

Everything Is Going to be All Right

How should I not be glad to contemplate
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?
There will be dying, there will be dying,
but there is no need to go into that.
The lines flow from the hand unbidden
and the hidden source is the watchful heart;
the sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right.

‘Everything Is Going to Be All Right’ by Derek Mahon from *The Poems: 1961-2020* (2021) is reproduced by kind permission of the Author’s Estate and The Gallery Press. www.gallerypress.com

A Spring in the Desert

Many years ago, as a newly divorced mother of very young children, the first Thanksgiving without them sent me free falling into the Grand Canyon of Anguish. Their father arrived to collect them for the long holiday weekend, a holiday that had always been so full of family for me. After hugs with chubby arms around my neck, kisses on my eyelids, tiny fingers twirling my hair one last time, my children quite cheerily toddled out to his car, with their little backpacks filled with favorite dollies and story books. I said goodbye from the kitchen, in a fog of disbelief. I didn’t know myself as anyone but their mother. I was young, and they were my everything. I couldn’t watch them get strapped into their new carseats. Couldn’t watch the car leave the driveway. The house became quiet. Then silent. I slowly slid down the wall of the kitchen to the floor, trying to catch my breath, trying to make sense of their departure. I had never been away from my children before. This was a CANYON of sorrow.

I was in the wilderness then. Disoriented. Overwhelmed by forces so much larger than myself. So many of us have had this experience - or are maybe having it now. And what do we do?

Fast forward many years - those little ones are all grown up, and I am now a school counselor in a rural elementary school, and in this line of work the resilience of children experiencing trauma puts a sobering perspective on one’s own life. In my life, even as I’ve experienced deserts, also impenetrable mountain ranges, vast oceans, and abundant lush gardens - the emotional landscapes through which we all travel in a lifetime (the noticing of which is our choice, or maybe our habit, or maybe our practice) - through all of this I have felt the certainty that I am loved and that food and shelter have always been available in some form. I have always experienced HOPE, making it oddly uncomfortable to claim hardship, to even recognize myself

in the desert, to acknowledge my own despair, my own heartache. But yes, I certainly HAVE had times of great sorrow.

How did I get off that kitchen floor? What was my wellspring? It took time. My babies went AWAY from me every other weekend, every other holiday. It's a long hike out of a deep canyon when you don't know yourself as the guide. Eventually I discovered I could read a whole novel in a weekend, quite a feat with two small children. A friend opened my eyes to a new city and a cosmopolitan world of music and art. I took a class on historic preservation. I got a job, and went back to school. I began what became my career.

After I hiked myself out of that wilderness, I walked along the canyon rim for a while, but the landscape changed because I noticed something beyond - and I ran for it. I took off, running, with my eyes up, the landscape reforming around me.

In his poem, Derek Mahon does this, while sitting in quiet contemplation. He notices a hopeful place - the flying clouds, the riot of sunlight - - AND the sparkling far cities. He is noticing these everyday things, these remarkable things. - and he also knows with certainty there WILL be dying. And he marvels at the high tide reflected ON the ceiling

If we can remember to look up, we will see again and again, that we are constantly entering a new place and a new place and a new place, and noticing this change is a hopeful practice.

The Hopeful Practice of Noticing is a lifeline, when expectations are shattered. When norms are shattered.

In spring of 2017, my parents, long time coastal residents, living in Brooklin, traveled to Ireland. I remember receiving pictures of their trip - mom in yellow foul weather gear, the wind blowing her hair across her face, unfamiliar cliffs in the background. She had a grin. She loved exploring wild windy places. A few months later, in early July, while at a teaching conference in Oregon, I received a phone call. Mom was in the hospital. News was bad, really bad.

She had pancreatic cancer.

I flew to Bangor and visited her in the hospital. She was upright, sassy. Her sister was there. They were knitting. She was fighting this thing and couldn't wait to get home.

She died 15 days later.

Wilderness is an unexpected landscape.

Mom's death was a shattering, a quiet explosion. Ripples of grief rocked me and my dad and my sister as we tried to make sense of the finality of her absence. We all did different things in that desert WILDERNESS place, with a quivering horizon and no guardrails. We tried to fall together. Sometimes it felt that way. But mostly grief is an individual reckoning and can be so very lonely.

It is the despair, the heartbreak that takes us to the next place. Even if it feels like we're wandering aimlessly with no clear path, we are moving. The landscape changes. Often we don't notice - but sometimes we remember to lift our heads. In a fleeting moment we might feel "this is different, here my heart feels lighter" and NOTICING this is the practice. Noticing is the well spring.

