

# TEACHINGS OF A TURTLE

NON-FICTION

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**A**t Lumpini Park in Bangkok many years ago, on a hot mid-morning, I watched a cute little turtle emerge from a pond and climb up the trunk of a royal palm tree that had bent to the water. The tree sought the water, and the turtle sought a few breaths in bright air. The turtle was oblivious of its smallness, of its vulnerability to any naughty grasping child's hand, of the fragility of its carapace, a mere tea saucer. It sought its other world without fear, without doubt of its belonging. The turtle inspired me to write a song, a tribute to nature's creation and containment of time, meaning, and music. But nature's gifts require of the receiver a listening pensiveness which, if surrendered to, leads to more conscious living and deeper joy.

*"Tomorrow's Leaves"*

*Yesterday grows golden from the trees  
illuminating streams in late year's furrow.  
Now is floating on the water's sorrow,  
and branches won't reveal tomorrow's leaves.*

## **LISTEN TO THE TREES**

At other times in that park, I sat under plumeria trees and wrote poetry; the fragrance of plumeria and its yellow heart radiating into five silken white petals inspire the poet to look inward to the poet's own sunrise-colored well of words.

Trees and poetry are best friends. I wrote a sizable portion of a book-length poem, my master's thesis, one spring season in Dartmouth at the courtyard of a restaurant surrounded by gentle birch trees that softened the light and focused the cool air. The poem was autobiographical, and perhaps cacophony could have arisen from writing in the breezes and glow of the north about a life lived mostly in the tropics, but somehow, the birch trees helped me write about the heat and glare of my Southeast Asia. The trees sang, and if the lines I wrote harmonized with them, I knew I was faithful to the voice of the poem.

Trees and stories are fast friends. Think of myths, both cultural and literary, about trees of knowledge, trees of birth that contain in their trunks the first man and the first woman, trees of life fed by the primeval waters of the motherly abyss. Trees of light both gold and silver. The first time I saw a silver tree from the window of a bus, I was so astonished that I asked the driver if the tree was real. Indeed, we had not driven through a portal into Middle-Earth. The driver assured me that the tree was real, and it was called a silver poplar. On one of my walks, I took a closer look. The undersides of the leaves were silver, and the wind ruffled the tree to awaken the radiance. No wonder J.R.R. Tolkien could imagine Telperion, the light-giving silver tree that was sung to life by the earth goddess Yavanna, the tree whose last flower was fashioned into the moon.

## **DRINK THE MOON**

The moon once made me high, led me on a conversation by turns solemn and comic and fervent with romantic songs. She was so full that evening. I sat on a low stool at my terrace and drank cold sweet tea, yes, drunk on nothing stronger than tea and sugar and moonbeams. It was Friday, and I was celebrating the weekend, so elated to be free of work and to behold that light-reflecting rock, that rock who is also goddess and wolf altar.

One of my favorite poems, "The Man-Moth" by Elizabeth Bishop, features an eccentric character, a personification of curiosity and imagination, who

... thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,  
proving the sky quite useless for protection.

...

he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage

to push his small head through that round clean opening  
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.

Don't you just love that? The moon is a hole, and our curious, imaginative selves climb up the sides of buildings like Spidermen to reach it and push through it, like toothpaste from a tube, out to the realm of cosmic light. Who is the moon for you, for me? How does her presence feel? What does she mean? Each of us must ask and answer.

On my first night in the U.S., in Vermont, in a mountain town that eschewed streetlights and so slept in complete darkness at night, the moon woke me. I wondered if a spotlight performed in the garden or if an impossibly quiet helicopter hovered, but it was the moon, brimming and near and uncontested, such a moon as I had never seen before, certainly not in the city! No wonder there is a lovely song about "Moonlight in Vermont." And when I returned to bed, I slept better. So the moon is the rouser and the Sand Lady who gives sweet dreams; she is song and silence, energy and calm, life in all her contrasts.

Why do we enjoy getting moonstruck? Why do we touch leaves when we walk by bushes and low branches? Why do we pet a cat when we see one? We seek connection with the energy that sustains all existence, for it renders us less alone, more intensely aware of life, and joyful. It can move us to our deepest core if we allow ourselves the time. But how can we gain this natural high when streetlights veil the moon in city skies?

