceinae*) is a mammal related to moles and shrews, with a noble lineage stretching back 15 million years. It has survived so long because it has evolved a splendid defense mechanism: about 5,000 to 6,000 quills. Much beloved in Britain, where it is respected as a guardian of gardens and immortalized by Beatrix Potter in her tale of a hedgehog named "Mrs Tiggly-Winkle," its habitat extends throughout Europe and Russia, the Middle East and down into Africa.

It lay beside me rudely awakened, interrupted mid-suckle, looking for all the world like an animated pineapple. Its face was expressively human, narrowing to a pink quivering snout, and it bristled with fuzzy spines which, as I had just discovered, were not in the least sharp, but soft and sensual as fur. Undoubtedly it had mistaken my hair for a convenient nest, and had settled down for the night. How long we had slept entangled together like that I don't know, but it could well have been several hours, there beneath the star-flaming sky of Israel, by the murmuring Lake of Galilee.

Then I heard a snorting noise, and turned to see a big hedgehog come waddling into the moonlight, with her nose close to the ground, decoding the trail: the mother, in search of her errant child. She gave another *oof? oof?* The baby hedgehog answered her with his squeaky *eeee! eeee!* and scrambled to join her. They sniffed each other. Where it was petit and soft, she was large and sharp-needed and formidable. She came closer to check me out, her blackberry eyes curious and piercing. About a foot away, we met noses. Whiskery face; the smell of moss and leaf mold,

musky abodes beneath bushes. Was it my imagination that she seemed to be saying—*Thank you for taking care of my child—I'll take over now?* In any case, they both ambled away, the little one following her with his bandy-legged, drunken sailor's swagger.

And that was my own private miracle, by the Lake of Galilee. A suspension of disbelief; a visitation from another dimension, when the boundary between things—and species-- dissolves. I still think of it as a gift: that a baby hedgehog adopted me as his mother and slept in my hair, as I slept by the ancient lake, as the lake slept within the encircling hills, and the hills slept beneath the vaulting infinite night sky, parent and child, enclosing each other.

## II . Poems

Evensong

Crows high on the temple hill  
narrate the ancient  
story of evening.

Kyoto lights flicker.  
Surf of traffic, workers' voices, packing up their tools;  
smell of grilled fish from open windows.

*Okaeri-nasai*: sweetness  
of returning  
to a known place.

Cat's ears twitch listening to us in the kitchen,  
one eye open, one closed:  
almost time for supper.

Arc of stars.

Kamigano Shrine

*for Waki*

Green bicycle, spelt cookies—  
that ancient grain  
praised by Hildegard von Bingen

“warming, lubricating, and of high  
nutritional value.”

The girl who chose  
me to choose her

sells home-baked cookies  
and Irish soda bread  
at the temple market.

Porridge

My father would make porridge  
in the morning:  
Red River oats mixed with wheat germ and flax-seed.

When Uncle Hector came to visit  
he'd dip his spoonful in a  
dram of whiskey.  
He smelled of buckskin and tobacco,  
played the bagpipes (badly),  
red vein-splotched cheeks bulging like a bullfrog.

Mum banished him to the attic,  
but he came down anyway  
early, with a flask  
in his rumpled tweed jacket, eager  
to proselytize me

with lurid tales of living in sin  
with an Indian woman  
up in the wilds of Smithers, British Columbia:  
wild geese flying North, the ice melting,  
the loon moaning like a lost soul on the quicksilver lake.

Next Door

The woman next door  
who likes to flirt  
with the mailman,  
tofu man  
and sweet  
potato man  
hangs her laundry out,  
bras and panties  
pointed suggestively my way.

The Little Room

In the middle of concrete and barbed wire there's a little  
room with curtains drawn,  
three roses in a vase  
and a bed with a wool blanket.

A man and woman climb the stairs  
carrying bread, wine, cheese, perhaps some apples,  
which they eat sitting on the mattress  
as if it were a meadow.

After they eat, they lie on the bed  
and forget how to speak.  
She gives him green, he gives her indigo.  
And after entering a luminous moon and dissolving,  
they fall asleep.  
A calico cat keeps vigil, on top of the bookcase:  
as if there were all the time in the world  
to lie folded  
holding each other steady, two wings of a bird.

At dawn when grey light enters the room  
the man stirs, dresses quickly and leaves,  
looking back only once.  
She sleeps a while longer, holding his warm afterglow.  
When she wakes she carefully wraps the food in a packet  
and pauses at the mirror  
before disappearing into the blurred streets.

The little room  
which has no address, nameless, found only  
by its scent,  
waits for the next couple to climb the charred stairs.  
The cat sits, seeing everything.  
The curtain sways. The bed  
with its fragrant weight  
floats high above the concrete and barbed wire.

