

ORIGINAL WRITINGS

BLOOD LIKE WATER

Joseph Graziano, O.P.

Here I stand at the solitary point where earth meets water and air.

The leaden ocean reflects an endless mackerel sky, while the wind buffets the heather atop the dark cliffs. Standing on the brink of the bluffs, if I were to turn again, I would see the mist-shrouded valley, the smoke curling from my little cabin and rising through the fog to disappear on the breeze. The ghostly mists will not lift; they are far too heavy.

Far below my feet, the waves are a dull throb on the shale beaches, echoing the steady rhythm of my heart. Come to me, they call, we will give you rest. You may live for a time, but he has died. And now, only black beaches before and a heavy mist behind.

The little cabin hidden in the fog at the end of the silver path houses a thousand memories of my childhood. My father built the cabin in his love for my mother, and it brought her joy for a time. The hearth is a treasure chest of tales in knick-knacks: a glass jar of the thousand shells we collected one summer, another of the thousand beautiful stones from the next, the sandalwood found like buried gold in the sea cave beneath the cliffs, the little model ship that served for my father's distraction the first summer we came without my mother. These were all interspersed with pictures of happier times with happy people I no longer know.

The fire itself was a memory. As Prometheus gave fire to the Greeks, so my father gave it to me. The tender memory of his instruction—teaching me how to kindle the fire, to nurture it, and keep it burning bright—always enkindles a similar warmth of affection in my heart, even now when he is gone. The last thing I did when I left the cabin this morning was add two logs to the fire. I did not expect it to be burning if I should return.

The garden, now overgrown, still echoes with the laughter of hide-and-seek and chases around bush and briar. My father's smiling face peeps out from behind every tree and leaf. There stands just beyond the gate the tree which taught me what a broken arm feels like and the skill of my father's loving hands when he set the bone himself. Through the arch of the back gate, the orchard that had descended back into a forest still rings with the voices of children long grown up.

But that is all behind me in the valley. Here on the headlands above the dale, the memories were mostly sunsets and sunrises and running with my father's words of caution ringing in my ears. Mind the cliffs. Not too close to the edge. If you trip, only the shale will catch you. But how could I not run from the dragons hiding in the rocks? By moonlight, we danced with the fauns and dryads upon the soft heather. When pirates advanced up the coasts, the well-hidden winding path which wove its way down to the beach found me a fierce guardian of my home beyond. Below, of course, were the caves and beaches filled with innumerable wonders. But these are only memories, ages gone by. Now, the shale and the sea are calling.

So here I stand in the scene I have seen many times before. The seabirds circle on the sea winds, silhouetted upon the clouds. The ancient columns where they nest overlook the dark cliffs and darker waters, serving as a lonely widow's watch for some sad albatross. These columns have wept their dewy tears as they watched many a mariner dash upon the coast below, gashing rubies in the crash of bones and boards, blood and bread upon the

water. In the end, though, these cold stones care not; they stand forever, a testament to vanity.

The winds on the water lift some of the distant grey, and now I can make out the far coast beyond the coast, though faintly as if I were seeing those shining shores through a mirror. Those white cliffs, seldom visible at the horizon, fascinated me. I used to imagine that atop cliffs as brilliant as those there must dwell a lordly knight who was also a dear friend of mine: he would come occasionally to visit, to help me in battle against dragons in the heather. I longed to go to those white cliffs, for him to take me back with him to see his home with its halls of gold. My mother would be there, smiling at me, and I would come to find that this friend of mine was really a long lost brother, my father's firstborn child.

The poignancy of the childhood memory struck me. What a fool I was to think that there could be some home for me across the sea, that some knight in shining armor would take me to live in some fairy land. What I did not know yet was how solitary and poor this life is. I had not seen the nastiness of men or the brutishness of short-tempered women. My heart then quickened to rejoice in nothing but a lie.

In those days, everything was full of wonder: the dragons, the satyrs, and my kingly friend. But that was another world. In this world, in these days, everything is full of drudgery: a third or fourth drink, a leaking roof, and my dead friend. Real life beats all fantasies out of you, fantasies like hope or joy or childish simplicity. Real life is mad dashes to the subway and being late for work, until suddenly it ends. Death comes to us all, and death comes to our delight long before.

