Ladders

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Introductory note:

My thesis project, *Driving with the Dead: Stories of Loss, Journey, and Wonder* explores the experience of bereavement through metaphors of journey and travel in 26 short nonfiction stories and essays. It is a fusion of memoir, meditation, and expository writing and considers the diverse, creative, and complex ways in which we humans respond to loss, interact with our dead, and grapple with the big questions of meaning and mortality. "Ladders" is an excerpt from the final, more transcendent, section of my thesis. Thank you so much for reading.

Ladders

I.

Stranded at SeaTac on Concourse B; a five-hour wait for a two-hour flight. It's late now, and most shops and restaurants are gated for the night. People around me are settling in, dozing in chairs, or lounging on benches, eyes cast down toward hand-held devices. I do what I always do with flight delays, pace and pace and stalk the corridors for public art. I come to a juncture of stairways and escalators and before I can decide which way to go, a glint of metal slants into my line of vision. I follow it upward to a familiar shape poised above my head: it is a ladder, stainless steel and gleaming. Then another. And another. Three ladders in all, motionless yet

ascending. My momentum stalls. The ladders lift me from the flux and flow of other travelers, reorient me in space, invite me to look, to see, to think about transcendence. C*an a ladder be a form of transportation?* Tonight it can. Stuck here as I am in the limbo of an airport terminal, any metaphor of mobility is worthy of consideration.

I walk the perimeter of the stairwell and keep my gaze on high. As my perspective shifts, more ladders appear: four now, at varying angles and altitudes. They are substantial, large enough to climb on, but not utilitarian. Their wings confirm this. Or are they not wings, but flames? Or flame-like wings, burning but not consuming. Jagged shards of frosted glass rise along the ladder's rails, like brokenness ascending. The closer I look, the more I see: swirls and glyphs and tiny ladders etched upon translucent wings. Ladders upon ladders drifting upward, but to where? The concourse ceiling? The wild blue yonder? The Great Beyond? For an instant I wonder if this installation might be a memorial to those lost in flight, but then I decide no, or at least I hope not. As fitting as this setting is for such a tribute, those of us with flying "issues" would prefer not to remember the unknown dead while waiting at our gates. It is enough that our own dead, suitcases in tow, are always traveling alongside us.

II.

Impossible, in my current state of strandedness, not to think of mythic Jacob, asleep in the wilderness with only a rock for a pillow. Not until his splendid dream of course, with transient angels moving up and down those fabled rungs, did Jacob realize his hallowed whereabouts. The revelation that the sacred was beside him all along made Jacob cry out in astonishment, "Surely G-d is in this place and I did not know it!" And so it is that encounters

with mystery almost always take us by surprise. Moments of wonder, like rushes of grief, often strike unbidden and in the least likely of circumstances. In Jacob's case, opening his eyes to wonder changed everything: the trajectory of his life, his people's history, even his own name. And although so much else transpires in this story, it is the ladder linking heaven with earth that we remember, it is the ladder which has inspired thousands of years of interpretive tales, paintings, sculptures, and music to tumble from its rungs.

But why a ladder anyway, standing upright in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a dream, almost squarely in the middle of the book of Genesis? Surely, ladders of transcendence did not spring into the Western imagination out of the clear, blue sky.

III.

In the beginning was the ladder. Or near the beginning anyway. Before, during, and after Jacob's ladder was codified in Torah, indigenous cosmologies throughout the world featured ladders in ritual, art, and story which linked the seen to the unseen world. Traditions from Iceland to India, from Asia to the Americas have imagined celestial ladders, ropes, or stairways as structures to convey the dead to higher spiritual realms. Among others, Australian Aborigines envision ladders to the afterlife as trees, sunbeams, or the starlit path of the Milky Way.

Ladders also have a legacy of providing pathways for deities to travel back and forth between the earth and the cosmos. Buddha is said to have descended from heaven on a jewel-encrusted ladder, while the prophet Muhammed is believed to have ascended to heaven on a ladder of golden light. Although contemporary spiritualities may no longer believe in literal ascension on literal ladders to literal afterlives, the idea of ladder, of linear progressions from

earthly to etherial, from lower to higher states of being or consciousness, is still very much with us. We continue to link inner journeys with upward journeys: *excelsior ad aster.* We are creatures of ascension, of symbol, and of seeking.

IV.

