

The Chance of Home



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Poems



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*For my daughters
Emma and Madeline*

*with gratitude for their love,
“with its vast geography of grace”*

This Long Listening



There is a story of a religious teacher who used to talk every morning to his disciples. One morning he got on to the platform and was just about to begin when a little bird came and sat on the window sill and began to sing, and sang away with full heart. Then it stopped and flew away and the teacher said, "The sermon for this morning is over."

—KRISHNAMURTI

I STILL MARVEL

Each spring I wait for the crocuses to come,
eager to greet their purple bursts as they rise

from the soggy earth and stubborn patches
of late-lingering snow, and while I know

what their veils will show of radiance,
this does nothing to blunt my wonder

at their shining spread across the lawn.
They never bother to argue or complain,

but simply spear their greening blades
up beyond the hold of winter's grip,

as if to sing in a gentle soundless way.
And though I've seen all this before,

I still marvel when they come, stem and
leaf and flower unfurling themselves

from the clutch of roots, a patience we
yearn for, a lure of this long listening.

FIRST LISTENING

*Animals and physical matter find a voice through those
who contemplate them.*

—Augustine of Hippo

When the rains fall after a long
drought as they did last night,

you can almost hear the bursts
of laughter and sense the ease

of the gnarly old olive trees,
breaking the watchful silences

they've kept among themselves.
And while we think it's ours to

give them voice, it could be
they're the ones first listening.

THE STILLNESS OF THINGS

Something deep within us yearns for
the stillness of things that cannot speak—

stones raised in a fresh-ploughed field or
the poplar that girds the road's far bend,

the spread of poppies swaying in morning
winds or waves astir on a blue-shining sea.

All these bear witness in ways we can't
quite hear but somehow sense, like a hymn

whose unstrung rhymes carry us through
the long hours, or a solitude that sings

within the restless fling of flowing time,
like a word that breathes unheard in what

we vaguely know but can never fully say.

A LATE-SUMMER BREAKFAST IN A MOUNTAIN ASH

All morning long she serves hunger's call,
this thrush who moves carefully from branch

to branch as she plucks her way through
the clumps of orange fruit, emptying

the tree of its harvest; in this she's drawn
not by appetite alone but by the stubborn

habits of desire, knowing she must feast
before turning south again away from

winter's hold, like the heart whose
yearning bounds the absences.

A FEW OF THE PARTICULARS

*The harmony past knowing sounds more deeply
than the known.*
—Heraclitus

I make my way listening among the hours and the days,
attending to a few of the particulars: the chatter of a finch

hidden in the foliage; the laughter of a child from behind
a sheltering hedge; the swirling autumn winds rustling

the last brittle leaves that still cling to the old oak's arms,
long practiced in the art of holding up the acres of sky.

Each opens our eyes to the ever-forward fling of things;
each gestures to a deeper flow than we can ever know or

finally say. Among these I look for traces of a hidden
whole, gazing on what I cannot grasp within the glimpse

of what I can, opening my breath to the lure of distances
that pulses in all that lives in this theater of here and now.

NO PERMANENCE

The dune grasses have no language of their own,
gesturing in murmurs we can almost overhear.

They seem to whisper on calmer days but then
wake to louder ways when the winds rise to twist

them where they stand and coax from them an
almost soundless song. So, too, the shifting sands

that hold them with their loosely rooted feet;
they know no permanence of form but wander

on, and as they do they carry the dunes along as
they make their way along the edges of the sea,

reminding us that we live amid the changes, a part
of an unseen whole that ever flows and never stays,

like wind and wave that drift without beginning or
end and seem to dance in their mostly silent ways.

IN DRY TIMES

This morning a gentle wind stirs the spread of brittle leaves
that lie like a crumpled carpet beneath this stand of olive trees.

Some have stood for centuries, and I wonder as I walk among
them who labored here and what they knew of gladness or grief.

At grove's edge an abandoned threshing floor opens a circle to
the sun, inlaid with stones worn smooth by wind and use and rain;

beyond this sits a tidy row of beehives, and as I come near I hear
the whirl of their wings, darting about among the rows of flowers

that weight these boughs in spring, while in late-summer days they
will have to search far and wide to taste the sweetness they crave.

They trust that desire will carry them far and then back home
across the distances, like trust when all reason for it is gone or

hope that holds us against the heart's drought, that lures us by
what we long for and finds us within the reach of what we seek.

A SINGLE THIRST

Today the rain falls in dark sheets driven
by gravity and wind, and all the while

a flock of white-throated sparrows nestles
snugly beneath a scraggly rosemary bush,

seeking what shelter they can find, each
joined in a single thirst, wing and twig alike

bound in unintended praise. They know no
other way than this against the biting cold,

staying close to share the little warmth they
have as if in promise of an enduring end.