

Fish Scribbles

- Musings, Memories, and Dreams -

By T.L. "Fish" Richards

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*For my beloved
ever-widening circle
of family
and friends*

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About This Book: Names

I meant to get this book ready as a New Year's gift, but failed. Which, as you will see if you read the right parts, is positive.

There's poetry in here, but also prose, since I find books of pure poetry daunting. All this stuff is from my journal over the last two years. A lot of it is from dreams.

As for the title, "Fish Scribbles," it comes from my childhood nickname, "Fish."

It was my little brother Johnny who gave me that name. He was called "Hoss" in grade school, and is now a full grown human who plays jazz trumpet and was once a real Mayor. He first started calling me "Trout," (for its alliterative resonance with my given name, Trudi, which I found clunky and unromantic), and "Trout" evolved into "Fish." I didn't mind.

My parents didn't call me Fish, of course. My father didn't seem to care one way or another about it. His given name was "Cedric William" but my mother dubbed him "Ricky" upon first meeting him in the church choir, and after that even his children and everyone else but his mother and sister called him "Ricky."

With my mother my nickname was another matter. Her given name was Mary Helen, but her children called her “Mod.” We began doing this as a convenient replacement for the embarrassing term “Mommy” when one of Johnny’s friends, Ray, said upon meeting her, “Good morning Mrs. Richards, and may I call you Maude?” Which then devolved into “Mod.” Being concerned for my welfare, Mod used my nickname to save me from ridicule.

For at that time, when I was around 13, I had developed the habit of opening my mouth abruptly and very wide every so often to clear my ears, which tended to get plugged up. Mod told me that if I didn’t break that habit, the kids at school would start calling me “Fish” too. So I broke it.

The name “Fish,” however, stuck around until we all meandered off into adulthood. Then it was more or less forgotten for over four decades.

Now, however, as I approach my second childhood, I’ve been remembering that name, and I rather like it. “Fish Richards” has a nice ring to it, and “Fish Scribbles” came out of that.

TLR

Fish Scribbles

- Musings, Memories, and Dreams -

High Sierra

For Ricky

I remember awakening to Delight
beside a brook in the High Sierra
where I played with my father

Fool's gold sparkled
in the granite sand
and in the rippling three-inch depths

And fledgling meadows
scattered with the tiniest white flowers
gave homage to the sun

Dipping a tin cup
we drank straight from the stream
water so icy pure

It coursed through the cells
of our shared body
an elixir of joy

Solemn with silent joy
the mountains boomed
with light

And my small heart beamed
over-gloried
at being born.

--

Grandma

Now that I am 66, it has just occurred to me
that my grandmother was a person,
not just a placeholder.

Now I need to fill in the memories:
Small woman
steaming down the sidewalk on Market Street
clutching me to her side
as I bump along beside her like a dinghy
carrying the red plastic pocket book
from the sale bin at Macy's
where we saw the giant Christmas tree
and had lunch, peas and roast beef, soft white rolls
and chocolate ice cream soda

On a sunny day in her garden
she is showing me the forget-me-nots
strewn on the moss
under her kitchen window

And inside
where Grandpa and the four Pekinese are watching TV
she pulls me into the closet where it is dark
and shows me a picture of Jesus
his eyes glowing green
See how his eyes move?
He can see you
anywhere you are
anywhere you go

--

Somersaults with St. Francis

Out of the past
comes the Prayer of St. Francis,
words my father wrote on my heart
in my child's sleep:
"Lord, make me an instrument
of Thy Peace"

How many years has this prayer prayed me
opening my heart just a fissure more
and sometimes flinging it wide
so the light floods in

Like today
when the last straw has broken my camel's back again
and I squinch up my brain
till there's not a grain
of space for one more thought
and temporarily
I pop free
into eternity

Then
for one impossible
holy moment
I just AM
doing a double take
at myself
laughing
and turning somersaults
in relief.

--

What My Father Told Me

Last night my father
gone these many years
came to me in dream
and I lay my head on his chest and sank
into the deeps of his warm golden light

And when I awoke
it seemed to me enough
just to be the Presence of glad appreciation
as if everything - perceiving and perceived,
felt or thought, given or taken -
were the very body of God

Like the black cat
two round eyes in a cat-shaped night
who has just eaten a hole in my new loaf of raisin bread
how he shivers and leaps away at my scolding
and runs to the screen door
to watch the wind bringing who knows what
and the pink roses nodding in agreement

And I remember what my father told me last night:
"To be in this world is enough" and
"You are not alone."

--

A Shocking Discovery

I thought I'd dropped out of Christianity long ago, but yesterday, New Year's Day, I noticed I've been living in Original Sin my whole life. What a shock!

I was driving home, it was a beautiful evening, the sky deep blue above me, the trees black against a horizon glowing like flame. I was admiring this beauty when I suddenly noticed that I was seeing it all through a subtle film of guilt — a guilt that was definitely not part of the sky and the trees.

It was an underlying assumption that I had done something wrong. An assumption, I saw with surprise, that I had been overlaying on reality all my life, and that had me living in a state of tension, always on guard, ready to hide.

I had never noticed the guilt before; in fact I had long congratulated myself on being relatively guilt-free.

Now I was stunned to see that I had been swallowing the idea of my own guilt my whole life, just as if I believed in "original sin."

Even more interesting, I saw that this was hooked to the concept of Right and Wrong itself, which I had endowed with the power of natural law — and now it was clear that there was nothing natural about it.

