

## **The Poetry of Gratitude**

By Patty Friesen (Oct. 30/16)

Poetry suffused with gratitude is a precious find. A skillful poet focuses our attention on details, but a poet who can honour those details with thanksgiving teaches us to pray. Jane Kenyon was a writer filled with appreciation for the details of life. Her collection titled *Otherwise*, is a book which teaches gratitude and faith with a poet's exuberance for beauty.

Jane Kenyon turned me onto poetry as a young adult. She was featured on public television in the US and her earthiness and ability to find slivers of joy in the midst life-long struggle with depression gave me hope. Kenyon is not overtly religious but her work draws heavily on biblical stories and images of prayer. *Otherwise's* open poem, *Happiness*, compares the way happiness turns up in our lives like a prodigal who comes back having squandered a fortune far away. She puts us her readers into the prodigal's parent's shoes at the return of a child, "that happiness saved its most extreme form for you alone." This metaphor of the prodigal is followed by a litany of small places where happiness appears. It comes generously, without condition, in the most ordinary of moments. Happiness teaches appreciation for those earthy ordinary daily moments.

Stephanie reads *Happiness*...

There's no accounting for happiness,  
Or the way it turns up like a prodigal  
Who comes back to the dust at your feet  
Having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?  
You make a feast in honor of what  
Was lost, and take from its place the finest  
Garment, which you saved for an occasion  
You could not imagine, and you weep night and day

To know that you were not abandoned,  
That happiness saved its most extreme form  
For you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never  
Knew about, who flies a single-engine plane  
Onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes  
Into town, and inquires at every door  
Until he finds you asleep midafternoon  
As you so often are during the unmerciful  
Hours of your despair.

It comes to the monk in his cell.  
It comes to the woman sweeping the street  
With a birch broom, to the child  
Whose mother has passed out from drink.  
It comes to the lover, to the dog chewing  
A sock, to the pusher, to the basket maker,  
And to the clerk stacking cans of carrots  
In the night.  
It even comes to the boulder  
In the perpetual shade of pine barrens,  
To rain falling on the open sea,  
To the wineglass, weary of holding wine.

Kenyon's lifelong struggle with depression and feeling any kind of happiness  
comes through her poetry which makes it all the more rich for the struggle. For us who  
don't have depression, it is hard to imagine what that feels like but Kenyon let's us into  
the physicality of mental struggle in Inertia.

My head was heavy, heavy;  
So was the atmosphere.  
I had to ask two times  
Before my hand would scratch my ear.  
I thought I should be out  
And doing! The grass, for one thing,  
Needed mowing.

Just then a centipede  
Reared from the spine  
Of my open dictionary. It tried  
The air with enterprising feelers,  
Then made its way along the gorge

Between 202 and 203. *The valley*  
*Of the shadow of death* came to mind  
Inexorably.

It can't be easy for the left hand  
To know what the right is doing.  
And how, on such a day, when the sky  
Is hazy and perfunctory, how does it  
Get itself started without feeling  
Muddled and heavy-hearted?

Well, it had its fill of etymology.  
I watched it pull its tail  
Over the edge of the page, and vanish  
In a pile of mail.

To combat this darkness of inertia, Kenyon finds comfort in the natural world.  
Her poem, *Peonies at Dusk*, express the hope that faith and love will help us find our way  
through depression. Using simple encounters such as this encounter with a peony,  
Kenyon encourages us to slow down and pay attention to where God may want to meet  
us, even in the face of a peony. Read...

White peonies blooming along the porch  
Send out light  
While the rest of the yard grows dim.

Outrageous flowers as big as human  
Heads! They're staggered  
By their own luxuriance: I had  
To prop them up with stakes and twine.

The moist air intensifies their scent,  
And the moon moves around the barn  
To find out what it's coming from.

In the darkening June evening  
I draw it as a blossom near, and bending close  
Search it as a woman searches  
A loved one's face.

While a bit of a hippie, Kenyon doesn't rattle the cage of social justice but slyly hints at it in the story of a half-spoiled potato thrown away that resurrects itself, seeming to grow larger until it might have fed a village. Potato...

In haste one evening while making dinner  
I threw away a potato that was spoiled  
On one end. The rest would have been

Redeemable. In the yellow garbage pail  
It became the consort of coffee grounds,  
Banana skins, carrot peelings.  
I pitched it onto the compost  
Where steaming scraps and leaves  
Return, like bodies over time, to earth.

When I flipped the fetid layers with a hay  
Fork to air the pile, the potato turned up  
Unfailingly, as if to revile me-

Looking plumper, firmer, resurrected  
Instead of disassembling. It seemed to grow  
Until I might have made shepherd's pie  
For a shole hamlet, people who pass the day  
Dropping trees, pumping gas, pinning  
Hand-me-down clothes on the line.

Kenyon died of leukemia in 1995. Cancer shapes her last poems with a growing intensity for the love of life. In the light of her impending death, they invite us to trust in God and in grace, because throughout our lives, grace has been written into the fabric of every day. Read *Otherwise*

I got out of bed  
On two strong legs.  
It might have been  
Otherwise. I ate  
Cereal, sweet  
Milk, ripe, flawless  
Peach. It might  
Have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
To the birch wood.

All morning I did  
The work I love.

At noon I lay down  
With my mate. It might  
Have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
At a table with silver  
Candlesticks. It might  
Have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
In a room with paintings  
On the walls, and  
Planned another day  
Just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
It will be otherwise.

Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon  
Shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
Up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing  
As a woman takes up her needles  
And her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
In the long grass. Let the stars appear  
And the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
Go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
In the oats, to the air in the lung  
Let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
Be afraid. God does not leave us  
Comfortless, so let evening come.