And yet, coming here, I can almost sense my littleness before a wondrous world again. This land where the sky and the sea bridge the twin cliffs might be the only place that still makes me feel small. Here alone can I fool myself to believe that my humdrum life still has some meaning. There is a mysterious beauty to the northern sea. Ever the ancient rocks rebuff the dark waters while the same sea spray redounds upon the cliffs and the

heather grows. And yet, it is ever a new experience; in all my years of coming here, I have never seen the same scene twice.

Suddenly, breaking into my tortuous thoughts, the sun still beyond my sight sparks a red gold off the water, like the flash of rubies set in gold. At once, this simple sight brings me back to the funeral, the golden glint off the chalice as I peered through my tears over the black-shrouded casket containing the face of death. How could that simple sight pierce through all the clouds of my life and cut me to the heart? How could I let it arrest my memory and come again and again at the most inconvenient times? Why did it so fix my gaze that day? A thousand times in my childhood, I had seen the same rigmarole as the pious man performed his hocus-pocus and called bread flesh, so why did it strike me to the heart that day? How could those few words of that one man so pierce my battered soul and call for a hope I no longer thought possible?

The sea sparkles again, a tear of sad farewell or perhaps of joyful greeting. I wanted to think of today as the end of days and yet, I could not help but think of my friend across the seas. He could never visit. He was nothing but a figment of my childhood. No one would come to see the blood upon the water.

And the other Man? But, how could He come? He was dead, and the blood dripped down. How could His dry bones live? How could His bloody flesh be food? No, there is only the earth, and the air, and the water. And right now, the sea calls.

And yet, all the inconvenient thoughts of that funeral, like a storm surge, will not sit still or be restrained behind the wall of my cleverly crafted doubts and denials. All the questions and possibilities too great for my failing hope, all the questions I thought I would be freed from here, nag my weary mind. The words the priest spoke, the words not his, echo in my ears, "Whoever would lose his life for My sake in this world would save it," and "I have come that you might have life and have it to the full." And then the chalice. The bloody sparkle of wine. Or could it really be

the wine-red sparkle of blood echoing back the blood of the man whose corpse lay before the cross but whose life was gone?

“Hidden with Christ in God,” the preacher said. Could He be true? Could the hope I dared not hope be waiting, the truth beyond my understanding truly be shrouded in this hidden mystery?

And love?

Could love yet live for me? Despite the rain, the cold, my leaky roof, the relentless pounding of humdrum-busy days, the life with naught but death and shale in sight, despite all this and more besides, could He be Love?

The red sun unseen glittered gold upon the white cliffs and everlasting hills where once I supposed my friend to dwell, shone resplendent, and went out. The wind surges upon the waters, and thunder rumbles in the distance. The swell of the wind off the sea lifts the salty spray from the tempting shale beach to the headlands above where I stand still stationary. I know that if I don't move now, I never will.

A gentle rain has begun to fall. The waves boom against the shale and the mist calls; but my heart yet beats with the surf and I breathe the living air. Do I live, mysteriously, because He died? Perhaps the ship from the west will still come and take me home to meet Him.

I turn to see those cold, corinthian sentinels whose weeping faces now house a hundred gulls. The heather dances in the breeze and the rain and the wind whistles through the rocks where once my imagined dragons dwelt. In the first flash of the lightning in the clouds, these grey stones shine silver as if painted by the rain. The rumbling voice of the thunder speaks its name once again.

I turn and see that the fog on the dale was shifting, stirred by the strong winds. Now I can make out the old orchard and the thatched roof of the little cabin beyond.

The rain begins to pick up and the cool water on my face mingles with my salty tears. My heart beats warm and I feel the solid earth beneath my feet. My hands are clammy with the hours

standing in the damp air, but I know that there may yet be two logs burning beneath the hearth, that a warm fire may still wait for me, behind my garden gate, through the little door of the cottage, built by my father's loving hands.

Tomorrow, perhaps, He will send a ship to ferry me across. And today? Not today. The rain is getting heavier as it washes the salt of the sea and my tears off my face. The night has begun to fall, and it will be a dark one. But the dawn will come before long. I will not go now, I will yet abide beneath the ever changing sky. I turn down the white road towards the cottage. There, across the threshold, the bread and the wine and the fire.

Br. Joseph Graziano entered the Order of Preachers in 2014. Before joining the Order, he studied philosophy and theology at Providence College.