

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

English Faculty Publications

English

1-2013

To the Space Beside Me

Betsy Johnson-Miller

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, ejohnsonmil@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/english_pubs



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson-Miller, Betsy, "To the Space Beside Me" (2013). *English Faculty Publications*. 12.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/english_pubs/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

To the Space beside Me

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:21

*Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons
for ye are crunchy
and taste good with ketchup.*

A sign on my secretary's door

“Do I still make you happy?” The news of some acquaintances divorcing had spooked me. My husband ran his fingers up and down my spine. “Yes, you still make me happy.”

But that conversation had been two days ago. He had not made me happy this afternoon, nor I, him. Our fight, which had just started to get good and juicy, got interrupted by our teenaged son who came in from mowing and threw himself into a chair to read the comics. Our daughter joined us soon after, deciding to make her pillow monsters at the kitchen counter instead of tucking herself away in her bedroom like she usually did.

While my husband and I eyed each other across the room, my daughter walked over to the garbage can to throw some fabric scraps away. “Mom, come here.” She pointed out the sliding glass door at our deck. “A hummingbird. Is it hurt?”

A shining emerald draped itself across the bird's back while the ruby on its throat glinted in the sun. I rarely saw a hummingbird land anywhere; this one stood on the peeling wood of our

deck and seemed to wobble. “Yes, I think so.” Even though I was still angry at him, I called my husband over. He had some experience with hummingbirds.

“It isn’t hurt,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“See what’s underneath it?”

Now I noticed that the hummingbird was on top of another small, red-throated body, and the second hummingbird’s needle beak had something sticking out of it. I asked, “Is it dead?”

My husband rolled his eyes.

“What’s going on?” my daughter demanded.

“They’re mating,” he clued us both in.

Her thirteen-year old mouth formed a silent “O.”

Since this felt like a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, I invited our son to join us. From the look on his face, you’d have thought I’d asked him to rub my bunions.

I turned back to the deck. Assuming the male was on top, we watched as he rocked his little body forward and backward. At the same time, he used his wings like hands to steady himself and keep from tipping over on his side. The female’s body rested between two deck boards and she did not move, except to curl her body into a feathery cup that teetered back and forth.

The rocking continued for thirty seconds.

A minute.

Two, three minutes more.

I whispered, “There isn’t necrophilia in the animal world, is there?”

“I don’t think so,” my husband answered.

“Because the one on the bottom isn’t moving, and besides, it has that leaf or whatever it is hanging out of its mouth.”

Time continued to pass in that slow way, and as we watched them, their beaks reminded me of both rapiers and Pinocchio.

“Even lions don’t last this long,” he observed, sounding impressed.

Still mad at him, I tried not to smile, but I did glance at him, recalling the other time he had crossed paths with a hummingbird. One had gotten trapped in a web at our old house, and my husband had freed it before the spider could attack. The strands of web glued to the bird’s body made flight impossible, so he donned a pair of leather gloves before gently trapping the bird in his fist. He then proceeded—even more gently—to bathe the bird in a bowl of warm water. The gesture struck me as sexy: a perfect balance of strength, confidence and tenderness. As soon as he unfurled his fingers, the wet body rocketed away.

Not only had he bathed one hummingbird, but now here we were, observing two more in the ultimate act of intimacy. But the sight wasn’t majestic—he agreed when we were on speaking terms again the next day—it was just weird.

Psalm 148, my new favorite, begins with the basic imperative, “Praise ye the Lord,” and what follows is a list of all the higher ups who are to obey this command—the heights, the angels, the sun and moon, even “ye waters that be above the heavens.”

Things shift in the second half of the psalm where we are told, “Praise the Lord *from the earth*” (emphasis mine). The command here is not to look up, but to look around, where we will find all manner of things we should join in the praising of God: dragons, deeps, fire, snow, fruit trees and “creeping things, and flying fowl.” This Psalm puts us in our proper place—not center stage, but as part of the chorus.

While this is laudable in light of the horrors we commit against the earth, it’s not the real reason this psalm intrigues me. I knew the Bible spoke of leviathans, but dragons? Why didn’t they teach us *this* in Sunday School? I imagine the drawing I could have handed my mother. “Yeah, Mommy, that’s the dragon from the psalms,” I could have explained to her incredulous face. With a Mama Mushroom Pizza magnet, I would have stuck my drawing on the fridge. Knowing me, I probably would have touched it each morning as I grabbed some milk for my Rice Krispies.

