

Leo of St. David

Tonight at dinner in a little Greek restaurant, my wife Vicki said, “Have you seen my husband lately?”

“Yes, I have. I am your husband.”

And she laughed a little, and said “I must be losing my mind.” And, of course, she is. Even though she can’t always put our relationship in context, she still speaks to me as her most trusted friend, and that is maybe the most important thing right now.

At dinner tonight she tried so hard with so much courage and humor to contextualize her life, our life together, with our sons. “Where do they live,” she asked? “Do they come to see us?” Are they married? I know I have known them a long time and I did my best, and did a lot of things with them. I was with them. I know I love them.”

“You were a wonderful mother, they were everything to you, you gave them everything and they are happy and good men because of you.”

“I am happy I can talk to you this way. It is important for me.”

“Me, too.”

Please help me,” she said,”if I do anything stupid.”

“Like what?”

“If I hurt them in any way.”

“I will.”

Last weekend we went to see the sandhill cranes at Whitewater Draw in southeastern Arizona with our friends Jerome and Sue. They have been at our side, unfaltering in the face of this change and the loss and the harbinger of more loss it represents. The Sandhill Crane migration is one of a dwindling number of mass animal migrations, and watching it is as awe inspiring as it is a sad reminder of what we have lost and are losing. We went last year, too. I wrote a poem about it with the refrain “We are here...” which I think sounds like the cry of the cranes as they come down to land on the water. Here it is.

The Coming and Going of Cranes

Sandhill cranes, elegant
as the concubine’s kimono,
forming at first like barely visible
wisps of smoke undulating
over the mountains

in the eastern
desert haze of mid morning
and then and coming and coming
in wave after
wave, hour after hour
to this desert wetland,
fed by water
flowed down
from the mountains
that had been
still, at rest in the
aquifer for 4,000,000 years,
cranes coming and coming
with their jubilant, insistent
cries, we are here, we are here,
we are here, in the world
come to this resting and feeding place,
just like the 10,000 generations
before came, and came.
and came.
We are here. We are here.

We have been married for fifty years.
Not so long. It does not seem at all long.
There are moments now when she does not
remember the names of our sons.
We are sitting side by side
on the edge of the wetland
looking up into the gyre of 1,000 sandhill cranes
descending in striations from
above, some moving clockwise, others
counter clockwise, we are here,
gliding down, their gilded underwings
sliding through the cloudless blue,
so elegant, so much more here that is true
in this golden, trilling whirlwind
than can be described and codified
by deadenders, poets,
philosophers, priests and gurus.

We don't know where we've been,
why we are or where we are going.
The cranes see us better than
we see them, know what we've done,
what we can do.

It is all so ancient,
so maddeningly real,
this jubilant swirl,
so familiar, but
so very brief.
Yet, We are here.
We are here.

On the way back this year from the cranes, we stopped at a little roadside stand in St. David, Arizona, which was founded in in the 1870's by Mormon settlers, or Latter Day Saints as they now prefer to be called. It is just a little bit down the road from the much better known town of Tombstone. There are now about 1,600 people living there. It sits near the banks of the San Pedro River, one of the last living, perennial rivers in Arizona. But it is only a river by desert standards, which means it has water in it, albeit just enough at times to get your feet wet.

The largest building in St. David is the Stake House of the Latter Day Saints just off Highway 80. Just down highway 80 a bit on the other side of the road is the Catholic Holy Trinity Monastery.

We pulled up to the roadside stand beneath the winter-bare cottonwoods. The sun was getting lower, and it was soft on the pond behind the stand and we had the barest of breezes. The stand had one pound bags of seasoned pistachios for sale, salted, unsalted, garlic, peppered, chipotle, and more with free samples so that you could make an informed choice. Leo was the proprietor, a diffident but approachable man in a beaten up straw hat and a hard used T-shirt and a pair suspenders holding up his jeans . He would lift his hand a little as the cars past, a little gesture, but I suspect an effective one.

Leo had some pecans, too, and a sign advertised honey for sale, but I didn't see any honey on the table. "Do you have honey?" I asked him.

"I do. Can't sell it on Sunday." I didn't think I heard him correctly.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Can't sell it on Sunday. Can't have it on the table."

"Why?"

"Man who produces the honey's wife died, and he married a younger woman, 15 years younger, and she says we can't sell in on Sundays. We used to, but then the first wife died and he does what the new wife wants. There's no law in the bible that says you can't sell honey on Sunday."

"Oh," I said, 'well do you have any around?"

"Yeah, over in the trailer."

And then we walked over to the trailer and Leo reached in and took out a bottle of honey for me. I asked him if he would mind if we had a little picnic behind his stand, and he said go right ahead. Help yourself. Later when we were having our picnic on the soft tree duff and in the dappled shade and I could see Leo lifting his arm in a little diffident wave at the passing cars, I put some of the Sunday honey on a slice of apple, and I had the thought that this was the best honey I've ever tasted.

I went back over to the stand to get a bag of pistachios, and Leo and I talked a little. He didn't eat the pistachios, he said. "Don't have any teeth," and then I noticed that was a fact. He didn't smile at all. "My dad had the same problem," he said, "lost his teeth early. But he ate pistachios anyway.

