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The Soul Walks Behind Herself

The soul walks behind herself.
If she could only catch
The slender figure up ahead

(Every day more slender)
Perhaps she could face the pain
That's grown beside her

As she has hunched lower
Year after year.
The soul has no time to wonder.

There she is, just ahead,
The distance narrowing,
Then widening again.

The soul is almost out of breath.
She finds herself leaning
On someone's shoulder.

Pain, smiling down
Like an older brother.
Taking her hand in his hand.

Food

The soul feeds
On what she fed

When she still knew how
To be generous,

A source of light
Toward which the world

Turned on its stem.
Soul glowed world flowered

And no one bothered to distinguish
The feeder from the fed.

The soul feeds
As the world recedes

Along its wet green stem,
Flower into bud,

Bud into seed
The ravenous soul

Cannot reach.

Hope

It may turn out the soul said
That I don't *want* to live

That my body is too far away
Too deeply buried

In the future
And the past

It may turn out the soul repeated
That what you call life and I call life

Is not life at all
But a strip of flesh

Ripped without permission
From the body of those

For whom I live
If I live the soul said

It may turn out
And now the soul is sobbing

That the past is the future
Into which I am dying

Without ever having—

Freezing

Like a river freezing
One degree at a time

Beneath her sheet of ice,
The soul feels

The eager feet
Of fears and hungers

That could never ford
Her waters when they flowed

Scratch and slide
Across her white

Unblinking eyes.
So much of her now is solid.

She thickens toward the bottom,
The muddy bed

In which so much of her is hidden:
Spores and bones, the bactrian passion

Of frogs whose blood has frozen,
The warm mouths

Of secret springs
Confiding limestone whispers,

The heat of molten rivers
That keep a trickle flowing

Beneath her thickening ice.

Bearing

for Nancy

Without much notice without a sound
The soul begins to change.

Her small unfinished face
Closed and wary like a child's

Opens slowly
Into the open ironic face

Of a woman shamed
Only by her lack of shame.

Without notice without sound
Or with a sound

Only a soul would notice
The soul begins

To abandon her children
Her tender notions

Of bearing for others
Who refuse to bear

The soul that refuses
To abandon herself for them.

Notice the sound
The soul has noticed

The sound of abandoning
The life that abandons

Of sacrificing the sacrificial life
The sound yes of children

The children of the soul
Runny-nosed children

Running toward the soul
They see for the first time

Because she has abandoned
The abandonment of life

She bore in order to bear them.
The sound of children laughing and crying

Crying and then laughing
In the arms of the soul

Who bore them before she was born
Who is bearing them now

Who has not yet begun
To bear them.

Opening

for C

The trumpets
Of the soul become quiet

And the wounds of the soul
Like flowers opening under melting snow

Drink in the meltwater of all
The opening of the soul

Is letting go.
It only takes a moment

A moment made of years
Years that have opened in the soul

Like flowers under melting snow.
For years the soul was frozen

And now in a moment the soul has opened
And the snow in which it froze

Has melted into the soul
Leaving the soul open

Open and quiet
Like defeat, and triumph.

Author Notes

Joy Ladin is on leave from Stern College of Yeshiva University, where she holds the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English. Her first book of poetry, Alternatives to History, was published by Sheep Meadow in 2003; Sheep Meadow published her second, The Book of Anna, a novel-like combination of poetry and prose, in 2007, and will soon bring out her third, Transmigration. Joy's poems have appeared in many periodicals, including Parnassus: Poetry in Review, for which she is a regular reviewer. She has been the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship, and a nomination for Pushcart Prize in Poetry. She is currently finishing up a new book of poetry, Coming to Life, and writing a book of autobiographical essays called Inside Out: Confessions of a Woman Caught in the Act of Becoming. Joy is the featured poet in this spring's Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin, and has essays coming out in The Southwest Review, The Robert Frost Review, Parnassus: Poetry in Review and The King's English.

About the Work

I often tell my creative writing students that writing poetry is the most intense way I know of being alive. However, during the 10-month period in which I wrote the poems in this issue, writing went from a way of being alive to a way of staying alive. Traumatic upheaval had triggered an intense, months-long depression; whenever I came close to giving up, I wrote poetry instead.