## **TRANSCEND THE CITY**

*I feel the breathing loam against my knees.  
I'm closer to the earth's long whispered mellow,  
a meaning only tiny seedlings know,  
a melody that only living frees.*

I was raised in chaos and pollution. Home was on the third floor, reached by a staircase made suffocating by glass walls, the smells and more of dogs and cats, and big black spiders sentinel in their webs. Inside the apartment, we relied on air conditioning and so, lived in dim stuffiness. We watered the few pots of orchids on the window ledges in the early morning,

but by mid-morning, we had to close the panes against the fumes. Outside my bedroom window for a few years, I had a view of the sky, but then a skyscraper of blue glass was built, cutting the heavens into reflective squares. For months, maybe a year, I watched the building rise taller and taller, the sky become more and more fractured, and my heart sink more and more deeply.

A hunger for nature gnawed at me during these years. By turns restless and lethargic, I never felt that I belonged in the city. Few things gave me tranquility; losing myself in fantasy novels did, so I read constantly! I enjoy fantasy stories because their settings tend to be the pristine, magical past. Characters read the stars, draw water from rivers, plant their own food, travel on horses, wander through thick forests, ride on giant birds, and heal themselves with the juice of leaves and flowers. Magic means mostly that the land and waters, the vegetation, and the animals are sentient. Sentience! Communication, connection, not only with other human beings but with trees and falcons that share wisdom, comfort with whispers, and retort with sarcasm!

Often, we must set aside time for nature if we want to maintain spiritual or psychological health for our interactions, our work, and our moments of solitude. We must seek nature if we want to be inspired enough to create institutions and art. We need nature's pregnant silence to compose music. We need nature's sympathetic insight to write poetry and stories that transcend the dinginess of the hyper urban personality.

When I travel, my focus is the countryside. New Zealand is absolutely satisfying. The yellow tussock, the mountains capped with snow, the lakes with their unassuming iridescence. How about the red autumn maples of New England? Or the muttering desert in Southern California? Or Mount Mayon in the Philippines with her perfect cone and jewel-green rice fields? It's simple: a lot of letting go of worries, a lot of staring and breathing. And then, hopefully, lines of poetry or melody enter my mind, and I take out the notepad and pen, or the microcassette recorder.

I know travel is expensive. Seeking nature can be as economical as taking walks in the nearest patch of green. A former workplace of mine had beautiful grounds with lotus ponds, and every twilight, with the east violet and the west pink, I walked by those ponds. During my years in the U.S. as a graduate student, I took three-hour walks through the woods behind the student housing. I once met a family of deer, and I immediately loved them for the innocence of their eyes, so I took a few more walks, hoping to find them again. Sadly, I only saw them that one time. They hid or moved away.

It hurts to realize that they thought of me as an intruder. I guess that encounter was meant to be unique and thereby more special, a gift.

## **GO SWIMMING**

These days, I take walks on the campus of the university where I teach and in Lumpini Park, and I gravitate towards the lagoons. Water makes a walk and a twilight more enchanted. Water, the most magical physical entity, peace and music for the dances of ducks, shadowy cloaks for monitor lizards, mirror of sunsets and fountains, and many otherworldly, lovelier doppelgangers!

When I was in my early twenties, I went jogging almost every evening. When it rained, I finished my jog and walked home totally soaked and elated. I enjoyed being wrapped in that cold curtain and watching streetlamps make chandeliers out of raindrops. I never got sick. The jog was my exercise, and the soaking was my ceremony.

My fondest childhood memories are of outings to the seaside. I've always loved to swim because I forget my heaviness. I forget the creakiness of my joints, the shortness and thickness of my limbs. With my face to the air, I lie down in the waves, and they cradle, keep me safe. I trust them completely.

When I meditate sometimes, I tell myself I am the ocean, emanating salts and silvery hues, with untold depths full of life forms mysterious, eloquent, fantastically misshapen, but I do not need to be afraid because these creatures are currents of energy, and they are mine. I have fathoms of resources I have not explored yet, so whatever causes me sadness or emptiness or fear, I can conquer it.

*They say that visions are impossible  
for one born to the noises and the smoke.  
But winds tear the clocks away; the coins have fallen.  
The tears fall fast and taste so sweet; I listen  
to paintings of the soul the rain awoke  
in sun and sailing cloud. They're beautiful.*

I cannot change the circumstances of my childhood and upbringing. They are in the marrow of my bones and the weave of my skin. They are sounds that ring in my thoughts and heartbeats. And with growing maturity, I learn to be grateful. But we are much more than our beginnings. Time is powerful, and water teaches us about the vast, changing self. Thank goodness for time. Thank goodness for the changing self. We can leave behind the claustrophobic staircase and take paths painted by red maples and jewel-green rice fields. We can break out of the seeds and reach for sun and nutrients. We can swim in and out of worlds, like a turtle, a wise spirit who not only perseveres in the race but travels between ripples and heat, earth and water. A mage who lives long. Thank goodness for the turtle.