In *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell, one of the main characters says that she has been married to four men in her life, and they have all been named George Edwards. How can this be? How can someone who has been married to the same man for over 40 years claim that she has loved four different men? This flies in the face of everything we have been taught about love by romantic comedies. Falling in love is the same as remaining in love, right?

As we drove to a small town festival a couple of days ago, my husband told me about an article he’d read which questioned the traditional wisdom that we are meant to be monogamous.

It urged us to strip away the romantic dreams of monogamy and face what can be the very real reality of it: boredom, despair, *fifty years* of waking up to the same head in the same bed.

Next year, my husband and I will celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary, and I think about how different I am from that 21-year old girl who said “I do,” how different my husband is. In five or ten years, we will probably be completely different again. Will *those* two people be able to love one another?

The more I think about this, the more I decide that when the Bible says “dragons,” I want it to mean that—Word of God!—there were dragons in the world, and that they were called (along with all of creation) to praise God.

For me the question isn't so much if God *could* create dragons; rather, I want God to be the kind of Author who *would* create them. That's because the sacred books of my childhood—*The House on Pooh Corner*; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; *The Velveteen Rabbit*—cast spells on my mind. Or perhaps it would be better to say they converted me. They encouraged me to believe in the fantastic: animals can talk; new worlds are only a closet away; and love can make something, anything, Real.

~

Today I walk a forest trail on my campus without harassment from mosquito or deerfly, trying to soak up the perfect summer day, the kind that seems an impossibility in the cold hard tomb of winter. Others have the same idea. Before long, I catch up to a woman who is Asian, and she keeps stopping to snap picture after picture. I smile as I pass, and she asks in what sounds like a Chinese accent, “How can you walk so fast through this beauty?”

A little while later, a guy carrying a guitar passes me going the other way, and just as he does, a piece of paper flutters to the ground. “You dropped something,” I call after him.

“That was lucky to do it now,” the guy says quietly yet fervently, and I get the feeling he is a Peace Studies major.

When I reach the statue of the Lily of the Mohawks, a kind of Native American Madonna, I slow and touch her right moccasin. I don’t know why, but silently I ask, “Please, bless me,” before moving on again.

After half an hour of walking, I sit on a ledge and see some flowers; a decaying log, red as the dirt in Alabama; and a squadron of dragonflies. They hover, dive, and hunt. When I look down, I see one has landed on my left thigh.

The bug’s eyes glow a ghostly green, and I swear they swirl, just like that spinning pinwheel thing they used on tv whenever someone was being hypnotized or falling into another space or dimension. At the very bottom of its green eyes, two small rubies rest.

Do dragonflies breathe? Because this one’s tiny abdomen—barely thicker than a hummingbird’s beak—bellows in and out as if it is stoking the fires inside. Leaded lines break up the insect’s wings, but unlike the colored stained glass windows in the chapel behind me, these translucent panes beg *See through me*.

God only knows what the dragonfly does next—literally. It takes its front two legs and, elbows pointing toward the sky, it frames its face the way a dancer might at the end of a dance. Then it releases its legs and does it again, but this time, it also opens its mouth into a wide “O.” It does this one last time; then like a dog, it shakes and dashes off.

Augustine was right: “. . . admire the dragons, and say, ‘Great is the Lord who made these.’”

Sitting on this ledge alone, it occurs to me that the notion of one love to last a lifetime is a dragon. Love, that fantastic beast, has been featured in all sorts of stories. Stories that include adventure and romance. Stories where there might be brief moments of misunderstanding or sadness, but mostly the characters find themselves soaring on love’s wings—far above the drudgery of dishes and bills and diapers. What often gets left out, though, is that love can teach us the real meaning of ache. Love can teach us to open our mouths and shoot flames at those who get too close as well as teach us where the soft spots are, so we can send our sharpest arrow with the truest aim. All too often, love can come crashing out of the sky and die. For centuries, we have been told to sing the praises of one true love and monogamy, but is it possible? To love the one who was? And is? And shall be?

One of my husband’s friends got divorced recently, and he visited us a few days ago. As we sat in the Adirondack chairs out back and drank sangria, he told us how lucky we were to have a happy, stable marriage. Then he talked about all the different women he was seeing, and his eyes and face shone with excitement and life. I prayed my husband wouldn’t notice.

Or if he did, I hoped my husband would notice what else I saw there—a dark hunger. A hunger that feared it would never have enough.

My hand falls to the space beside me, the space my husband usually occupies. The flowers
before me open to the sky; my hope is on the dragon.