Many students have asked me about the link between poetry and depression. When they are happy, they say, they can't or don't write; when they are depressed, poetry pours out of them. But though intense feeling can certainly spur the writing process, depression doesn't in itself produce "real" poetry—that is, poetry whose value is determined not by the feelings of the author (did it make me feel better? did I express myself?) but by the responses of readers. "Real" poems written during depression might be about anything at all, even joy. For the author, the benefit of writing "real" poems is not self-expression but self-transcendence—escape into what Eliot called the "extinction of personality" that is poetry. It can be terrifying to open ourselves to that which is not us, to make ourselves a vessel for language rather than "using" it to "express ourselves"—and that is how depression can spur "real" writing. When the self and its dramas become unbearable, the extinction of personality that poetry demands becomes a relief.

During the time when I wrote "The Soul Walks Behind Herself," I lived for the moments when my self could dissolve into language, when my emotional maelstrom would be silenced by the voice of poetry. That voice sounded posthumous to me; it came from somewhere beyond what I was going through, from which my suffering was dwarfed by larger patterns of existence.

"The Soul Walks Behind Herself" began in the back of a car. I had been commuting six hours a week with a woman who had become my primary support. This week, though, we weren't driving alone. In my state, I couldn't make small talk. I curled up in the back seat darkness, sobbing quietly—and when the sobs kept getting louder, I started writing.

As so often during this time, the first words that came out were "The soul." I wasn't surprised. I knew I needed to imagine an aspect of humanness beyond trauma and triumph, demography and biography, an aspect that survives whatever makes up our lives. The character of

“the soul” offered me a way out of the isolation of depression into a sense, however abstract, of connection to humanity, to life. But now I wasn’t feeling connected. My attempts to stifle the signs of my suffering even in the presence of my closest friend intensified my loneliness to an intolerable degree.

Though *my* soul, if I had one, seemed to be spinning away from life, “the soul” I found myself writing about seemed to be pushing in the opposite direction. It was far away from life, falling behind, exhausted by the effort to catch up, but it wouldn’t stop struggling, because, unlike me, it could see life up ahead. In the despair-soaked loam of my personality, a counter-life was taking root. I was passive, defeated, spent; the soul, however frail, was determined to reach the life I’d given up on. And somehow, that determination, even if it was futile, meant that the soul was not alone. Someone was touching her. Who, I wondered, and instantly knew: it was pain. Pain would never leave her.

It was a bitter companionship, but it was more than I had been able to imagine, sobbing in the back seat—and by the time I had finished writing, I had been moved by the poem to another, quieter space where there were no sobs. The pain was still there, but it wasn’t an emergency any more. I didn’t need to end it. I could curl up with it, let it keep me company like my friend’s distant murmurs in the front seat.

Though “The Soul Walks Behind Herself” came out almost whole, revision took a long time. At first, every word seemed essential, even though I knew that there were parts that could, and thus should, be cut away. Repetition is central to the form of the poem, and my emotional attachment made it hard to tell superfluous from essential repetition. I glanced at the poem over months, each time winnowing, tightening, breaking and rebreaking lines until I found line breaks that created a doubling effect—a sense in the individual line that would morph in surprising but inevitable ways as the next bit of sentence was revealed. I wanted the syntactical motion of the poem to replicate the emotional and metaphysical motion I was trying to evoke, the sense of halting, shuddering but unstoppable forward motion.

As I winnowed and rearranged, I realized that the end wasn’t quite right. Though the soul realizes she is being accompanied by pain at the end, the relationship between them wasn’t clear. Pain was “like” something to the soul, but what? I approached the problem mechanically at first, generating lists of possibilities that would fit the basic shape of the ending: “Pain, like a mother...”; “Pain, like a lover...”; “Pain, like a slightly dishonest contractor...” By listing some of the innumerable possibilities, too silly and too serious, I began to have a sense of what was and wasn’t right, not only in the poetic sense, but in terms of the vision of existence the poem suggested. “Lover” was too intimate; the idea that pain is the soul’s lover tipped the moral vision of the poem too far toward desolation. Maybe pain would never leave the soul, but surely the soul could hope for a better lover. “Mother,” on the other hand, implied too much nurturing on pain’s part. I knew that souls can grow through pain, but I didn’t believe that souls are born of it.

After testing many possibilities against my musical and moral sensibilities, I settled on “older brother.” Older brothers can be present and nurturing, but presence and nurturing don’t define older brotherhood the way they define lovers and mothers. Older brothers can be a real pain and vanish for years at a stretch, but the “big brother” is associated with protective strength and a bond, however distant, that is never broken. It felt true to me to figure pain as older than the soul,

sprung from the same seed but distinct from it. I didn't know if that was true in the sense of Truth with a capital "T"—but I knew that it was true to the matrix of anguish from which the poem had sprung. When the poem felt true to me, I knew it might feel true to others.

Joy Ladin on the Web

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www.new-works.org/9_4ladin/ladin_bio.htm

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