"Belief, Myth, Fidelity, and Original Texts"
By Linda Stern

Featuring two poems:
"Why We Go by Twos"
"At the Jetty"

Whether Greek myths and Bible stories occupy the same category as myths is an open question — mainly because of the element of belief. No one today believes that the Greek myths are true or that Greek gods exist. But many people of faith do believe in the literal truth of the Bible. Where the two types of stories meet is in their ability to convey *non-literal* truth. That is, do these stories have something to tell us, whether or not we believe they actually happened?

In composing "Why We Go by Twos" (next page), I started with the Bible story, a beloved tale told and retold to generations of children. You can even find Noah's Ark toys for babies, such is the love for this story.

Why We Go by Twos

Why two animals? you ask. *Why only two?*
The easy answer is "Like mom and dad,"
but your puzzled eyes say that won't do.

That's the least, I say, *the least that we*
can be and still have human things—
and two can someday make a family.

Outside your window day turns into night.
The lighted bodies in the blackening air
wheel through on their inevitable flight.

The floodgates, the fountains of the deep,
kept back by an irrational hand,
are quiet while you drop off into sleep.

But standing by your bed, I turn to stare,
as shadows fill the corners of your room,
and think with what unutterable despair

they watched the ship recede atop the waves,
clutching their infants in the rising flood,
knowing they were not chosen to be saved.

Reprinted from Linda Stern, *Why We Go by Twos* (Barefoot Muse Press, 2015)

These stories have traditional interpretations, but my own personal faith drives me to look at biblical material in light of what it can tell me today. What is the wisdom we can get now from this ancient text? What is the contemporary value in these old stories? There is a reason these texts have endured.

So I started with the Noah story. It's a powerful story and, in a profound sense, a story about the perpetuation of our communal life. I asked myself what we are meant to learn from this destruction of civilization. I imagined a parent telling the

Noah story to a child and then wondering privately about what it really means to wreak this kind of havoc. We're used to seeing both (or indeed all) sides of contemporary conflicts. Are there two sides to the Noah story? to any biblical story? For example, what about those left behind?

The thesis of the poem is embedded in its first line: "*Why two animals? … Why only two?"* Once I had that line, I was able to think through the opening question in the rest of the poem.

I've written a number of poems on biblical material, and the question of how much readers — even very educated readers — will get the source material is always a concern. Will readers understand the allusions without extensive notes? More importantly, will the material speak to them? In this case, I was fortunate because the Noah story is extremely well known. Nevertheless, I re-read the story to make sure I was being accurate.

As it turns out, in the Hebrew Bible, a text remarkable for its concision, the story is told in two versions in Genesis, and different kinds of meaning come out of the two tellings. I didn't need to go into that situation, but I wanted to use some of the original language. I thought that, even in translation, the biblical language would resonate for readers and even impart a sense of gravity to my poem.

The Jewish Publication Society translation of Genesis 7.11 is "All the fountains of the great deep burst apart, / And the floodgates of the sky broke open." The King

James version has "[A]ll the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened." I was able to use some of that very powerful language in verse 4:

> The floodgates, the fountains of the deep,
> kept back by an irrational hand,
> are quiet while you drop off into sleep.

I see the poem as living in a tradition of biblical commentary and interpretation — and that includes questioning the plain meaning of the story. So I knew where I wanted to end up in the poem. I wanted to express the "other side" of the story. The poem concludes with a shift in point of view, which serves as a *volta*. The speaker imagines, finally, being among those who are not saved.

So for this poem, the biblical source is not an ornament or an allusion. It's really the essence of the poem.

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My experience in writing "At the Jetty" is quite different. In this case, I started out with lines 10 and 11, which came to me from — who knows where? Jung's collective unconscious?

> **At the Jetty**
>
> You climbed the jetty leading to the sea,
> and I hung back to let you try your skill
> at navigating life apart from me
> though you were not so far I could not still
>
> reach for you if you slipped and fell. I know
> that wasn't fair, my child upon the shore.

