



Bridge Pond

Martha Elias Downey

NOTE TO READERS:

The following two poems *The Bishop Street Wrestler* and *The Waiting Game* were performed as part of an evening dedicated to spoken word, sponsored by the Theological Studies Department of Concordia University in the Fall of 2010. One of the themes poets were asked to write about was the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel as found in Genesis 32:22-31. The two pieces published here stand as a testament to the richness of the biblical text and the delightful creativity of the human spirit.

THE BISHOP STREET WRESTLERS

Dr. Matthew R. Anderson

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The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbock. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said: "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob". Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved. The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

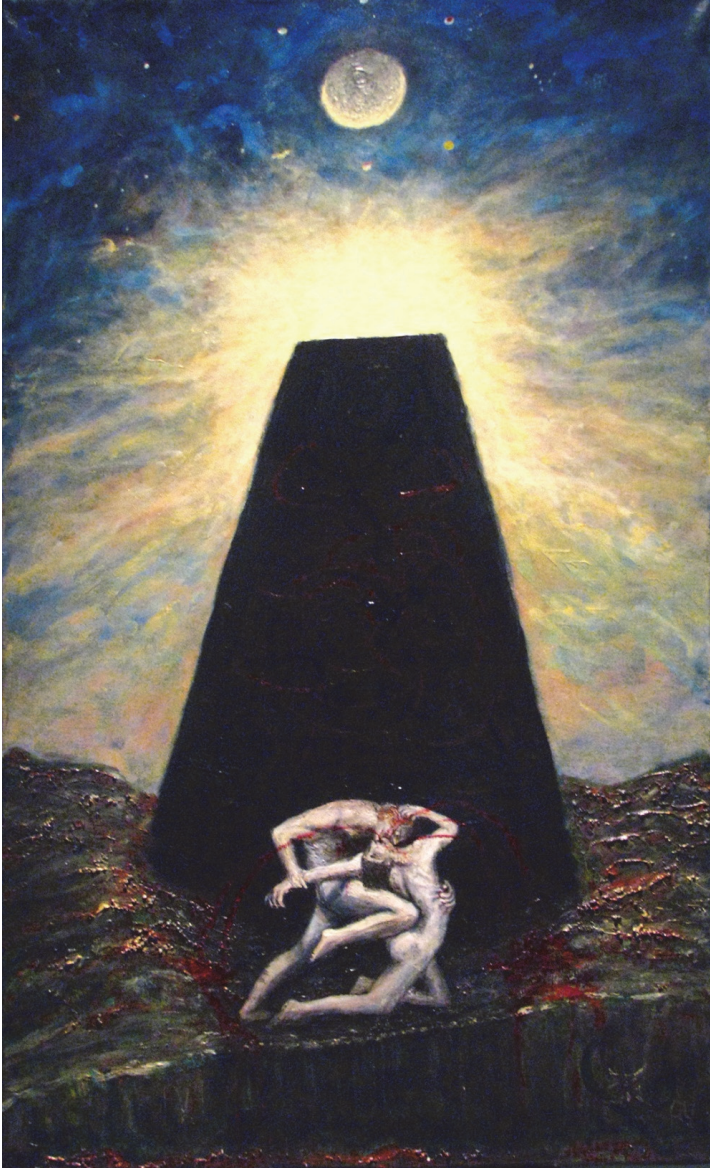
Genesis 32: 22-31

That night says the Holy Book, Jacob got up
 Troubled by his dreams?
 Who knows?
 He SHOULD have been, such a small, mean,
 Cocky bean of a man. The smallest brother, the crook, the cheat
 Who ran off to Uncle rather than take the heat
 Of the stolen birthright.
 NOT right.
 Birth WRONG. Under that sheepskin, lentils still on his breath
 Like the benediction stolen just before death's
 Final rattle.
 Jacob'd been wrong,
 But still favoured, featured, even blessed, the underdog,
 the twit.
 (A pattern it seems, in holy Writ.)
 On the way home, sleepless, Jacob, now older, woke up,
 Cradled that cup
 Of tea, thought hard,
 and decided.
 And so awoke his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children,
 (not bad, for fourteen year's work)
 and forded the Jabbock. Sent them under cover of darkness
 away
 across the stream,