Sculptor Lin Lisberger writes that ladders are "one of the most fundamental architectural forms, suggesting movement through space and endless possibilities." She considers her hand-crafted ladders to be essential foundations from which to build human narratives. And she is not alone in her structural affinity. From stone etchings in neolithic times to illuminated medieval manuscripts, from Tibetan thangas to Renaissance paintings, from the mystical etchings of William Blake to the abstract paintings of Chagall, Miro, and O'Keeffe, artistically rendered ladders have expressed our visions, conveyed our questions, helped us ponder the possibilities of our transitory existence. From where do we come, to where are we going? And how do we get from here to there?

It has been noted many times that humans are the only creatures both blessed and cursed with the knowledge of our own mortality. Making art and telling stories are two of the essential ways we have of responding to this awareness, of exploring complexities and conditions which intellect alone cannot fully experience or explain. Religion writer Phillip Zaleski says that writing about spiritual matters (under which the topics of death and bereavement are often classified) can be viewed as "a rung on the ladder linking heaven and earth." A rung, perhaps, but not the entire apparatus. Patty Smith, in her eloquent book-length elegy, *Just Kids,* wryly laments that writing about loss has its limitations. Most significantly, she says, it cannot wake the dead.

Yet art can console us. It can enable us to offer our dead a continuing place in the narrative, a material presence in a world in which they no longer dwell.

V.

A ladder is a story of constancy and yearning, of motion and stillness, of mourners and dreamers. Do our souls live on after death? Do the spirits of sentient beings climb ever upward? I cannot speak for how or where the dead may go, or if they go anywhere at all save in our memories, imaginations, and the legacy each leaves behind. But I do know this: a mourner's journey does not proceed in a linear way, neither from down to up nor up to down. It is a winding way of forwards and backwards, of footholds and free falls, of ever-shifting vantage points. It is one foot in front of the other, from rung to rung, and the vast empty spaces between each rung. In that emptiness great sorrow may abide, but also the possibility for great wonder. Rabbi Gershon Winkler, in *The Magic of the Ordinary*, encourages us to venture into these empty places, to "relinquish the absoluteness of the known —even for a moment— to create space for the unknown." After all, what else is death but the relinquishment of the known? What is life but an invitation to embrace the unknown?

VI.

One night each December, for about eight hours or so, the rolling lawns where my parents are buried transform into something of a sprite's night, a wonderland, a shimmering field of earthbound stardust. This effect is achieved by hundreds of *luminarias* arrayed on headstones and monuments, along walkways, beside fountains and roadways. An hour before dusk, waves of volunteers arrive to light each candle: step by step, row by row, soul by soul. By sundown, the

transformation is complete: multitudes of flickering lights reaching from the earth to the heavens; multitudes of tiny lights uplifting our hearts to some higher where.

On one such night, I met a woman who told me of an experience which brought her out of great despair following the death of her only son in the Iraq War. While attending a personal healing retreat, she participated in a guided meditation. During the exercise, she had a vision of a undulating, curving, ladder form. The image filled her with a deep sense of connection, continuity, and completeness. Although she did not understand it at the time, she drew a sketch of her vision so that she might always remember the feeling of resiliency it brought her on that day.

The next time she visited her son at the cemetery, she told me, she was stunned to see another visitor installing a large kinetic sculpture on a nearby grave. It was a three dimensional model of her meditation vision: a ladder-like structure with no beginning and no end, spiraling continually on ambient breezes. It looked not unlike the winding staircase William Blake rendered in his painting of Jacob's Ladder; but most closely, it resembled a creative rendering of what many call the "ladder of life," the helical structure which links us all, generation to generation: the double spiral of DNA.

VII.

Back at the Seattle Airport, I sat quietly for some time for with Norie Sato's ladder installation before I felt compelled to move again, to experience the art as I imagined the artist had intended me to: as a traveler, a being in motion, arriving or departing, vertically or diagonally on stairways or escalators. I wanted to follow *Wings of Transition* to its terminus, see where it might lead me, discover how its story might or might not come to fruition. As I climbed

the stairs, new ladders appeared, some with wings unfolding, others poised in closing. There were eight now: industrial-sized butterflies, ungainly, gleaming, flocking purposefully, their runged thoraxes inclining toward a vaulted, windowed alcove at the top of the concourse ceiling. I followed their static migration until I came upon ladder number nine, the uppermost, the most exultant. Although this one appeared to be the leader of the pack, I understood it to be one ladder in a timeless succession of ladders, ladders unbounded by the confines of time, space, and the conventional properties of our material world. To me, this final ladder was not just the culmination of an art piece, but an invitation to follow mystery: to hold our eyes aloft, to wander and explore, to lose ourselves and find ourselves in both continuity and in questions.