A new landscape appeared for me once again, and this time the coast of Maine was on the far horizon. In the year after mom's death, I resigned from my long time teaching position, my husband Sam and I sold our house in Pennsylvania, packed our things into storage ... and started walking. We walked across England, slowly. Through many landscapes. After 200 miles from the Irish Sea to the North Sea; along headlands, hills, lakes, and moors; one foot in front of the other, each day rhythmic, simple; we kept traveling. We spent retirement funds pre-retirement, learning again (noticing) that the world is large and beautiful and worth the risk and we are just a tiny tiny moment in the vast history of civilizations and landscapes. And this was a wellspring. When we resettled we were empty nesters, restoring a house in Brooklin, looking for jobs, wearing masks, social distancing, waiting for those first vaccines. I went to grad school.

My dad found love and remarried. My sister did too. The landscape changed. The wilderness receded.

A few weeks after my mother died, it was the writing of a poem in her honor that lifted my head, that reminded me that noticing is remembering is honoring, The hidden source, says Mahon... is the watchful heart. For me, this is what keeps the wilderness at bay. Connecting to her humor, her artistry, and mapping that into my life, so much of which, is a shared experience, since we live now in the town where she lived. Sometimes I am seeing what she saw, I am feeling what she felt. What a gift this is. To hold her, in this way, always.

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Here's a good thing about getting older. More and more we have the opportunity - if we choose to take it - to notice where we've been. To zoom out for the view from the mountaintop, to notice patterns of change, patterns of repetition. Grief is always there, the LANDSLIDE from the mountaintop into the valley of shadows. But sometimes, the rubble is resting in the perfect angle of repose and you can hike right over it, right up to the peak and survey the land, all the way to

the horizon. And from this vantage point, achieved with quite a bit of sweat and tears and courage and exhaustion we can see that the sun rises in spite of everything, and the far cities are beautiful and bright. And we can lie there, in a riot of sunlight, watching the day break and the clouds flying.

Jean Marie Porter, born in 1943

Some of you knew her
artist, weaver, mathematician, master gardener, gourmet cook, explorer

These are moments, collected, noticed, my wellspring

You tuned yourself to weather,
to sunlight, to pattern,
to growing things.
You leaned towards the chaos of nature
asking if we heard the coyotes,
the owls,
or the thunder of the night.
And while you found solace in wildness
you also found great comfort in its tending
and its sorting.
This was known.
Your wild tender spirit
loomed large for us all.

Your longings and your visions,
appeared to us as crisp ironed sheets,
hand knit lace,
a collection of Sauternes,
a white geranium blooming on a windowsill.
You were the alchemist.
You harnessed the sugars and seeds of nature,
placing before us
seasonal bounty transformed:
plums to torte,
blueberries to cobbler,
flour and yeast to spongy pockets of sunlight and steam.
Even the insects loved to taste your sweetness,
their nibbles welting your skin for days.
You were tuned to pattern,
the shuttle of your loom rhythmic,

solving another math riddle
disguised in your weaving.

That month I stroked your hair,
tucked a curl behind your ear,
rubbed your toes,
held your hand.

You said I was strong
even though you were the one stepping further each day
from the physical world that you so loved
and all that we need to find our way in it.

*Speech for one,
Food for another.*

You stepped further and further,
until the only thing holding you
wasDebussy
and your wild tender spirit.

I rested my head on your soft shoulder
letting you fill my heart
and fill my eyes to brimming.

You were not one for races,

but

this

was

a

marathon,

final and extraordinary

and you hurried us all,

breathless,

to the end.

Which I understand.

After your last quiet sigh,

we bowed our heads,

and in our sorrow, knew what to do.

From your gardens came your final weaving -

a coverlet of blooms:

poppies, ferns, lavender,
bay and astilbe,
spirea and roses,
daisies, hydrangeas,
pansies and grasses.
A palette of colors and scents
woven to bear you along
through the dim afternoon,
candlelit, peaceful.
And the insects too,
in their vigil,
rose out of the blossoms blanketing the form you left behind,
inched across your cool cheek,
wove, with tiny looms,
their own tiny math riddles
from fingertip to graceful fingertip.
Even a honeybee rested with you,
curled in the lavender.
A homage to your tender spirit,
Unbound,
free now to expand,
like a gaining breeze,
into the wildest of all places -

the gray ocean,
the apricot sunset,
the blue-green forest.

~ Annie Porter