

Poems and Mysticism

Santa Monica Friends Meeting's Adult Education Series on Mysticism

April 7, 2019

Contents

Square Dancing..... 1

Quaker Harmony..... 2

How Can Stan Keep From Singing? 3

Yowl 4

Who 6

Standing in the Light 7

In the Teeth of Time..... 9

Square Dancing

Hand over hand, I go around
One person's smile, and I'm reminded of her friendship
Another's smile, and I'm reminded of his caring
Skirts and manliness, we dance to a tune
And get to know each other
A sense of humor, playfulness, from one person
Precision from another
Twirling enough to feel alive
Clap, clap, clap, thank you
Whom shall I talk to, touch lives with
I go home feeling warm

-Jan Bartholomew

Quaker Harmony

Outside the quiet meeting-house, birds chat
lustily tuning their chirps and calls
as the sun creeps over the wall,
casts leafy shadows through the patio,
and warms the tables where a late-comer,
dozing against a ragged backpack, waits
for the meeting to break, for talking Friends and the food
to arrive, a simple fare
of cheese and crackers, fruit,
and peanut butter sandwiches.

Inside, the silence deepens,
circles around chairs and benches,
skips over a cough and a whispering child, and settles
into the hands and feet, shoulders and faces
of worshippers. The birds warble and a branch scratches
the glass door to the patio. Gathered now,
they breathe together, these Quakers,
suspended in a web—invisible, tangible—
of shimmering Light
and the song of birds.

-Rachel I. Fretz

How Can Stan Keep From Singing?

Grandfather tart,
Grandmother's heart
Raised him, embodying
The pain and joy
Of a young boy,
How can he keep from singing?

Yankee wit
That will not quit,
In his head still ringing;
Church choir notes
And Bible quotes,
How can he keep from singing?

From college dorm
To hilltop home
Pianos always waiting
To sing along
A joyful song,
How can he keep from singing?

Up and down
And all around
The hills of Culver City
As on his way,
Pounds slip away,
How can he keep from singing?

When silence fills
With notes and trills,
God's chorus earthward winging,
Not still and small,
But filled with All,
Why should he keep from singing?

-Ann Fuller

Yowl

An animal yowls,
A thin wail that deepens to a growl,
Then soars, raising a long, uneasy tremolo,
As cold desert night settles down
Hard on the yucca-starred plain.
A cry of anger, lust, pain.
Science says we must
know, must chart the unknown
and thus make it ours.
Logical, this, and yet it seems there
Is something more, some
Unknowable energy
That drives the beast, that makes the listener
Shiver from something other
Than the failing of the light,
The awful cry.
Something unintelligible, a need
To cry so deep it can-
Not be fathomed
A need to sound, to be
Heard
To yelp so loudly
That stars tremble
In the febrile moon dust
That brushes the cobble-stoned desert floor with half-
Seen shapes and shadows.
An unknown wail that
Sets a human to wailing, a sound that lingers,
That spins wraithlike through thin fingerlike canyons.
Awful in its hunger, the sound
Makes the heart strong
With wonder, with the desire to know,
To discover the silent sand-strewn wash
To probe a reeking pile of blue and red berries
And who knows what else is in it scat,
Wounds the heart with the urge
To know what is at the heart
Of this creation,
What swill, what bile, what
Need drives this need
To howl as the moon flows carelessly past,
To make scrawny hilltops ring with it,

Yucca spikes tremble with it,
Creosote reeking of oil and
Juniper exhaling a sweet breath
That makes the heart rise.
What manner of animal is this,
This unformed unseen,
Heard only in its yowl,
Its neediness.
What kind of sage-scented lie
Is she spreading on the burnt wind,
Memories of her youth
Of her first successful hunt,
The perfect taste of her first mouse
Or rabbit, hot heart beating
In her mouth, her ears, sweet blood
Staining her sharp-toothed mouth
Is it the memory of her first lust, a quick
Coupling, quickly trotting off to lick her thick fir,
Awaiting the kits to come
Or is it simply the need to make music
To beat the melody of the wind
The rustle of pinyon pines and
Last year's dried and empty grass,
To make a lie of the very night
That hides her?
The creature can be understood, can be
Known, can be
Heard, dignified by
Being known. Yet, that
Sound escapes from her,
From the awestruck listener,
Too, from any knowingness,
Flies across chill empty air,
Belongs only to the unseen perfection
Of the thickening night.