Even right and wrong were nothing but a judgment I had inherited, a phantasm without substance.

These assumptions about guilt and right and wrong are still in me of course, but at least I've seen them for what they are: the whispered incantation that the Devil has been muttering in my ear all these years!

--

The Value of P.E.

I suppose it is good to try to teach children sports. Certainly for the born klutzes, the ones who are always chosen last — oh the pain and suffering! — and who wilt with relief at the end of each day's torture.

But also for the born athletes, the always chosen first, who run and leap and execute arcs of triumph at every turn.

Because for everyone, P.E. is a perfect lesson in Failure.

For the duds, it's simple — you fail and that's that. Six years old and you're already launched on a lifetime of humiliation and search for self-improvement.

But for the winners, it's even better. Toe at the starting line, your competitors grinning at you in savage fear, you have to keep beating your own best record — what if I lose this time??? Will I still have friends? And without them how can I admire myself?

So the winners, they get the best of Failure's training.

But no worries — life is always fair. Whatever your forte — being good, being bad, getting A's, being a liar and a cheat, being a clown, being popular, being a bully — there's always the chance that you will fail.

And that's where life begins.

--

No Rocket Science

Today I have
Once again
Discovered
What the sages have been trying to tell me
All along:
That Thinking
In the sense of prodding around
To see how I'm feeling about life
In any one moment
Is unwise.

Because Thinking
Is nothing but the futile attempt
To stop the flow of time,
To snatch Life out of its happy dance
And trap it,
Possess it.

I seem to believe
That if I could do this
It would keep me
From dying
But obviously
I can't
And if I could
I'd still die
And the great glowing world
Would die with me.

That's why
Whenever I fall into

Belly-button introspection
Trying to skewer the squirming moment
On the pin of my mind
I always find that I am
Miserable.

On the other hand
When I'm just
Living
Acting
Feeling
Doing
(As in writing
Or reading
These words)
There's no judgment
No attempt
To pin down the moment.

Only being here
With what's going on.
No rocket science,
Just the Great Good Luck
Of being alive.

--

Vehicle

It's subtle
the egoic "I" is necessary
it has to be open, willing, waiting, ready
so great things can come thru it

But it usually gets it all wrong
and stops everything from happening
wheels spinning in a mud sinkhole

The thing is
it gets all agitated and excited,
thinking of all the great things it's going to do,
has to do, must must must do
and how much everyone will love it for that

But this very expectation
overwhelms it
and it clenches itself up
in a protective knot
of pure paralysis
so nothing happens!

Of course the chi can't flow thru a knot
So the truth is, the poor little I can't do a thing –
it's powerless

Except for one ironic truth:
it is all-powerful to stop everything
or at least slow things down
and screw everything up royally
by too much wanting

If the I doesn't let go,
nothing can flow
the I has to relax,
abandon the illusion of control,
and accept its humble role

As mere empty vehicle
for the Force, the Light, the Power,
or whatever you want to call it,
to come through
and do what needs to be done.

--

Their Mercury Retrograde

Suddenly, long after I believed I had released them from my grasp, my tame adult children leapt out of hiding, roaring like a tornado through my tidy life, upsetting the crockery.

My son, unmasking himself, nearly gave me a heart attack as I watched him launch himself into the Void, tender, valiant and hard as steel, soaring away into perilous galaxies where no mere man has gone before.

My daughter, in a wild freedom dance, flung Revelation all over my lovely period furniture, burning holes in the upholstery and liberating me from all the false hopes I had so proudly hung along the walls. Then she disappeared into the forest to learn from the wild animals.

And I all withered in a corner had to be reborn, a naked babe, and grow up all over again.

Now at last the Change is over, like a natural disaster that lays bare the raw earth, opening its beating heart of diamonds and rubies and molten gold.

Now at last, I get to loll in bed in the late morning, catching my breath and wondering what to do with this new, unruly treasure.

--

Tongue-tied

For my Daughter

Oh enigmatic child
Wild daughter of my heart
You strike me dumb
Like the sacred Redwood
With whom
If only my neck
Were up to it
I could spend hours
Standing
Hands on her warm bark
Ignorant
Of her language
Arching backward
Casting my gaze high
Into her gold-green
Queendom
Lost
In tongue-tied
Wonder

--

Limitless

We who sleep
and wander the million worlds
to stop by day in this place
of sun and shadows
are we not free
without knowing,
everything devoted
to excellence
in every role
even the misery?

Without knowing,
we are the King's players
playing to Ourselves
limitless our realms
limitless our roles
limitless our Being

--

Moon Feast

There are the regular times
of peace:
Morning
when I wake up before the world
and catch it
just sitting there
not going anywhere.
And bedtime
when I finally give it all up
and stop Running.

It's in between
that the going gets to me —
Doing doing doing
One thing after another
Always on deadline
Seeking some
Ephemeral
Impossible
Completion.

Then
once in a while
sanity hits me
and I walk
in the evening
to the end of town
and sit on a bench
and just look
while the sun goes down.

There are the valley oaks
their brown trunks
wearing gold brocade
the magpies flouncing
and scolding
flaring their flamboyant tails
from tree to tree

And the Moon
almost round
but not quite
like a ball of white
potter's clay
in the fumbling hands
of some genius
still learning
to make the world

Then God feeds me
placing the unfinished Moon
perfect in its imperfection
just there
on the blue plate of the sky
between the sprigs of tree-parsley,
a feast to quiet
the heart.

