

## Learning to Say Yes

by Marianne Peel

To Laura

“...Speak to me. Take my hand. I will tell you all.  
I will conceal nothing...Fist my mind in your hand.  
What are you now?...”

-from *Effort at Speech Between Two People*  
by Muriel Rukeyser

Let us together you and I open our hands  
to what we love. Meet me in your driveway. I will bring  
gooseberry jam and you will offer sweet piesporter wine.  
I will pack a picnic hamper of goat cheese  
latticed with cranberries and orange rind. There will be  
Japanese potato salad with slivers of Persian cucumbers.  
There will be stew of red lentils swimming in coconut milk.

We will sit by the river listening to water move over rocks. I  
will bring a red feather boa draped around my neck and shoulders.  
I offer you a robin's egg blue scarf wrapped in lemon pastel tissue paper.

And we will toast the holy ghosts of those we have loved. Tell stories  
of how our mothers came to us from the other side. Tell stories of  
those whispering so soft we must press ears to lips. Tell stories  
of those who remain silent.

We will read poems by the river until dusk. Rumi. Whitman.  
Dickinson. Laux. Shihab Nye. We have forgotten how to pray.  
I used to know the incantation for the souls in purgatory.  
In the name of the bird and the butterfly and the bee. Amen.

We will light sandalwood candles. Send luminaries  
down the river. We will wear earrings that dangle onto our shoulders,  
signally our movements ever so slight ever so bold to fish and fowl.  
We will announce our presence in this world with wine on our breathing  
and pussy willow blossoms in our hands. There will be orange tiger lilies  
woven in our hair. And we will sound the singing bowl sitting down  
by the river. Vibrations around our candle fire. Holy communion  
of sourdough loaf. I will bring clover honey from the market in Tupelo.  
Bricks of butter infused with sea salt and olive oil. Pralines  
from that roadside stand in Buford, Georgia.

We will dress for dinner. Swishy skirts and bangles and hats  
with translucent baubles flourishing the brim. I will spread  
Casablanca Plum gloss on my lips. You arrive with Flashmob Fuschia

lipstick. We have painted our nails neon. We glow in the evening.  
We refuse shoes reject sandals, exchanging wool socks  
for a tender bed of clover.

Your daughter is the secret you keep at your center. You refuse  
to allow the priest to soot her forehead. Saying no to smudging her  
with ash. Shielding her from the dust to dust.

After such loss how do we perform the simple tasks? Wash dishes.  
Scour pots. I want to break every plate on the edge of the sink.  
I fold laundry. Towels tucked into perfect rectangles. Solace  
in seams matched up end on end. Peace in color coordinated stacks.  
A tower of towels. I once knew a woman who reveled in ironing.  
She labored to the voice of Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man  
in America. All those creases and collars hammered down  
by the steam. Housedresses all in a row from light to dark. A carefully  
constructed closet of clothes suspended on wire hangers.

Once I emptied my whole refrigerator. Crammed everything down the garbage  
disposal with a splintered wooden spoon. Electric grind. Devouring week-old  
slabs of salmon loaf. Yams sprouting vines. The sad eyes of potatoes.  
Cilantro shriveled on the stem. Bratwurst gone pale grey. One afternoon  
I drizzled expired cream into porcelain cups filled with lukewarm tea.  
Watched the cream curdle into sour hieroglyphics. Sketched these abstracts  
into a watercolor binder. I study and decipher each one when sleep is stubborn.

But today we will let honey drizzle out of the corners of our painted mouths.  
We will dab almond extract behind our ears, in the soft bends of our knees.  
I have stitched all these scarves together. A picnic blanket of scarves. And  
when our poetry picnic is consumed, I will wrap you in this tapestry of  
scarves. I place the amber pashmina from the Istanbul market around your face.  
Hijab in this western hemisphere. Permission to enter any sacred space.

I have salve for your blistered palms, here in my breast pocket.  
In this meadow of ferns and wildflowers, we are palm to palm.

Tell me the story of your hands.  
Of each ring on your fingers.  
Tell me of holding your hand out  
to what you love.