

The Hem

Celtic Reflection for 2.9.20 / St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

Whenever I have been asked to give a poetry reading, or visit a class, I'm far less nervous talking about craft and form, working from my own notes and history, than when the room is opened for questions, and I relinquish what control I may have had, standing without armor before a sea of faces. The question I am usually prepared for, and that seems to come without fail, is a variation on "what is your writing process?" Or, "how do you write a poem?"

I can handle that one because the answer is easy: I really have no idea. It's mysterious and without formula. Which is often a disappointing response, even if a true one. I sometimes go on to explain that I make a lot of notes, fill up a page with words, phrases, stray images, trying to seduce the muse, and then I abandon the thing, then return, abandon again, return, and sometimes if I am patient, if I can sit there long enough, or keep returning for an hour or a year, a poem might emerge, I tell them, like a drowned thing rising, the hem of a garment becoming visible as from underwater, a glimpse of a shape from below the surface of things.

The last time I was asked to give a reading, it came time for audience questions. Sometimes I imagine them sharpening their knives but that day I was asked a most wonderful gift of a question for which I did not at the time have a response: a young man asked, is there a single image from scripture that means the most to your life? I think it's so beautiful. Not a phrase, or verse, not a passage from the Bible, not a figure or saint or prophet or parable, but a single image that has meant most to my life. I loved thinking about it.

And then, some days later, far from that campus where that question was asked and like a drowned garment rising, I realized that was it, that very thing: it was the hem of the garment that was maybe the truest image I knew. The hem of the garment that has meant the most to my life.

Robes and garmentry and even hems appear several times in scripture, I think, but the two times I know best are, one, in Isaiah, when we read "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple." And then in the gospel story about the bleeding woman who touches the hem of Jesus' garment. That story is of a desperate woman, down to her last hope, who was convinced that if she could just touch Jesus' cloak, just the hem of his garment, she could be

healed. And she is. She received her miracle. It was after long suffering and shame, but mercy came for her, and she was healed. Just the hem of his garment was enough.

If my life has a theme it is one of mercy and grace, rescue and balm, the divine hem appearing at last. For me, writing poems has been one way I have found to see in life's cruelties and sadnesses also its miracles and muses, its largeness. I know I can only ever see or touch the hem of it, but it is enough. The hem alone more than I can fully conceive, or as in Isaiah, the hem alone filling the whole temple of my world.

I have spoken from here before about my struggles with depression. For years, my way of being felt like mere survival; I was psychotically sad, oppressively sad, and for what seemed like no reason at all. It was at the root of so many other ways of being— poor decisions, bad relationships, self-loathing. I used to feel I but lived hour by hour with varying degrees of dignity, usually not much. And then one morning, it was about this time of year, I woke up and something had shifted. I knew that I might not remember this feeling, that it might not last and so I told my doctor, “Mercy has come. Help me remember it.”

It is a much longer and rougher story and it goes on. But the point of it is that I have experienced the divine, profoundly even if briefly. I was ill and then healed. Not cured, but healed enough to speak about it eventually and with compassion for myself. Mercy came like the hem of a garment I could touch and it was enough. Marcel Proust writes that sometimes a memory of an experience of mercy like this is like “a rope let down from heaven to draw [us] up out of the abyss of not-being, from which [we] could never have escaped by [ourselves]”.

So, I am too late to have responded to that original question, but here I am now to say that the hem has been enough for me, all I needed. Just a piece, like one bead, or one seed, the rope let down from heaven. A small miracle is still a miracle and a brief mercy is still mercy. I stake my whole life on this, that the hem of God I glimpsed was God, and is.

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