--

T'ai Chi

For Fong Ha

Standing like a tree
shows me
that if I go way slower
and take twice as long
to do everything
in my life
I will end up having
MORE time
not less
because
I will likely live longer
from so much
less stress.

But even if I die
five minutes from now
I will have
actually been here
to enjoy this eternal moment
and that's because
standing like a tree
spreads life out
over a small space
the way a puddle mirrors
the Universe.

--

Shoulder Tension

“Oh Lord help me!”

“I am ever with you”

“Then help me with my shoulder!”

I am holding

my whole tiny being there

in my left shoulder —

so tight!

a constant shrug,

to ward off what?

Nothing will release it

until at last

The Great One breathes unto it

with Her fiery breath —

and for a split non-moment

my shoulder is

just the top of my arm

helping hold up my head

and not the entire world

--

For June

When we knocked
on your door
- how many years ago? -
you hid behind it
ready to slam it
on our fingers
should we prove
strangers of bad tidings
in the night
in the night

But then
the bird of possibility
lit on your shoulder
and said
What the heck,
you can always grab a frying pan
and bonk them on the noodle

And so
you opened the door
and much to your surprise
and our delight
you welcomed us
like long lost friends.

Indignant stander-up for
the Rights of Idiots and Gods
Insister
on the full exposure
of Creeps

Builder
of bright bridges
to the sky
You keep
your vault of hidden memory
sealed away in your bedroom
and peak into it each night
to keep it safe

And night and day
you love and love and love
giving
the irreplaceable gift
of Your Self
opening your heart
like a great crimson flower
unimaginable
in the forest of your doubt
tending it
in all weathers
with the gentlest of hands.

--

Oxytocin

I spent the holidays with my son
and his childbearing-age girlfriend
A long zone-out
of cooking and cleaning
watching TV and
fantasizing grandchildren
and when I came home
I was depressed for two days
missing them.

Then last night
I took windowpane acid*
a little rectangle of clear plastic
you could actually see through
I took it two days in a row
in my dream
just to make sure
and it revealed the same both times:

Oxytocin,
secreted abundantly
in the presence of offspring
and during sex,
is a blissful addiction
but not necessarily
the whole meaning of the world.

**a form of LSD*

--

It's Not How I Look

Out walking yesterday
I asked myself
How do I look?
Aging white woman
short brown hair sticking out
in odd directions
average height
casual dress, no makeup
body on the sturdy side
but carrying my years well,
still functional
still smiling
and still mothering
endless children

But today
looking out
from inside my eyes
at the rainy hills
and the wet road
and the gentle people
it strikes me
It's not how I *look*
that is important.
It's *that* I look,
and how I *do* that looking.
That is the Fact
and the Act
that is amazing and
most Wonderful.

--

Down and Up

On the way to sleep
the web of force loosens,
the spaces between the particles
get bigger
everything gets softer
and you can fall through
into the void.

Then to wake up
you just grasp onto thoughts
like handholds
and hoist yourself up into
the density
where you can push yourself around
through the matter,
like in a pool
full of golf balls.

--

Hotel Philosophizing

Out my window
thunderheads
angelic with white
oh-show-me-the-glory tops

In the room next door
my napping son and his girlfriend
have banished me
for making noise
washing lettuce
in the sink

At first
a glumness
offers her fishy head
above the surface
of my pond

You could be offended
she says

So true
I reflect

Yet lounging here
in my red plastic chair
feet up
on the air conditioner
is not half bad

So why mess around?
A moment of misery
may be a thrill
but it stands no chance
in the last gasp
when
just under surface
of things, there's
this crazy,
senseless delight
that makes me think
it must be true
what they say:

Everything
is Nothing
but piles
of Light

--

The Dreary Truth

Feeling out of sorts and trying to figure out what I had done wrong that put me in that frame of mind, I noticed how simplistic my default take on life is.

It's all about good and bad, black and white, right and wrong, as if someone "up there," outside of me, were calling the shots. If I'm unhappy, it's because I deserve it, I've done something "wrong," and am being punished for it. So I go around trying to be a "good girl" and do the right thing, because I believe that is what will automatically "make" me feel good. And my main purpose in life is to feel good, of course.

This is all about being powerless. If I had power, I'd do great things, I'd transform the world - but being at the mercy of whoever or whatever is calling the shots, the most I can hope for is to learn to do the right thing so I can end up being allowed to feel good most of the time.

What a paltry purpose, based on nothing but having pleasurable sensations and emotions! I talk a lot about "freedom of choice" and "intentionality," but those are really just ideas - bright shiny playthings from my mental romper room. Really choosing my mental state, really choosing how I feel, think, and act, is as far beyond me as the moon.

--

Movie

Life

is like going to see

an amateur film

by a dear friend (us)

a flickering and grainy melodrama

important and worthy

of every minute of our time

because it is so sincere

and we care about the person who made it

yet still

just a movie

--

Silence

“Help me”

I say to whomever it is in me that can

“I can’t hear the silence!”

“Don’t fight it,”

says my imaginary advisor

“Wherever you are,

you are.”

