**Backpacker**

I could still hear the voice jabbing in my ear, could still feel the sting of it even now:

"Write me something that makes sense of all this! Write that love of yours, so I can really feel it, even with the world the way it is!"

So I staggered off to a place too far for me to walk...

a place to which no trains are running anymore...

a place that now exists only in the fevered storm clouds of my imagination -

and I still didn't know what to say.

Wherever you stand, the world flows with atrocities.

Wherever you stand, smiles are a hair-trigger away from dying.

Wherever you stand, this is a world that can turn on you without warning.

A world that can make you nothing.

A world that can strip all value from your name and put your family in an internment camp,

sanction your benefits,

bomb your cities,

freeze your heart,

machete your children,

throw you in a gas chamber

or simply march your entire neighbourhood into the woods...

for no other reason than your face doesn't fit.

A world that can choose to exterminate your identity simply because the tide is turning that way.

How can I build redemption from such a world?

I can't.

Even at my most loving, I can turn hateful at the slightest whim, even with those I love most...

simply because this is what it means to be human.

Even our deepest love is often saturated with mess and hate and rage...

and sometimes,

grasping on to that rage feels like the only thing that keeps us from tumbling into a seemingly bottomless pit of indifference.

Even the most beautiful things we do can so easily appear cruel and heartless to those outside our circle of approval.

The more honestly we look at ourselves, the harder it is to miss the billions of ways in which we continue to betray those qualities we claim to love.

I cannot reach into my heart and say:

"Here, you see? This is the love that makes it okay."

To do that, I would have to distil the essence of a love that is deeper, more profound and more accommodating than anything this world could possibly allow.

I would have to shine a love that withers in its own light...

a love that cries

freely

in places where it almost feels inhuman to cry -

places so torn and twisted that even tears are beyond us.

And what then would such love say to us, in the midst of all this filth?

How would such love respond to such horror?

Perhaps simply by holding all the terrors of a filthy world in shattered hands -

hands that, miraculously, could still nurse my broken fingers in a way that nothing else can.

I can't see my way through all the pain and injustice and cruelty and misery.  I can barely see my way through my own.

"But maybe I can,"

says the backpacker...

"Maybe I can see...

empty and vulnerable though I am right now...

empty and vulnerable and broken with tears...

empty and vulnerable, just like you,

seduced

by every ragged beat of your heart,

tumbling my way down from the stars to my chosen home in those precious galaxies behind your eyes...

tumbling down from the stars to rekindle your imagination…

tumbling down cosmic river valleys from the massive scary mountains of the human heart with my little backpack full of broken worlds."

What are you? I wonder,

looking into the backpacker's eyes.

I see stars and galaxies turning there, wheels of cloud lit by candles too numerous to name,

and I see eyes that know them all,

walking away from their majesty...

taking off that cloak of clouds, that jacket of ocean and forest...

stripping the mountains and the heart that weeps there -

leaving only the things that look wrong,

the things that look empty,

the things that look lost.

"You can't write me," say those eyes;

my brother, my sister and my darkness all at once.

So instead,

I find myself hugging something

that would disappear,

the moment I try to package it.

I find myself hugging something that crumbles

as the streams crash down from the cliffs above.

I find myself caught up by a tide

on whose shores I seem to have stood helpless all my life.

I find myself held and washed away,

able to cry in places that blow open the borders of my eyes.

This is not an answer.

This is not a solution whittled out of problems.

This is simply being held

and human,

as the world comes crashing down from the stars.

Now, there's a hope,

I find myself saying,

as the straps break,

and all those broken worlds fall like morning rain around the backpacker's feet.

--- John