

The Journey

*Without warning
I was flung from the mountainside.
Cradled in the earth,
Wind and rain loosed me from my place
Into the air, tumbling, crashing forward
Falling into a rush of water
Which held me among the jagged rocks.
It held me.
Lovingly washed me a thousand times
Until my rough surface
Bore little resistance
To the urge to move forward.*

Lucille Marchand

In this poem, the narrator goes on a journey. But this is no first-class pampered excursion, filled with luxurious beds, culinary delicacies, and enchanting vistas. Rather, the narrator is harshly extracted from her place of comfort and security, “cradled in the earth,” by implacable forces of nature. The use of the passive voice (“I was flung”) only emphasizes the sense of helplessness and unwillingness with which this journey is begun. The groundless physicality of the imagery continues through words like “tumbling,” “crashing,” and “falling.” This journey is one without a parachute, life vest, or seatbelt, where the traveler ends up submerged in violently roiling water among “jagged rocks.”

Then, abruptly, we encounter a moment of transformation. Once again, almost shockingly, the narrator is “held” (reminiscent of the poem’s third line) and “lovingly” bathed, over and over. She is worn to nothingness, made smooth, until no part of her resists the inevitable. At last she is prepared to “move forward.” And note that this moving forward is described as an “urge,” perhaps as primal as the “urge” to sleep when we are exhausted, the urge to eat when we are hungry, and the urge to push in childbirth. Moving forward may be as natural – and as deeply resisted initially – as falling. Yet both are often out of our control.

How many times has each of us taken just such a journey – with patients, with family and loved ones, with work situations, with our own bodies and minds? How many times have we experienced that awful sensation of stomach-dropping, heart-sinking freefall, when

everything that is familiar and secure, all that we count on to anchor us in practice and in life, vanishes? Suddenly, inexplicably, we have been “torn loose” from our comfortable expectations, and all we can do is give ourselves over to the forces propelling us toward... who knows what? The turbulent waterfall? The edge of the cliff? And then, over we go. We do not want any of this – the loss, the fear, the turmoil, the devastation. Yet unaccountably, when we fall, we find ourselves “held.” The highways and byways of our lives are often enigmatic, and I for one cannot claim that the holding and the loving justify or in any way explain the calamitous aspects of our “journeys.” But it is true: at last, like the narrator, we find that we do not resist. We go forward because we must, and because we are ready.

Dr. Marchand takes a well-worn metaphor, life as a journey, and infuses it with new vitality and meaning. Her poem rejects the saccharine for the authentic. It does not moralize or rationalize, but simply witnesses. At its best, this is what poetry does for us: it forces us to see the familiar afresh, to realize that what we think we know is much more wild, unknown, and unruly than we want to admit, and that at its core life is both brutally and wonderfully mysterious.