So I sit

on a bench at the edge of the town

where the oaks stand

red in the evening sun,

and the wind passes through them

and on

languidly

Such stillness is here

yet my mind and heart

keep scattering seeds

of noise that blossom

into whole trains of thought

and the silence is lost

under the rolling fiction of their wheels

and I ride with it up and down

and all I can hear

is the sound

of my wanting

while the Silence holds me

in its large

and patient

hands

--

Surrender

For Anam Thubten

The place I come from
is a realm of Joy
deep and patient
as the sea.

And everything
I look upon from there
is me:

pain and pleasure
fear and courage
sorrow and delight -
beloved world-body
held in thrall

And from that Source
I look upon it all
with kind compassion
born of Light.

*Inspired by Anam Thubten Rinpoche's talk on Surrender,
at the Berkeley Buddhist Temple, December 2013*

--

Following the Breath

Suspended
in the flux and roar
I ride my gentle steed
the Breath
following
a luminous and simple prayer:
happiness and freedom
for all beings
everywhere

--

The Purpose of Sunsets

I'm always trying -
Trying to be better
Trying to be more Conscious
Trying to grasp the whole Universe
and gobble it down
like some sweet delicacy
So I never know what's going on
because I'm always looking
for something else
elsewhere.

The solution
they say
is to just
"be here now"
but that's impossible
because of the Trying

I am explaining this
to myself
for the umpteenth time
when the Sunset grabs me
in her gentle lips
like a mother dog with her pup
and I have to stop
and look.

Raspberry
and orange sherbet
throbbing purple fleece
moment by moment pressing

lower and lower
into the horizon
until a blazing vermillion band
condenses
all the sun's fire
in an impossible
richness
and the band is nothing
but a brilliant line
and then
winks out

I watch
and find myself drifting
speechless and peaceful
here and now at last

--

Big Dipper

Walking at night
I pass the soccer game
under the buzzing floodlights
young bodies dancing and gyrating
around the spinning prize
then wander out
across the half-cut field
to contemplate the freeway
packets of human beings
speeding past
slipping away into the dark
like lozenges of light
While high above
dim in the city-lit sky
the Big Dipper
fills me
with contentment

--

Pelican

A giant brown pelican landed on the railing of the seawall at the marina and didn't fly away. Instead, even though many humans were walking by, he just sat there, watching us, allowing us to approach in ones and twos.

Each person tiptoed toward him in cautious reverence, until they stood only a few feet from him. Then they stood there looking at him.

And he looked back, examining each individual, just side-stepping a couple of steps farther away if anyone got too close.

When it was my turn, I could see perfectly his beautiful sculpted head, feathered softly to a little peak in the back, and one brilliant eye, as he swiveled his head 360 degrees to look at me, his long beak curved and tucked vertically against his long elegant neck...

In ancient Egypt the Pelican symbolized the afterlife; in Christianity and alchemy, self-sacrifice.

--

Time for Myself

Today, the day before my 66th birthday, I'm alone in my flat in the city. It's an old house, built a century ago, plain and sturdy. Pine floors, white walls, wainscoting. Lots of light coming in big windows. Lots of molding, several levels, where the dust collects. The stained glass iris my sister made in the 70s hangs in the window, a flood of blue, magenta and gold falling aslant across the wall.

This morning I'm thinking, trying to unravel a puzzle that's been bothering me for the last few weeks or months. I've been feeling a kind of loss - a loss of feeling, of inspiration, or what I thought was inspiration.

I wonder if I'm just inventing a problem here. I'm happy enough, I'm generally calm, collected.

But that's just it. I'm too calm. I used to go from one extreme to the other — I'd worry about everything from the house burning down to nuclear apocalypse, and get really depressed — and then I'd have to do something to get un-depressed, so I'd meditate and start doing stuff with friends to change the world, and then I could feel joyful. It was the slingshot effect, as one of my friends used to say.

Somehow, that's not happening anymore, and I miss the highs.

I've tried going there again. I've tried reading about all kinds of disasters in the making – and it doesn't phase me anymore. Maybe I'm just getting desensitized, but I can't fake it.

So today I decide to take the morning for myself. Just to be here in this house, and see what's going on in me and around me.

Once I start, I realize I've never actually done this before. I've tried taking "time for myself," since my meditation teacher said it was a good thing to do - but I always tried too hard. It was like doing a school assignment. Those sessions with myself were a kind of dutiful torture that bored me silly - I was so busy I wasn't even present.

Today I'm not doing that.

Today I make tea and just sit, looking around, drinking tea. It's tea from an herb, and I think of how I feel like a plant, just sitting here...

Then I reflect that I have a lot more going than a plant. I have organs of perception and creation – hands, eyes and ears, a mind that I enjoy using, especially now, when I have the time.

Maybe that's why I've been into solitude lately. Because all these years, even though I've often been alone, I've hardly ever tasted solitude. I've been too preoccupied with doing — with others, for others, to assure my place with others. Doing stuff to make sure my world doesn't change in the wrong way.

Poor world that I so constrain! What if I could just watch it flow, watch the changes, be with everything. With this small cat who wants me to pet her, this garden trembling in the morning light, this old house built long ago when the world was different — quieter, less complex, but still tragic, and still sweet. This world that has come through untold eons of time with every molecule vibrating, colors so true, everything original, every detail perfect.

My mind fiddles, fussing about this and that — but that's what minds do.

Perhaps I don't need to worry about anything — not about mental chatter, nor about my curious lack of emotion. Maybe I'm just missing the drama that used to distract me from the disquieting emptiness underneath things, the pure nothing.

Perhaps I've been distracted long enough.