Father

I keep seeing my father  
in old men passing with stooped shoulders  
and Salvation Army suits which never fit:  
the same grey moustache carefully trimmed  
and big framed glasses which don't quite hide the  
eyes holding such sorrow  
I want to embrace him saying father father  
but find myself frozen  
my own bones hunching into a question-mark.  
Anyway, it turns out to be only somebody else's father:  
the world filled with the same ancient men  
unladen from wives and children, walking alone in the dark.

Grandma

So many prairie dawns narrowing to twilight  
in this old woman lying on the bed  
so many kisses fragrant with flour dappling my cheek  
snowy nights when babies were born in the wind-torn farmhouse  
years stacked up pressed together like petals

even her eyelids locked now after the stroke  
she squeezes her left hand slowly in my hand

so many tables loaded with blessing  
“just a little snack” expanding into pagan feasts  
smoked whitefish blueberry kuchen jars of pickles shining in the fruit-cellar  
luminous ore of everyday things

so many seasons beads of a rosary plainsong clouds  
moon’s pure symmetrical radiance over the snow  
centuries of seedpods drifting nowhere grandpa waiting  
for her bones to curl with his within the frozen  
prairie latticed by love

oh grandma let us journey there together

Boxes

Boxes stored in my brother's spare room  
holding what used to be my life  
another continent another language  
old journals letters the red flannel shirt  
a trucker wrapped around my shoulders  
when he found me huddled in a ditch by the side of the highway  
near the wreck of my Datsun pick-up  
a carved wooden bird a girl left by my tent in the frosty grass  
though she was married she held me in her arms  
a pebble from Dylan Thomas' grave  
Michael's Purple Heart from Vietnam he left in a drawer  
on his way north to Alaska escaping wife number two  
smudged lecture notes from classes long forgotten  
books which I knew more intimately than life  
everything left from what I have lost  
waiting to become lost again

Only

Wanting only to live  
a few more years forever

walk barefoot  
in grass wet with dew

back again in the same  
body I wore as a child

mornings doing  
nothing special

endless afternoons  
clouds drifting like lost languages

the sky deepening  
remembering where it was born

and stars within stars  
sifting through your hair

Cricket Koans

*El niño busca su voz.*

*(La tenía el rey de los grillos.)*

Lorca

\*

autumn rain

cat licks her fur

\*

two old ladies discussing the weather:

scent of their clothes—

incense from the family altar

\*

one more turning

of a page:

the right side of the book

each year lighter

*(Oct. 6)*

\*

by the fridge

reach past my wife's bum for an Yebisu beer

Toward a Recognition of the Numinous (MacLean)

\*

even though they seemed to be listening  
how quickly everybody leaves!

erase the blackboard collect the handouts  
turn out the light

\*

sing me to sleep ancient  
crickets newborn each autumn

\*

monarch butterfly: gold-  
stippled tattered wings

barely able to fly

on top of the hill both of us  
pausing to rest

\*

passed out in the rain  
old guy down by the Kamo river  
hugging an empty sake bottle

\*

October moon nights cooler  
time to lug out the kerosene stove

cat tired from playing all day  
sleeps in the drawer among my shorts  
purring

the wind searches for her lost child in the leaves

\*

watching  
the grey heron watching  
the waterfall

\*

cockroach scuttling across the tatami:  
even small unloved things  
feel fear

\*

photos my grad student shows me  
of his just-born baby:  
crow-feather hair wild eyes

stunned face red—*akachan*—seared  
by that passage  
through / out / into

\*

moon's burgeoning

belly mid-  
wife stars gather round

\*

Tsuki-chan's eyes cognac-  
clear in the dark by  
my pillow

\*

black-robed monks  
chanting all night until dawn

Kyoto the ancient capital  
drifts away on

cricket sutra

\*

spellbound looking  
up: wind

turns the pages  
of the Book of Clouds

\*

leaves pulsing in the  
net of light  
cast by the fisherman sun

\*

crickets singing all night:  
harmonic of a deeper tuning

\*

each day edging closer to  
distance

reaching out to hold in my arms  
contours of absence

\*

be with me  
lady with the nouveau  
beaujolais eyes

\*

brushing against each other  
all night  
feet calves thighs:  
blind cavefish

\*

your breath plaits me around you  
secrets we trade free

Toward a Recognition of the Numinous (MacLean)

\*

rough wool blankets: Precambrian Pleistocene Neolithic  
pressing hip to hip two  
pale fossils

breathing so quietly  
not even God can hear

\*

wind in the leaves: the dead praying  
for those who must live

snowmelt at my wrists

\*

stare lid-  
lessly

until a hole's burned through  
which you step into

hands dream-  
divining

\*

where have you  
gone small  
traveler in black

armor I hear your

echo

\*

night owl flaring  
in cool pine dark:  
*here here*

\*

unshaven for two days  
in the mirror: my father's face

\*

my mother could only sip water  
from a teaspoon  
her last few days

\*

they're still there  
over my shoulder  
looking on

\*

at night on the unlit  
road

only way to tell

Toward a Recognition of the Numinous (MacLean)

where you're going

look up past the trees:

different shades of darkness shine

\*

what you were singing

all along

first frost    cricket