You've told me many times to let you go.
To say good-bye – that's what I raised you for.

You may be right. How can we tell what's true?
Antinous whom Caesar made a god
was not more loved or beautiful than you.
Yet he, unmoored, was lost. How, much more awed

and helpless than a king, shall I not fear
a sudden fate will bear you far from here?

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I had read Marguerite Yourcenar's marvelous novel *Memoirs of Hadrian,* in which the young Antinous plays a prominent role. The story stuck with me. The lines that came to me are now in the pivotal third stanza of the sonnet:

> Antinous whom Caesar made a god
> was not more loved or beautiful than you.

About the historical Antinous, this is part of the explanatory note that I appended to the poem when it was published in *The Classical Outlook:*

> Antinous, born about 110 CE, was the young male lover of the Roman emperor Hadrian. He had been a companion of Hadrian's for several years when, about the age of twenty, he drowned in the Nile River. . . . Hadrian, overwhelmed by grief, declared Antinous a deity and set about establishing a cult and building shrines, as well as an entire city, Antinoöpolis, in his honor. Antinous was held to be the epitome of male beauty, and numerous statues of his likeness survive to this day.

I held onto those lines for a long time. I would come back to them again and again to see whether I could use them anywhere. I just loved the lines themselves.

Separately, I had been working for a time on a free verse poem inspired by watching some boys jump off the high part of a waterfall into a pool of water below. Of course this activity was officially forbidden and quite dangerous. The boys were, in

a sense, jumping into the unknown. As that poem evolved, it focused on the struggle we have at the end of life — that jump into the unknown.

The image of the boys jumping continued to stay with me, though. And I started to think of jumping at the beginning of life, rather than at the end. Again, the idea of parenthood came into play — jumping is also letting go.

At that point I went back to the Antinous lines and started to think about how they might fit into my theme of letting go. I felt the language of such a poem needed to be elevated, to match those lines, and that the sonnet, a classical form, would be the right vehicle for this quasi-story. It was hard to imagine those lines in a free verse poem.

Introducing Antinous near the end of the poem does, I think, add a slight frisson of interest. It opens the poem up a bit to wider meanings of love and death. Unlike the allusions to the Noah story in "Why We Go by Twos," though, the allusion to Antinous can be a bit arcane. Also, my poem uses the idea of Antinous a bit selectively.

The historical Hadrian and Antinous are, together, one of the most iconic homosexual couples in the ancient world. However, my sonnet focuses on more general themes of human love and loss — especially on the love and loss, as well as the fear of loss, involved in the parental task of letting go. The speaker in my poem uses Antinous — a legendary archetype of a greatly loved and exceptionally beautiful

young person — to assert, by comparison, that no one is more cherished and more beautiful than one's own beloved.

Because the allusion to Antinous comes at an important point in the poem, it's possible that readers unfamiliar with the Antinous story, even given the "Caesar" clue, will be perplexed by or even turned off to the poem. This is the risk that the poem takes. If you unfamiliar with how youth, beauty, love, and death intertwine in the Antinous-Hadrian story, you will surely not experience an important element in the poem in a visceral way, even if you eventually get it intellectually.

This balancing act happens in many, many poems because poetry, like all art, is always in conversation with its forebears and its peers, as well as, of course, with all of history and civilization. Readers can have just as much trouble with an allusion to Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," or a reference to a movie about the 2009 true story of a plane landing on the Hudson River, as with an allusion to Catullus. I'm certainly not alone in looking up unfamiliar words and names in poems that I am reading. There's a kind of democratization of poetry going on here. We don't necessarily have to be able to answer the question "Who dragged whom around the walls of what?" when we can easily search the answer. I guess the question is, How much do we *enjoy* the poem if we've had to google the allusions in order to "get" it? The jury is still out on this issue.