Perhaps I can simply be here, with this mysterious gratitude.

--

Vision

Shiny red trucks
come barreling
down the mountainside
with their cargo
of emergency
then turn right
and disappear
in clouds of dust

Old Wo-Man
with shaved white head
and coat of golden flowers
pushing shopping cart of many colors
takes the path to the left
knowing not where it goes
only that is the right one

--

Amazing

I swear
that man
was carrying a tiny
kitten carrier
with windows
and the kitten inside
was wearing sunglasses

--

Not Dealing with the Infinite To-Do List

Yesterday, stealing a precious hour of walking and talking together, my friend Melissa and I began talking about the “overwhelm” that so many of us today are feeling — the feeling of being pressured, too many things to do, etc.

Immediately I thought of the daily avalanche of emails. I never read them all — far from it — but as I hit delete over and over, the tiny suspicion that one of them might hold the key to the future is always lurking in the background. Thinking of this, it dawned on me that we feel overwhelmed precisely because computers and the internet have made it possible to bring the mental world, which has no limits, into visible, palpable form in our very limited world. This is confusing.

With this inconceivable wealth of information displayed before us every day in living color on the glowing screen we can't live without, we start thinking that everything we see on facebook or in our email or anywhere on the web is real and somehow of vital importance — is something we can and should be dealing with in some way — something on our personal to-do list.

This discrepancy between the physical and the mental, between “real” life and virtual life, between what a human being can actually do in a day or even a lifetime, and the virtually unlimited scope of the internet — is exhausting us all.

In the face of this overwhelm, my personal solution is to Do Nothing.

In the morning, before getting started on the day — before email, food, and rushing out the door, or whatever is on my plate — and again afterwards, at the end of the day when I've slaved and rushed about and maybe managed to scratch one or two things off my list — I am happy if I can take a moment just doing Nothing. Just sitting, being there.

Then, if I'm lucky, for an infinitesimal flash of a moment I can be the observer — unbiased, sympathetic, with nothing to lose because s/he is/has no/thing.

--

Sweet Sorrow Dream

Come out!
come out!
the children sing
Strong
and new
and kind,
they want to see their fathers
up deep and close
not curled on the streets
in this huge blankness

--

Flood

Where it comes from
is pure mystery
but there is a stream
rushing through the canyon
of my life
steep walls dark with pine
and wet rock,
and up ahead
Light
where the stream gushes forth
into fields of Joy.

This flood pulls everything into it —
trees, horses, cattle, cats and dogs
people, events —
and only our separateness drowns
as we all swim
rollicking together.

Here music plays
and song opens the world
and the spirit breaks free
and flies.

--

Love song

Waking far too early,
I lie with myself in the dark
not wanting anything

This is love, I think
the thrumming pleasure
of all my senses

What else is this
but love
for myself and the world?

I am exquisitely in touch
with every part of me
like the touch of silk, or water, or sunlight

The ache of my body is the ache of love
and everything I do is of love
for every jeweled aspect of me

Like the bee opening the flower
and the lover the portals of desire
this joy opens the world

--

Confessions of a Widow

I

Venturing into Online Dating

After galloping out
On my toy horse
Like a knight for his lady
Setting out
On the intrepid quest to
“Learn to love without fear
or attachment”
I have learned instead
These humbling facts:
I NEED people!
And I am subject
To the moods of the Sun:
Happy in the morning
Gloomy in the evening
Or in any place of shadows.
In the gloom especially
I need PEOPLE!
Need my kids
Need a true companion,
Need a warm hand in mine,
Need a massage, need
Laughter
Need to Understand
Need Faith
Need Hope
Need the Future bright and shiny
Need to Someone to Love.

It's not the way I thought
After going through the worst
of the Grief:
That I'll be Fine
On my own, and that's that.
Yes I know I carry the Sun
Within me
But it has its risings
And its settings...
I can stand the dark
If I hold my breath
And count to a zillion
And beg God to save me,
And I can imagine
And even feel
That warm Companion
Inside me
In my Heart of Light.

But I also need them
Outside!
In this real
Sweaty fragrant flesh and blood
Illusion of a World
With the illusion of suffering
So strong in my bones
I can't stand it.
I am part of it.
It is part of me.
We are one
In humility.

II

Standing Need on its Head

So, being in Need,
I languished
In the slathering dark of self-obsession
Trying to satiate my emptiness
Sucking my entire self into my stomach
In hopes that someone
Would fill the vacuum,
Until I just couldn't hold my breath
Any longer.

When I let it out
And began to breathe again
I discovered
That the only way to fulfill my Need
Was to stand it on its head
Spin it around till it fell over dizzy
And struggled to its feet all confused
And bumbled off accidentally
In the right direction.

Need has to fulfill itself
Need has to give what it lacks
Need has to act
As if it is rich and full of love
and all good things.
It has to give away every last penny
And every last hug
Until it does a double-take
And sees

With a gasp
That it is far from empty

That it truly is
Wealthy in every regard
Though it owns nothing
Because it gives
And gives
And gives
Until there's nothing left
But a flicker of Light
That finally passes
From this shadow world
Entirely
Leaving only
The gift
Of its memory.

--

Whoa! I fell down!!

Yesterday was alarming. I woke up at 5 and couldn't get back to sleep, as often happens these days. Exhausted, I drank mate which completely spazzed me out – I was a wreck for the whole day.