"How'd he do that?" I asked.

"He gummed 'em to death, I guess," he said, and Leo almost smiled.

He was from Boston, had been in St. David for 37 years. Would have never known that by looking at him, but what do we ever really know by looking at someone? He didn't make or grow the pistachios, got them from the monastery. He said he had had a rough year.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well, my wife died, then my son died two weeks later, found him frozen behind the courthouse in Boston, and then my dog died, all within three weeks."

"That is hard. I said. "Very, very hard. Terrible. I am so sorry."

"Yes," he said. "Thank you. Life goes so fast," he said, looking at me directly, "in a nano second."

"Yes, I know. "

And we did know that between us there.

"Take care of yourself, Leo." We shook hands.

"You, too."

"Take it easy, Leo," I called back as I walked to the car. And he lifted his hand a bit in recognition and turned back to waving at the cars going down the road in the settling light of the afternoon beneath the winter-bare cottonwoods.

False Coordinates

I love you all,
want you desperately,
but you cannot be
my coordinates.

I can't set my
way by you,
by what you say,
by your attention,
your tribute,
your disdain,
your adulation
or your pain.

If I am in a dream,
in the womb of a sycamore
above the water
of a sacred river
on the edge
of a pristine frozen plain,
that's my business,
mine alone.

I can't have
you doing the calculations
for a way through
that you can't see
and that only
I can follow, can I?

(When I say "I,"
think "you.")

If you don't like
the color of my shirt,
or the part in my hair,

should I pretend
I'm not alone and
brush it over

the other way
so that you'll

be happy
and someday
I'll be sad?

No, the truth
is, everyone
is already in
the rearview mirror
and I am going
directly to
the place that
only
I can know.

You, too.

At the Altar of Being

The Sphinx moths are large,
the size of a delicate hand, say,
my wife's hand,
the wings black and white
in fractal repetitions,
their eyes aglow in the dark
when struck by light, like a deer,
a dozen of them in amongst
the midnight Cirrus blooms
glowing white, there is nothing whiter
than the desert night flowers
which spend just one night
under the moonlight
in the moist, cinnamon scented air,
the sound of Sphinx moths
slowly undulating wings
the only sound there is,
then the graceful dropping descent
between the velvet, long-expectant petals,
through the powdery mist
of the anther's saffron pollen
as the long tongue unfolds
and slips between the labia
of the stigma and the stamens
and laps at the sweet nectary.

I think I should pray here,
that if I am to be left behind,
it would be good to pray,
to get down on a knee,
but one knee is not enough,
to get down on both knees
in the gravel and the dirt
here amongst the Sphinx moths
and the Cirrus blooms in
the perfumed moonlit air
is to relinquish any claim
other than to being,
to be suspended between
ineffable grief and
ineffable gratitude, to be
both those in the instant,

to let the heart grow larger
than can be imagined
at the altar of these beings,
of this being.
This is all there ever really was,
all that there really is,
all we ever need or needed.

I read of the last man
of an uncontacted tribe
deep in the Amazon, alone
and hidden for thirty years
from those who destroyed
all that he loved and knew
and understood,
from those who wanted
more than there is.
They found him dead
in his hammock
outside of his hut,
adorned in a rainbow
of macaw feathers,
ready at last
for the moment
when he could
fly to his people.
I understand him
here, with the flowers,
the moths, the moon,
the sound of the
undulating fractal wings.
with this gift of air,
he is my brother,
he is our brother,
and I, too,
and we, too,
when left behind,
adorned in feathers,
will fly
to our people.

Not the Longing

It's just part of the deal.

Who doesn't want
a dog that will never die?
A home that will never fall?
A voice that will never crack?

Longing is the heart
of the long dream.
For a lost child,
a kinder mother.
A faithful brother.
A heart that
never skips a beat.
To be taller.
For unclenched teeth.
For health, enough to eat,
a final explanation.
You name it.

For the innocence.
the green fields,
the black earth,
where I lie,
a child humming with
the bees, hidden
in the fields of mustard,
in the life of the grasses,
in the life of the planet,
chewing the milky bases
of the blades
the sunny sweetness
running down my throat
that's become suddenly
a light sparked brook,
I become the sun,
the black earth, the grasses
and all of the around.
No discrimination, no separation.
I long
the lost nation.

For the high flying
circus life, bumbling,
clowning round the ring,
chasing my hat,
laughing, home with my kind,
my funny, flying friends?
for something upon which
nothing depends,
that will never unwind,
something that always stays.
Laughter is the finest satisfaction.

For a perfect lover
right from the dream,
right out of the sacred fire,
to fill the original
borderless space.
To whisper into
my perfect ear
with her perfect
electric mouth,
you are complete,
you are safe,
in this forever place,
you make me entire.
The ghost consummation.

What is it?
What is it
In this long dream?
Always alone,
finding a way
everywhere, everyway,
in the water,
across the cliff,
through the uncertain crowds,
there, in the dream,
to find a way,
to the culmination.
To be the life,
not the longing.

To be the life.