fearful of the years and the black, bad dream
 and likewise it says, sent EVERYTHING he had.
 End result?
 No longer rich. No longer respected.
 Just Jacob alone.
 Unprotected.
 That's what it says.
 Just his backpack. Like the kid again. ALONE.
 But who was he kidding?
 This chisling, quizling, fibbing, grasping, gasping, clambering little man.
 realized
 Who was coming.
 Alone.
 Truer words were never spoken.
 In the end, at the ford of the stream, we are always, ever, alone,
 And a man wrestled with him, it says, until daybreak.
 So what?
 So what, you ask?
 What is this old story to us?
 What can WE take from this ...
 This solitary wrestling?
 Just this:
 What is this study – YOUR study, dear friends, OUR study - but a wrestling?
 A mental exercise that keeps us guessing
 No blessing, our books and lectures, our ideas, conjectures, but
 A half-turn, full-nelson, pin to the mat
 both shoulders down, this and that,
 Wounded at the hip,
 Out of joint.
 But as you may point
 out, still, somehow, we learn to:
 Publish our thoughts in a journal, see them in print,
 If we're lucky and good
 the letters behind our names pay the rent
 Theological studies makes one poor and bent,
 Not broken,
 But BENT.
 So a meeting like this gives chance to vent
 the divine. Perhaps meet the divine,
 A little Kaffee Klatch, cinq-a-sept set-up, sit down, set it down, kick it out
 Knock-down no-holds-barred with God, this fisted, twisted, fiery, Ancient of Days,
 who, as with Jacob, grabs us by the wrist,
 and
 then, a Bishop-street theophany,
 turns terrible, a holy, burning cacophony,
 A symbol, metaphor, but more....
 a man, it says, like anyone else. HU-man. A stranger....
 And isn't God in the flesh always the stranger?
 An incarnate unknown, a problem, a source of danger?
 There by the Jabbock
 Jacob lost his comfortable status quo
 Oh, he pretended, this wrestler,
 Fainted, dodged, parried, thrustured

But then like the fighter God is, was all over you
While Jacob, poor little runt, a weekend warrior busted
Slip, slid and parried
Surprisingly, for a small fellow, although worn and harried
held his own,
While the stranger, like a dog to a bone,
Bore down, as the Word ALWAYS does,
On our weak spots,
and shoved, and held, and pushed and turned, and bit and wounded,
Until Jacob, weak and worn, tired and sore
It being almost daybreak,
Held this stranger off just long enough,
For light to break.
God's breath on our necks not always sweet comfort -
But sweat, and fear,
Too powerful, too intimate, too God-blessed near,
Tell me your name, the stranger muttered in his ear.
Jacob, said the fighter.
You are no longer that name but another, said the stranger:
Neither your father's nor your brother's, neither your country's nor your mother's,
You are mine now, Israel.
Mine.
And shall always be.
And the point?
As he was, so are we.
As he was, so are we...
Fearful, alone, in the dark, often waiting,
Circling, this guessing, baiting, irate dating game with God,
This study, this elaboration citation of concentration,
On what was, what is, and what is to come,
For what we have witnessed, what we have seen,
Goes far beyond this Mesa 14,
Our books are the very gates of heaven, can we not understand?
And our thoughts the fighter's moves and parries,
Whilst the Unknown, the strange fighter who call us out awaits.
So....
Good dreams to you, good friend, I cannot wait to hear tell,
Of the way you fight your Penueel.
For we too will have our day, will wrestle,
Our hips out of joint,
But we will, though limping survive, though tired, alive,
Like Jacob, our every blessing stolen,
thrive
Our names changed, having more than we deserved
For we too, dear friends, Will have seen God,
and yet
and yet.
And YET....
our lives will be preserved.

Dr. Matthew R. Anderson is a lecturer in New Testament and Theology in Film at Concordia's Dept of Theological Studies. He has published a number of short stories and has had his work featured on CBC Radio One. He recently returned from Spain, where he was teaching a course on Pilgrimage for the Department with Sara Terreault, and where he learned to say "octopus" in Spanish.



Born Under a Bad Sign (Am I My Brother's Keeper?)

J.E. Raddatz