Finally I went on a walk, which was refreshing in the beautiful warm sunshine with the blossoms coming everywhere. I sat in my meadow and enjoyed the sun, the air, every detail of the grasses and flowers. Earlier I had done my meditation, and I thought, this is the moment to call Mr. Twinkle, an old lover from the 70s. Something I've been planning to do since he suggested I get that book.

So I called him.

After a bit of whee-style chatting about this and that, laughing and talking, I got up my nerve.

"I got the book you recommended – the tantra book."

"Oh, the Multiorgasmic Woman or man or couple...?"

"Yes, the couple one."

"Isn't it a great book?"

"Yes, and I've been doing some really interesting work with images..."

"Uh-huh..."

“...about sex... and it occurred to me that it might be interesting to do some tantric exploration together. What do you think?”

“No – no, I don’t feel that right now,” he says reflectively, “but we should hold the possibility open.”

“Oh, ok.”

I am crestfallen, but of course don’t want to show it. We continue talking about sex and tantra and he invites me to go to a tantra workshop – which doesn’t really intrigue me very much.

Finally we hang up, me with a feeling of humiliation and embarrassment, but of course I had known that might happen.

It's not that I'm in love with the guy – but I just had to ask, since I still find him oddly attractive, even at 70. And there was the revived memory of how really gorgeous he used to be... we both used to be...

Then I get a call from another friend, and he warns me that my plan to visit my tenants, to make “human contact” before the System squishes them out of my existence with the eviction, might backfire. They might just get angry, thinking I am somehow trying to use them for my own emotional ends... And I see the point. And I think no, he’s right, it’s not a good idea. Who do I think I am, some angel of benevolence? Maybe I do just want to assuage my guilt for being comparatively well off, while they might even go homeless...

So I go wandering off into the beautiful afternoon in my jet lag, careful not to stumble on the sidewalk and skin my knee like I did last week in a similar fog.

I begin thinking about all my failures. Sleep being one of them. But that's nothing compared to my unflagging attempts to possess my now dead husband and all my now grown kids, and all the vanished people I ever loved...

I walk and daydream and carefully plod homeward. I'm a few blocks away, taking one of the cul-de-sacs with the nice suburban homes and the safe empty asphalt for the children to play on, when I hear a little voice.

"Whoa! I fell down!" The voice speaks almost as if marveling in wonder — not at all upset. I turn to look.

It's a little boy, maybe five years old, with his big brother. They are on roller blades, the big boy rolling along nonchalantly, the little one just learning. The little one is wearing a huge helmet, the big one's blond crew cut is exposed defiantly to fate. The little one is already struggling back to his feet. He stands up, wobbles forward, and his feet fly right out from under him and down he goes.

"Whoa!" he marvels a second time, "I fell down!" Just amazed at the wonderful things that happen in this interesting thing called life...

And I smile, and laugh inside me. What a lovely little messenger. That's the attitude – that spirit of playful wonder. That's what attracts me to Mr. Twinkle – his lightness. Maybe he's trying a little too hard – imagine calling yourself “Mr. Twinkle,” after all – but he's a work in progress on being light.

To enjoy being with him, or anyone else for that matter, one has to take life lightly, and at the same time seriously. The Sacred and the Profane in a quirky, unpredictable ever-changing mix.

And there really is nothing else you can do but bumble through, laugh, and let go...

--

Early Morning

The last darkness
swept into a corner
the rising sun
bursts upon my sight

--

Laziness

the cat
meowing for her breakfast
my body
glued to the bed
in a perfect marriage
of gravity and bones
my bladder
will finally be the one
to break the bond
till then
bliss

--

Inside

Lovely, she draws me to her
with a lambent fire
she leads me deep
into the mountain
rooms and bowers unfold
in her heart
the earth trembles
we shelter in the deep cave
while outside
the earth
springs into being
and we await
the new day

--

Getting Unstuck from the Past

In my dream
I was pouring over a thick old book
Of cartoons
Its pale pages covered in plastic
Like an old photo album
The black ink faded to murky blue
In thousands upon thousands
Of detailed drawings
Of mundane moments with my family
Including my dead husband
Who was looking over my shoulder

Apparently, I marveled to myself,
Once upon a time
I had drawn all these.
How could I possibly
Have spent so many hours
So long ago?
They weren't bad,
It must have taken me forever...
I turned the pages
Completely entranced
Until my husband asked me why
Was I keeping all that?

When I woke up
I had the thought that
Maybe I need
A colonic.
Maybe that
Would loosen up and dislodge

All those pounds and pounds
Of impacted memories
That are stopping the flow
Of living my life
Plugging the pipes
Of just being me.

--

As Though it Were a Liquid or a Wind*

She wasn't looking for a partner; she'd already been married and knew it made no difference; you were still the same people. Not that it had been bad — in fact he had been the love of her life, and it had been a long, sweet journey. No, she had no regrets, she would do it again in a moment, but it was over. She figured she'd had her share, and she'd had her fill too.

Because although it had been long and sweet, it had also been awkward and fearful at times, walking locked together like that because they had both forgotten how to walk alone. And she remembered how hard it had been when the path ended before his feet, and he stepped off into the void and vanished, leaving her reeling at the cliff edge, alone.

After the shock, she had learned to walk by herself again, no mean feat. She missed his cozy warmth and his deep blue eye, and that smile that nothing in the world could shake. But at last she found her footing, and her strength of heart and mind returned, and she saw again the gallant view spread out before her into the luminous distance, and the tiny purple wild flowers at her feet. Companions passed singing, and she would join them for a while, but afterwards she would let them pass and go back to being on her own, glad she no longer feared toppling into the abyss without someone by her side to grab onto.

