

Labyrinth

Mary Pat Lynch

I

Slow spiraling steps as water milkwarm laps
at ankles, curves sleekly around thighs, hips,
waist, arms, closes over my head.

Deeper now than ever I have been
in thick and starless darkness
I stand alone on a treeless plain

rock-strewn, trackless, barren, black.
The faintest glow of phosphorescent breath
limns a distant horizon

and the entrance
straight-walled, bare-floored, hewn
still and cold under palms laid flat against her flanks.

Inside, images glisten
rock-chiselled, crude-carved:
wolf, eagle, turtle, tiger, raven, fox, stag, serpent, more, all.

A voice echoes (inside my head or out I cannot tell), "*Choose.*"
I reach out to touch the stone
salamander, the Illuminator
who goes before me, red-gold in darkness,
to the first turning--left we turn,
sinister, *tuathal*, also *tuaisceant*, we have begun.

"*Why am I doing this?*" I think. "*If we need to get to the center, surely it would be quicker just to go there. It's not as if we can make a wrong turn. We just keep following this path.*"

The voice echoes (in or out I cannot tell), "*Answer me this:*
what is it that moves ever forward,
never back, never turning aside,
never resting, but never tired?"
"Oh great," I think, "riddles."

Images of sharks glide constantly, restless mouths open
salt liquid slides soft over serried rows

bathing flared gills with oxygen--they move or they die.
Then I know: time impels us ever forward, move or die.

Low chuckle: "*Yes. Father Time. Old Kronos himself.*
Welcome to the labyrinth."
So now I know.

II

We turn a corner. In the path,
a small table
On the table, a golden cup
In the cup, blood
The voice says, "Drink"
I draw back, gorge rising.

"I can't do this," I think. *"I may get it down, but it will come right back up again.*
This isn't right; it's not civilized; it's taboo. I can't do it."

The voice is dry. *"Shall I turn it into wine for you?*
Or would you like a priest? Have you forgotten
already? To travel this path, you must take me
as I am, process me yourself.
You can do it, if you will."

I drink.

Placing the empty cup carefully in the center,
I move to step but on my tongue,
a bitter herb, astringent, contracting, clearing

"You have drunk of the cup and tasted bitter herbs--continue."

I leave the rough-hewn passage for smooth
polished obsidian pierced at regular intervals
by niches also smooth, also polished,

lit from within, they contain each an image of the Goddess
Tiamat, Erishkagal, Danu, Inanna, Spider Woman,
Boann, Isis, Arianrhod, Hera, Cerridwen, more,

Durga, Macha, Hecate, Kali, Epona, Pele,
Demeter, Kybele, Maeve, Artemis, more,
Mary, Sophia, Kwan Yin, Sheba, Tara, Athena, Brigit,
Bloduewedd, Aphrodite, Snow White--yes, her too

To a woman of a certain age, even the face of the maiden
speaks of death. "*Here we come*," they say, kicking high
with smooth legs. "*Get off the stage--It's our turn.*"
The eyes of the men turn away from us, toward the maidens.
The Queen is dead, Long live the Queen.

I am at the next turning blocked by pillars of fire
as were placed at the Gates
to bar the way to Paradise
but such a bar is nothing to a salamander
and nothing at all at a turning of the year when fires are built
as paths to Paradise, if only you jump through.

I jump

and find myself surrounded by women dancing, many women, many
I join the line, hands on the hips of the woman in front of me
feeling hands on my hips from behind

we dance, laughing, brightly colored skirts slapping our ankles
twisting and turning, moving forward into darkness
we go together

the tempo increases
our feet move faster, then faster still
breathless, we run, still laughing
running into darkness with joy
we run together to the next turning
where we stop

because the way is blocked by children
smiling, cooing, well fed, round cheeked,
these children of our bodies and our hearts
reaching soft small hands up, pick us up
we stoop to them, scooping each as many as we can carry,
some one, some two, some many
I have three, one slung behind, one on each hip
we continue on our way slower now,
but laughing still, the children laughing
we move forward into darkness, together

we go a long way, a long time,
the children grow taller, heavier,
away, they say put us down, so we do
they move away from us in darkness
I'm not sure where; they seem happy

and then the women, too, begin to move away
I'm not sure where
I reach the last turning to find
I am alone.

III

Before me the abyss lit by galaxies of stars
If I take one step more, just one, I will fall endlessly forever
into the arms of infinite space
I want to go. I am poised on the edge,
toes over, breath of the Goddess on my face
but I don't go
I stay
silent, waiting to be recognized.

The voice asks, "*Where are your children?*"
"*They left me,*" I answer.
"*Where are your sisters, then?*"
"*They also left.*"
"*Of their own choice?*" "Yes," I reply.
"*That is as it should be,*" says the voice, satisfied.

Silent, I stand. Nothing more.
I breathe in, I breathe out.
The stars turn. Nothing more.

Only human after all, I ask, "*What comes next?*"
The voice laughs, "*Next?*" Big belly laughter.
"*I never know what happens next. You have to ask old Kronos about that.*"

I try again. "*Then how may I serve you?*"
"*Ah... service. I don't know about that either.*
Talk to the Goddesses. Pick one.
She'll tell you what she wants."

I am puzzled. "*Which one should I choose?*"
"*Whichever one you like.*" The broad face
turns away, not forever, for now only, but
before she leaves, a pause, a turning back:

*"Whichever one you choose, choose in joy.
Choose no hard road from shame, or guilt, or seeking for glory.
Only joyful service will bring you back
to the center."*