-Ruth Gooley

Who

Unlike Descartes, I'm not so sure
If, or who "I" am,
Or who's the "I" who questions this,
Or when this "I" began.

Is the "I" who talks to me,
Different from the "I" who listens?
"I" can't be found in the brain,
And it wanders off in sleep,
But soon returns to weave my dreams,
Then revives memories of it "I" keep.

But is the "I" who re-members
the antecedent "I" gone-by?
Should my memory dull and fail,
Would "I" too wane null and die?

Does this "I" persist in coma,
Or alter in a trance?
Yet evaporate when lovers' kiss
or meditate on emptiness?

Perhaps this "I" comes and goes,
With thoughts arising from the mist,
Like stars that fill the evening sky
Then fade at dawn, though still exist.

So is this "I" my own construction,
Made of thoughts and memory?
Or if it's more, then who creates
The cosmic dust of our anatomy?

-Darlene Lancer

Standing in the Light

"A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul By the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural, and Rational Doctrine" (Jonathan Edwards, 1734).

It must be a joke
to in any way link
the intellectual, scholarly genius of the great Jonathan Edwards
with my Vermont grandmother
who barely finished the third grade
and didn't read a thing.

Absurd.

This grandmother had not a single idea
about any divine or supernatural light
as she absorbed
the fading, reflective light of the setting sun
that streamed into our kitchen
and that would soon disappear
behind Okemo Mountain
to the west up Main Street.

As she drank in the flashes of light that
bounced off the Black River
she murmured barely audible phrases
that came out
oh how beautiful
and oh how lovely
as my grandfather turned away, embarrassed.

All of the writing from Edwards
about how the light came immediately
and without impediment,
how it was totally from the Divine
demonstrated something about the power
of the waning afternoon light,
or maybe it was the extra vodka and cranberry juice
that pushed the light into my grandmother,
so that she rocked
back and forth in the kitchen,
leaning over to the west toward the river,
filled up with oddly mirrored shafts of sunlight,
rocking back and forth,
clutching herself
as the fading streaming rays

bounced off the river
and into the kitchen for a moment,
finding its way into my grandmother's entire body
as she shook
and spun around in the midst of that light.

-Stanford Searl

In the Teeth of Time

*Music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.*

--T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"

The violinist is dying, the pianist is dying, all of us
in this high-ceilinged room on our chairs are dying.
The roses in the sunlight streaming through the windows
are dying, though their scent is strong.

Outside a dog howls as the violin pours forth
its intricate filigree, its amazing leaps and moans.
Poor howling dog, howling for all of us sitting here
on this Sunday afternoon in the teeth of time.

We are forever brothers and sisters,
held together in this womb, birthed
through the throes of the music into the sunlight.
We howl with pain and joy.

This musk of mortality mixes with the fragrance of the roses.
The moans and sobs of the violin are indistinguishable
from the blood leaping in our veins on this
Sunday afternoon in the kingdom of forever.

The cutting edge of time is essential to the ecstasy.
The performers are our high priests, flinging themselves
into the silence to bring back treasures for the tribe,
which we devour in this ritual communion.

We ride their backs as if on dolphins,
soaring into the sunlight scattering diamonds,
plunging through the depths, lungs bursting,
our exuberance edged with panic.

In this moment of alchemy, discipline is inseparable from freedom,
fierceness from tenderness, focus from abandonment.
The music is a lover with a hundred hands, and we are reeling

with the sudden touch of sound after a moment of silence.

Worth it to be mortal on a day like this,
with the sunlight, the roses,
the music rising to heaven, swooping back
to earth, our vehicle to eternity.

-Judith Searle