And so she climbed the mountain, growing stronger, helping as best she could those who were stumbling or who lay huddled in exhaustion at the brink, and trying to redirect others who were going down instead of up. And she gave thanks for the strength she had been given, and for the delight in her heart.

After some time, however, she began to grow bored, and even a little lonely now and then. And began to remember, and to wonder. How nice it had been to walk with a companion by her side. The memories persisted, and she thought, perhaps not a real companion this time – that might get dangerous – but at least a lover?

And sure enough, from behind her there came prancing a young knight on his old yellow charger, and she curtsied, and he bowed, and they did a little dance of hello and who are you and where have you come from. He seemed a lovely lad, kind and bright and strong, and she thought, what more could I ask? But I must remember that whatever happens, I need to keep walking alone. Who knows when the path could end under his feet – or under mine?

He, on the other hand, had been alone for centuries, stuck in a bog some leagues back. So happy was he to find a friendly face, feel a warm hand in his, and taste a honeyed kiss, that he was instantly smitten. He fell in by her side and began to walk with her, leading his old horse, and whenever she told him she needed to be alone he would fall back a few paces, just far enough to

give her space. Then, keeping his eye on her, he would follow along, whistling and calling out jokes into the soft air and sending smiles to tickle the back of her neck.

For a while she enjoyed his attentions. It was flattering and he made her laugh, and when she let him near enough, his touch made her swoon.

But she knew she had to be careful. She had to remember she was fine on her own, she couldn't get stuck again, and besides his poems were beginning to drive her nuts.

One day, at last, his adoration was just too much. She slipped off the path and into the folds of the mountain, and hid herself in an abandoned hut.

It was cozy and dark in the hut, and it felt so safe that she forgot the bright path up the mountain. Building a little fire of coals, she sat staring into its embers day and night. How good that she had found this refuge. Who knows what might happen if she went back out?

Outside, the fields of sunlight bloomed, and the blessed virgins of wisdom and carnal delight beckoned, crooning in their most delicate voices. But all she heard was the harpy's whine, and all she felt were the icy little winds that slid under the door, licking up her shins.

At last one day an old friend and fellow traveler passed by, and slipped a note under the door. "I saw you on the path a while back," the friend wrote, "and for some reason I remembered these words from the Poet: 'Do not fear the pressure of the Light... absorb it as though it were a liquid or a wind, for in it, certainly, is Life.' Thought you might appreciate this..."*

The Poet! It had been so long since she'd thought of his words. Uncanny that her friend knew she was hiding here, and so kind of her to stop...

More than anything, though, the words rang true. All at once she noticed how cramped she felt, how her butt hurt from sitting so long.

My God, how had she not noticed, it was dank and miserable in here! She needed to get outside, get back on the path! This was hardly the Life she aspired to live.

On the other hand, she reminded herself, she was in here for a reason. That young man was out there, yearning to gobble her up, to make her his own and squelch her hard-won strength and lovely independence. Even if it did sometimes get lonely and boring being on her own, it was such a relief to be fine with herself at last, not to really *need* anyone else...

At that another verse whispered up from the depths: "On this road you descend further and further. Here dwell Hatred, Vengeance, Strangeness, Possession, Jealousy, and the Desire to Remain..."

She shuddered. The “desire to remain”! She had never understood what that meant before, never even wondered about it in fact. But could it be that the “desire to remain” was what was keeping her here?

Which reminded her of yet another verse, one about thinking you are staying safe in one place when in reality you are sliding backward:

“Conservation,” it went, “is false and unstable; on this path you delude yourself with the idea of permanence, but in reality you descend rapidly.”

No, no — it couldn’t be. She had thought her decision out, she was in here because she had learned from bitter experience...

On the other hand, the words did seem to fit uncomfortably well. Here she was, hiding in this dark hut, and she had all but forgotten the Ascent, the wonderful Path toward her Destiny! If that was the case, how far back had she slipped?

It was an alarming thought — but still she held back. She knew her lover was waiting not far away, mournful in his need for her, but trusting as a faithful hound that she would eventually emerge. That terrible need he so blithely admitted — wasn’t there something wrong with that?

Or was there? From inside, a soft voice came, reminding her: “Absorb it as though it were a liquid or a wind...”

Really? Just accept that overwhelming love, even that terrible need?

“And why not?” the kind voice replied.

Why not, indeed?

At last she screwed up her courage and took another look at things, this time without putting anything else in the way. No judgments, no fear, just the facts.

And she saw that his “need” was simply part of who he was right now. He was still kind and bright and strong, and terribly sexy.

What do I have to lose?

Standing up, she crossed the room in two steps and opened the door.

The warm delicious day flooded in.

And sure enough, there he was, right outside – and her heart filled with happiness.

Laughing, he took her in his arms.

“What took you so long? I’ve been ringing the bell for hours!”

She fell into his happy embrace and he made breakfast for them both on his portable Coleman stove.

What had she been thinking? Why had she ever wanted to hide from this friendly heart? His eggs and toast were so much better than her stale leftovers.

And so they ate and smiled, and took hands and walked side by side, leading his old yellow charger up the mountain, to see what lay beyond the next turn.

