

Garnets and Pomegranates

Raylene Hinz-Penner

These days I want to rail against the way that Americans seem to me to be wallowing in our September 11 “tragedy” — experienced by far too many others in this world before us, and to a much larger degree, with respect to the loss of human life. Yet, last night when I flipped through the television channels and landed on the Westminster Dog Show honoring New York’s search and rescue dogs, I wept again at their goodhearted heroics. Strangely, I have watched too many of these televised tributes and wept often in the past months. I was not tempted, however, to see the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City; waving our own torn flag when we should be serving as gracious hosts to the nations of the world seems ill-suited and maudlin to me.

Americans have, apparently, been recommending to one another helpful reading material these months since September. Novelist Anne Landsman, in the last issue of *Poets and Writers*, takes comfort in the fact that she encounters a subway reader of *Pride and Prejudice*, and indeed, finds others reading old favorites, perhaps with new eyes.¹ I thought of my own habits in recent months: retreats into Emily Dickinson, the Psalms, favorite contemporary poems, familiar words. And suddenly, I longed deeply for the great myths of the human race — stories larger than myself or my own culture, my own age, my own country, my own century, my own religion.

I want, in these times, to think of the cosmic, the over-arching, the transcendent, and that desire sends me back to someone like Joseph Campbell, with his ability to bring together, in his search of mythologies, conflicting religions — to see underneath differing translations the universal human longing for God. “One thing that comes out in myths, for example, is that at the

Raylene Hinz-Penner is a poet and teacher at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. She was part of an MCC-sponsored learning tour for North American artists to Cuba and Guatemala during the summer of 2001. Currently, she is working as a poet in the Prison Arts Project sponsored by Offender/Victim Ministries at Hutchinson Correctional Facility, Hutchinson, KS.

bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.”²

In January, my birth month, I pull out again my tiny hoard of garnets, my birthstones. This year they seemed precious, carrying weight beyond what they had held for me before as simple gifts of thoughtfulness from family members. I reveled in their strong, ruddy, brown-red color, their refusal to pale. And I read for the first time that the *garnet* gets its name from the *pomegranate*, for their resemblance in color.

I have been hoarding a pomegranate since Christmas — about the only time we can buy them in Kansas — not eating it, for they dry beautifully and last! — just holding its tough garnet leathery skin for comfort, rubbing its dimpled lobes where a thumb feels so at home, remembering its mythological connections. The lingering uses of the Demeter/ Persephone myth come to mind: the lament of my poet friend, the ex-nun, anguishing over her adolescent daughter’s behavior: “She is eating of the fruit of the dead, and she will pay with a stay in hell!” — or Eavan Boland’s poem “The Pomegranate” from *In a Time of Violence*, which begins,

The only legend I have ever loved is
the story of a daughter lost in hell.
And found and rescued there.

. . . .

And the best thing about the legend is
I can enter it anywhere.³

Remember Demeter, bringer of seasons, life-sustainer, the Olympian “who most loved mortals and the earth that fed them”?⁴ Remember her daughter Persephone, lover of the flowering fields of Sicily, free-roaming beauty snatched by the god of the underworld? Remember how eating the pomegranate seed condemns the beloved daughter to spend a portion of her life in Hades, condemns us all to the season of winter?

Ah, the cursed pomegranate, Eve’s apple, “the fruit of the dead,” symbol of fertility (packed with its many jeweled seeds), inhabitant of modern-day Pakistan, whirling dervish of contradictory associations! You can pull up on the website of Archaeological Sites of Israel the picture of a tiny thumb-sized pomegranate recently acquired by the Israel Museum inscribed with the words

“sacred donation for the priests of the house of Yahweh,” and believed to have once decorated the scepter used by a temple priest in Solomon’s temple. The pomegranate was a favorite motif of the temple and one of the seven fruits with which Israel was blessed (Deut. 8:8).

So what has this beautiful pomegranate here on my desk, this cursed jewel, to do with September 11? It is a reminder of the dilemma of human history, the long experience which is forever the loss of innocence, Persephone’s loss (and gain). I think of the American loss of “innocence” September 11, perhaps an experience of “growing up” to reality which was destined to happen. It reminds me too, of my status as an American, between my miserable tears of pain and my longing to put it behind for new life. I am caught in my loyalties between Israel and Palestine (or Pakistan); between Greek and Hebrew beliefs — between Demeter’s control of a world and her powerlessness; between my sense of my own country’s life-sustaining potential and a war of retribution; between humanity’s heroics and sinful commitments of atrocities; this dark “winter of our discontent” and the potential for something new in Afghanistan, perhaps even healing and new life. What a crazy ride it is: one day tears, the next day anger, the next day solace, marveling at the human spirit. The flow of words, words, words, and then utter silence.

I have always thought there is no more perfect capturing of our human blessedness/cussedness than Theodore Roethke’s “In a Dark Time” referred to in the above-mentioned Joseph Campbell/Bill Moyers interview. “In a dark time, the eye begins to see,” Roethke begins, and lists then the perplexing paradoxes which constitute human existence, before he ends:

A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.⁵

That time after a fall is a time, *mythically*, for a great learning. I thought I sensed something of that maturity, for example, this past summer in Cuba. The Cubans have withstood through recent decades the fallout from their associations with two Super Powers — Russia and the U.S., and have risen to a new understanding of who they are as a people. I remember how innocent and naïve I felt, as an American, upon my return to this country from Cuba early July, summer of 2001 when I wrote this poem:

Returning from Cuba

for July 4 in Kansas, I am home for the fountain fireworks of the golden raintree, the lizard-green spray and stream of its too-soon-tawny bleeding hearts—already dimpling, brown-spotted, fizzling in the heat. We have spent our nation's youth in a swagger, an apple-green innocence we feign before we explode (again and again) in bombast.

Here, under the golden raintree, I remember the long tired soul of the Cuban people, their African rootedness — the cagey laughter which pulls them up onto the floor for the all-night Rumba they know shakes down all this world's mad politics: these last forty years' economic leveling, a hundred hungers, the snubs and rumbling of both Cold War Monsters — while they drum on, on, on, their bodies holding the dance, unto the day of feasts.

If September 11 is our loss of innocence, may we learn from it a longer view; may we in the U.S. see the world as a much bigger place than we have in the past; may we hold a more mythic understanding of who we are in the larger scheme of things.

Notes

¹ Anne Landsman, "What Writers Are Reading: After the Attack," *Poets and Writers* 30 (Jan/Feb, 2002): 21.

² Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers*. Interviews edited by Betty Sue Flowers. (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 39.

³ Eavan Boland, *In a Time of Violence* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), 26.

⁴ Donna Rosenberg, *World Mythology*, Second Edition. (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing, 1994), 15.

⁵ Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time," in *Contemporary American Poetry*, Fifth ed., A. Poulin, Jr., ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 499-500.