

Her Name is Faith by Pam Calabrese MacLean

Dearest Odin,
Just a note to thank you for revealing the treachery of hope for those who see
only what the white raven brings.

1 2 3 4 5
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All night the little girl counts.
Hardly taking a breath,
She fights to stay with us.
By 5 am her Dad can only cry
1 2 3 4 5.

The ambulance takes her,
Sirens silenced.
All the time in the world?
Or no hope at all?

She can't walk
Or talk, but reaches through the bedrails
For the buttons of my red plaid shirt.
She buttons it down
Then up
Down again.
Soon this too, will be lost to her.

Now I count her breaths. Mustn't fail this time.

We float
The child, the old woman.
Memory suspends us,
Little puffs of dreams
Push us forward.
We falter,
Longing to touch down,
Feel the earth on the soles of our feet,
But we grow tired,
Frightened of what might be lost
This time.

A monster eats and eats and eats the little girl
until it seemed there could be nothing.
But even monsters need catch their breath.

And we danced a little because she still knew who we were.

I waked up. Nonna asleep by the bed.

*She holds on to us.
If we go away,
We go away together.*

Nonna is afraid. I'm not.

*Else lives in my skin.
I want to kiss Nonna,
Else bites her.
Hard.
Nonna doesn't cry.
And God won't let me.*

*No one knows I can see through my eyelids.
I see every word.*

What does Faith hear when I talk?
The machine gun rattle of words,
Bullets with no mark to hit
Or the muffled announcements
In bus/plane/train terminals.

Her world, a dizzying montage
Where she leads me through
All I can't understand.

Is this how she lives
Every day
In my world?

I know she sometimes feels
The silence of my breath
On her cheek.
In this silence
She hears me
And we walk together
Where our minds allow.

We have found a hollow
An emptiness
Where we spend time
Living like moles
Doing what we know
Burrowing
I remember us years ago

Hands in the garden
Deeper Nonna
You can feel the ocean.

But this is not like that
Not here
Not now
Here is loss
Now is burying.
We no longer know what we do.

The dark serves up another memory
Us getting lost
On our way to a yard sale.
She reached from her car seat to touch my shoulder
It doesn't care so much if we're lost together, right?

So we dig
out or in
because it doesn't care so much
Together.

Every morning
stepping off the same cliff
The fall familiar
Walking on air meaningless
The impact unknown.
Yet time enough to know
Our lives are infinitesimally changed
Not by days but seconds.

Some seconds break you.

The monster swallows her legs
Her mouth
Not flesh or muscle or sinew
But will.

The little girl fights back
Pulls hard
Pulls talking:

Our voices and others,
from her seven year old mouth,
Are all the monster allows.
We wait.

And wait.
For her own voice.
Unborrowed words.

She pulls walking
Against his jagged teeth.
Now she runs but can't stop.
Twice a day we wind her
Tight
The sheet like a shroud
And hold her until the monster sleeps.
We count together until she sleeps
Then I count on alone.

They name the Monster
A common virus
That uncommonly goes to one brain in 2 million.

They tell us it erased parts of her brain.
And we can take her home.

Erase sounds so gentle
A sweet little board monitor in second grade
Leaving the board clean
Erasers banged free of dust
Chalk lined up
Ready for what may be written there tomorrow.

Plasticity is the new hope.
The brain remapping.
Much more likely in someone
So young.
Always the same hopeful example
'If you can't get from A to B
The way you always have,
Take a different route.
Or make a new path.

What if there is no longer an A to start from?
No B to reach?

Odin, do you know
White ravens are making a comeback?
Do you know what it means
That they come born of black?

We drive as if chased.
We don't say it but believe
We can outrun the monster.

We check the rearview mirror often
Until Faith's eyes close. We look a few more times
Before we're reassured. Then we watch the road
Behind for followers.

Arriving home we see the monster has eaten
Faith's new tights from ankle to thigh.

She eats the hands of an antique clock,
Chunks of a thick glass tumbler
Shirts and mittens.

From desire to done
In a second
Another child's ice cream
From his hand to her mouth.
A passing stranger's purse
Off her shoulder in to Faith's lap.
Her hand in a pot of boiling potatoes.

I scream my way from the torture
Sleep has become.

The mornings of no dreams,
Innocent enough.
Innocent as the joy
When I dream her as well
As she once was.

Reality never dreams.

Waking to her first kick at the door,
Having to learn it all again.
The virus, the seizures,
pica, on and on.

I open the locked door,
Her hair wild
Her eyes too open
A child in Bedlam.

She says my name, her face full of wonder,

As if she never expected to see me here.

The monster is bored,
Makes her dance everyday
To music only she can hear.
His tune has her limbs wild, thrashing
He keeps time under her skin,
Empties her eyes. I long to look away
And would but for the young pediatrician
With a Princess tiara who told us,
We just have to support Faith through this.
She isn't in pain and she won't remember.

After each seizure I say Faith you're back!
Only once I forgot
Ahem came the loud throat clearing,
Nonna it's me. Faith. I'm back.

Some days the loss is too sharp, I can't catch my breath,
And my heart forgets to beat.

She fights the hardest
The days the monster slips
Into her skin
The guise of innocence.

Faith has her hands twisted
In my hair.
I beg her to let go.
We are both crying for the first time in months.
I can't I can't.

We know it's the monster that squeezes our heads,
Kicks and pinches us. Bites.
We wear our bruises
Like badges of honour.
Even her younger brother
Still tells her she's sweet
And kisses her goodnight.

And it is this
The monster hates
Gagging and spewing up
Pieces of the child

Who lived before...

Her Mom sweeps Faith's hair
Into a ponytail saying, I just want to fix your...

And in a tiny heartbreakingly hopeful voice
Faith asks *My brain?*

Dearest Odin, Know this.
Monsters no longer hide, waiting to be revealed
By the blackest of black,
Or the whitest of white of your ravens.

Monsters are everywhere
And we'll never see them coming.