**"This and a few other phrases borrowed or paraphrased from The Inner Look, from Silo's Message.*

--

Four for RB

I

Round-bellied man
face carved
in ancient sadness
when I stoke your furnaces
your eyes open in surprise
just a crack
like laughing crescent moons
and impossible light
spills out
You touch me deep
and my secret lilies
tremble with sweetness
My waterfall rushes white
and the lake of our being
covers the world

--

II

Angelic giant
emerging
from under a dead leaf
my lover
besotted fool
enters my bower
with a bow and a wink
and in a peal
of delirium
devastates
my castle walls
He pays me
in the coin of kindness
and shudders me open
with the kiss of the Lord
Volcano-born
he won't fit
between the pages
of any book
but titillates
my sleeping child
blossom suspended
over a green field
and cries out in surprise
at the enormity
of the vast morning
that welcomes him home.

--

III

It took you decades
of misery
to build up all that pressure
but when the dam burst,
I was there
a fertile floodplain
jam-packed with seeds
lucky beneficiary
of all your
wet goodness
and now those seeds
are sprouting up a riot
in our wild new kingdom

--

IV

I have seen the impossible light
of the edge of eternity
twice in my life
the first time
in my mother's eyes
as she stood by the sink
having forgotten how to wash the dishes
everything burnt up
in leaping cataracts of joy
and the second time
in my lover's eyes
the joy light flooding out
like lava
burning my doubts
in the white ash
of laughter

--

Logic

It must be ok
Because
After all
I can only recognize what I see
in me and around me
because it *is* me

So I and you and all things
friends and enemies, trees, cars,
stars and crocodiles
must be the same
fitting as we do in this mobile puzzle
so perfectly

Therefore
everything
any of us think, feel, or do
is equally important
and even our panic
about dying
is loveable

--

My Opinion about Death

The other night in my dream
Someone feeling helpful
Gave me a large book
With a cardboard cover
No reputable publisher
To explain
The preposterous density
Of the dream
Of human life.
Didn't impress me.
What explanation
Is needed? Or can be?

We are alive
And Death comes when it must
There are innumerable ways
I watch for the signs
Gaps between the teeth
Expanding belly
Painful joints
Sluggish bowels
Insomnia
A screen door banging repeatedly
In my head
from a brain tumor no doubt
Or just crazed loneliness
At the scheduled desertion
Of children chattel
I could go on

Meanwhile
I am, we are,
Quite obviously
Still alive.
Good and Bad
Giving and kind
Wracked with shame
At causing pain
But Alive!
Unblocked channels
For the most outrageous intentions
Of God,
Whoever that may be.

And So
I am convinced
We Will Continue
Forever.

For
Based on an old
Still-fragrant bouquet
Of most shocking experience
Plus the multitudes of reports
Of illogical wonders
From others
Who have “gone” and “returned”
All I can say is
Death’s a sham.

It’s pretty convincing, of course
And I have no idea how it
Really works

But I am sure as sure can be
That somehow
We just emerge
Whole and complete
From the decomposing bone pile
Into a new place
Probably the one we wish for
Be it the lonesome Badlands
Or the most sumptuous
Garden of Love.

--

Final Dream

Driving too fast,
I lose control
and crash
(surprise!)
and die.
From outside
I watch the funeral -
very sad,
but OK.

--

After Saying Goodbye to My Son

I did not weep today
When you flew away
After bringing
Your young cats
Home to my house
And spending
Three precious days
Sharing
With me
Not profundities
But little things
Kitty coddling
Endless movies
Cooking and laughing.
After those days ended
And your dear image
Vanished behind
The revolving glass
Then, when my bliss
Should have fled,
I refused to let it go.

Instead
I kept you with me.
All the way home
I carried you
In my heart
And you are still
Right here,
Alive and real
And sweet as honeydew.

Because
This I promise
This I swear
And only this
Is true:
The essence
Of you
Is in me
And the essence
Of me
Is in you.

That is why
No matter how
Things appear
Parting
Is illusion
And even Death
Nothing
To fear.
His trickster's knees
go wobbly
And he slips
Like a shadow away
In the Light
of this
Round and Shining Day.
And only now
That I have told you
This
Only now
Am I weeping.

--

In the River House

For Jorge

Oh my dearest love
Was it a trick of my mind
that you died and left me
escaping into realms
I could not penetrate?

For here you are beside me
Alive in this very moment
in this yellow kitchen
at this long table with friends
in the house that goes
down to the river.

Here you are with me
alive and smiling
sad that I left
but glad to the brim
without a trace of rancor
that I am back again.

Now memory clarifies me
and relief floods me
like the rising Day:
For it is clearer than the song of life
that here with you
and nowhere else
is where I belong!

Can it be true
it was I who left you,

and not the other way around?
That some requirement
of destiny trapped me, some theater
I had to play out alone?
And you, kind soul,
bowed to your role
while I fled weeping away?

For I have believed in death,
and mourned and wept
and learned the ropes of living
just on my own.
But now that I have seen you
held you and kissed you
so sweetly once again
I do remember:
Nothing is so real as our love.

How I have longed
not knowing the depth of my longing
to be at your side
all these years.
And now I know
you keep a place for me
here in this river house
by the deep, sweet waters
where children and friends
and a feast await.

Love
let me dream you beside me
until we next awake.

--

Other titles by Trudi Lee Richards:

Soft Brushes with Death
- a Jorge Espinet Primer -

Experiences on the Threshold

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