

SaraAlexander/3923ASacramentoStreet/SanFrancisco/CA/94118/415-606-5335

Lilacs in Spring: 5/11/22

I am often glad when an excuse to write comes my way, so when my dear friend Kirsten told me about this contest, I felt a 'yes' jump up inside my heart. A very big yes, despite the fact that the essay I submitted a few years ago - and loved dearly - was not well received. It described a golden summer evening, gathering blackberries and returning home hoping to bake a juicy cobbler. In the end this bucolic fantasy morphed into a "dark story", as too often happens: romantic endeavors devolved into terrible ordeals. I don't recall everything that went wrong that evening but I do remember when the butter exploded in the microwave and greased the entire kitchen floor. Just the same I thought I had crafted a hilarious essay out of that romantic summer evening gone very wrong.

But despite my previous lack of recognition, I took a closer look at the prompt for this year's essay: *"Renewal, Rebirth, and the Inspirations of Life and Nature in Spring. New Growth as we emerge from the past two years..."*

*Oh no!* I am ambivalent about this emerging: I miss all that free time for baking. And writing. And cleaning out cupboards. For washing the dishes mindfully, like a monk. I was rarely lonely during Covid. Just about everyone was stuck at home, and available for good conversations. There was no pressure to go out and create something wonderful. Sheltering in Place was like a meditation retreat *and* an artist's residency. The return to social living has been wonderful in many ways, but...not *better for me*.

Unable to find any inspiration, I called Kirsten for help. When she read the prompt, *she* too yelped *"Oh No"!!!* knowing very well that renewal and rebirth were somewhat anathema to me ... and soon we were laughing hysterically. *Write about Rebirth?* I really did have a problem on my hands. I was the "stepsister's foot" trying to fit into Cinderella's glass slipper. If I have any aspiration as a writer, or as therapist and as a human, it is to be a soothing proponent of 'endarkenment' to a world striving for enlightenment. I want to promote an appreciation for the truth

about living, and for failure, too: “Life is hard. It’s okay to get it wrong. Its okay to fail. Failure is inevitable, and can be useful, or even sometimes tender, and funny.”

I decided to print out the prompt on a piece of paper, and put it under my pillow tonight, hoping it would birth some inspiration. Kirsten encouraged me, reminding us that she and I had both placed our baby teeth under pillows decades ago with good results: finding money and gifts in their place the next morning.

This plan worked quickly! Before I had even finished positioning the folded paper under my pillow, I had a “Spring Rebirth” memory.

When I was a substitute art teacher, the first year out of college, I wheeled carts of poster paints and oil crayons all around an Inner-City School, and I had absolutely no training for that job. I had a degree in Fine Arts, that’s all. So I invented the “teaching of art” as I went along. And one spring day I took armfuls of Lilacs to school, stuck them in jars and invited my young students to paint.

The amazing thing was the Kindergarteners. No one had yet ruined their creative imaginations, (Thank Gd) by telling them how a flower should be drawn. That supposed art education – or, as I observed that year, that imminent destruction of originality, - wasn’t scheduled until first grade.

So when class was over I had in front of me dozens of paintings of lilacs, each more amazing than the next. I wish I could show you a photo, but that was 50 years ago and no one carried smart phones. I could not recreate the exact images today, but I do remember my heart bursting with joy, and my mind rattled (in a good way) with surprise: Magentas, purples, violets, every shade of green. Almost every shape, too... imaginable and unimaginable; each flower more beautiful and incandescent and unexpected than the next. For a few moments that classroom was transformed into a secret garden in spring; dazzling with new flowers; fragrant with the perfume of lilacs, and vibrating with the chirping of excited young children.