

Seedsong: An Elegy For Thomas Berry, 1914-2009

Elizabeth Ayres

The day we said goodbye to you, a loon sang on a blue lake as clouds separated into white islands dotting a blue lake of sky. Shovels bristled in the mound of black earth heaped beside your open grave, and mountains leaned into each other like sorrowing friends. In the garden, seedlings bristled in their own black earth. Then a long line of friends filed past a fragrant stand of balsam pines into the meadow. Then it was done, and we all went home.

It takes time to hear the voice of a place. I think you might have said that, although they could be my words, or this woody fringe of the Chesapeake Bay swelling into thought—sometimes the connections blur the distinctions, and I can't tell the difference. This place speaks in the creaking wings of an unseen gull, its gray body blending into the gray mist as a dream blends into sleep. As Earth's dream winged its way into your sleep and, waking, you woke us all. There are no words on the boulder that is your headstone, but it's been calling to you since you were a child, that meadow, in its mother tongue of lilies and crickets, its alphabet of white clouds dotting a blue sky.

White mushrooms dot the wet green grass here. I stand on a sodden carpet of pine needles. A network of exposed roots meanders, like the ropey veins on an old man's hands. That one time I met you, we read to each other. From your work, from my work, from the work of a host of friends, all those words, thoughts, visions, dreams, all falling like droplets of rain, mingling, overflowing, seeping into the ground, absorbed, transformed, and look, Thomas, look! How the pine trees have flung their seed-laden cones with such reckless generosity.

Look, Thomas. In the sweet salt wind, storm clouds roil and boil, seethe and churn. White as lilies, black as crickets, every shade of gray in between. The bright light and the dim light, the shine and the shade, borne in each other's arms, waltzing across the sky. I do not know what happens after we die, but I do know there is some mysterious exchange between creation and annihilation, between possibility and the extinction thereof. I know this mystery is choreographed into the structure of galaxies and grains of wheat, and that we are all partners in the dance, and that the single yellow dandelion blooming near my foot will soon become a gossamer white globe. Then the gust of wind, and a thousand seeds flying on a thousand gossamer wings.

It takes time to hear the voice of a place. From north and south and east and west, a thousand gossamer stories, borne on the wind like seeds. Sun and moon, mountains and meadows, lilies and crickets and stars—you taught us to listen, Thomas, and to speak the truth of our own story in the vocabulary of our mother tongue. A language with no word for 'goodbye.'



Thomas in Greensboro, NC, August 2008. Photo by Caroline Webb.