

Monologue – Christmas Eve, 2010

It's not that bad, you know – being a shepherd. I kind of like it.

It wasn't always that way, though....not at all. Many things have changed in my life, lots of dust has blown in the wind to get me to this place where I can say to you – I love my life. I love LIFE. And I love the Lord of Life; the one who fashioned us from clay with a calloused hand made soft by love.

Yes, lots of things change. But when you're a shepherd, there's one thing that stays constant.

I know I know you're thinking – *sheep???*

Ok, I'll grant you that. TWO things are constant, then. Sheep, and dust.

Looking after sheep – it's a dirty job, and our land is dry most of the year. Dust is – it's everywhere. It chafes under the straps of your sandals, it makes your lunch all gritty...it gets into your eyes and ears and and in your...well you get the idea....until you think you're *made* of the stuff. I used to curse it. Now – now it's different.

I'm glad to be able to tell you about it, because I can see that you're going to listen. There's something about your eyes tonight....a tenderness....a hint of earthiness....and maybe a touch of longing? Some sadness? Is that what I see? Anyway, whatever it is that I see in your eyes, I know in my heart that you'll hear me well.

The field where we were that night was just on the edge of town, and all these years later, it has barely changed. I can still go right to the spot where grandpa sat that last spring when he couldn't walk much anymore. He'd sit there by the tree, smoke his pipe, and tell us stories. My brother Daniel and I - we were learning to be shepherds that spring...grandpa said we were old enough and it was time we helped out, and so we spent our time out in the field with him. I loved it then, not the job itself, but being with grandpa. He told us stories. That's the part I loved best. Well, that, and how he taught me to spit! He told us stories of how The Holy One fashioned the first people from the dust of the earth, about Moses and Miriam leading the people out of slavery and how a cloud led them in the wilderness. I always pictured it as a cloud of dust – swirling and shimmering and unearthly... like all the larger than life images in a young boy's head. He told us about Jeremiah and the potter, and Elijah and....

It was so much fun, being out there. Dust and all.

One day, though, he was quieter than usual; and he was having trouble breathing. He leaned up against that tree... and he told me he loved me... and that I was the light of his life. Something in me went hot, and then cold. I was just a kid...he had never said anything like that before. He wasn't that kind of man, you know? He said he loved me, and then he reached out, touched my head in a kind of rough blessing. Then with one arm, skinny and the colour of roasted figs, (and about as wrinkled!) he drew me to him so that I was on my knees in the dust, and held me against his bony chest. I felt sick...and afraid. I could hear him breathing - a wet rough sound. He said he loved me. And then - then he told me that he

would die. *And when I do*, he said – *my body will become dust. And Adam...listen to me. I don't want you to be afraid.*

I cried, there with my head against his beating heart. – I couldn't think of one thing to say that didn't sounduseless...and besides, I don't think my throat would have let any sound out. Then he started to cough, and he couldn't speak either...he just waved me away, pointing toward the ewe who had been so close to lambing. I swallowed my tears and went. When I found her she had already given birth Her first lamb – and she had done it all alone.By the time I got to her, the lamb was there, all wet and vulnerable, squirming with new life and trying to stand up. The ewe was licking for all she was worth, with the little sounds only mothers know how to speak and only babies, so fresh fromwhere they're from....know how to hear.

The next winter, grandpa was gone.

I thought of what he had said. – and of his skinny old body, wrapped in the grave clothes by my mother and sisters, and how it would turn to dust. How in those last months he had become ...drier, his body and mind too more concentrated. As grapes to raisins, as plums to prunes, so was my grandfather: who he was to who he had become. On his way to dust even then, as the juices of life slowly left him. We'd go later, when nature had taken its course, and collect his bones for the ossuary, and the rest of him would be...Grandpa would be dust.

That day as we walked away from the cave, a wind was blowing the dust around in strange patterns, and we had to hunker down for a few minutes, until the worst had passed. Maybe, I thought, as I pulled my robe over my mouth and nose, maybe God has come to take Grandpa to heaven in a whirlwind, just like Elijah! But no, *that was just silly*. Elijah wasn't here, and God was....far away, and Grandpa's body was cold and wrapped in cloth and would soon be dust. The wind was blowing as it always did – those strange patterns I saw were simply because I was looking at it through tears. The Almighty doesn't stoop to earth for mere shepherds....

But the little whirlwind DID take something to heaven the day grandpa died. The wind came – and it raised the dust from the earth into swirling patterns - and it also raised a few questions, the kind not easily answered. My grandpa was gone, and I was hurting, and that monstrous cloud of mystery blocked the sun and blurred our vision - and when it settled, the mystery of it settled on me. No, the Almighty does *not* stoop to earth for mere shepherds....that's silly. But still....I could never think of dust the same way again. There was always something....not frightening exactly, not that. Mysterious. Almost enchanted. I had the feeling I was looking into a pot of water, just at that magic time when it's about to break into a rolling boil....that in the dust there were forces just outside my knowing, blowing in the wind.

My brother? Not so much.

Daniel was so angry after grandpa died. *What's the point*, he'd say – *we're just space dust. All of us. Like those sheep. We're born and if we're lucky we escape the wolf and we don't end up on someone's roasting spit – and then we die and turn to dust. What's the point? Space dust that's what we are. Those*

stories grandpa told us from the scriptures? Dry old stories, made up by people too afraid to face the truth. And the truth is, Adam, truth is there IS no truth. So give up and pass me that wine flask eh? And he slapped me on the shoulder - too hard.

Our cousin Jacob – had another take. Always a bit – different, was Jacob. A dreamer, Mama said. A lollygagger, was Papa’s version. Jacob came to the field one night *“I had a dream”* he said. *“I had a dream that the world was created by flying dust. Can you imagine? Somewhere, something happened – the Almighty set off an explosion I think, and it sent dust flying in all directions and it was hot and it all melted together and made...this.”* His arm traced a huge circle.

“Don’t be crazy Jacob – you ate too much lentil stew before bed” That was my brother; that was Daniel. . But I liked the idea. *“If that were true”* I said, *“then this dust”* (I brushed one layer off his shoulder) *“this dust might be from the beginning of time. From worlds we don’t even know about...it might have the handprints of the creator on it...”*I looked at my hand, covered with the dust from his robe, and was overcome with the idea. It was breathtaking to think of things like that even if they were silly.

Daniel punched my shoulder again. It hurt. I think he meant it to. *“Creator eh? If there IS a creator, you can be sure he’s not interested in you or your dreams and certainly not in dirt. Come on – let’s go.”*

And off we went, as they say, in a cloud of dust.

The next day we were outside Bethlehem – staying well away from that place. It was a wild town; people from everywhere travelling for the census. The roads were one big cloud of dust as travellers’ feet kicked and scuffed their way into the city.

I noticed one couple especially. Only because she was so young, and so obviously ready to give birth. I don’t know a lot about women but I know sheep, and that “ready to give birth” waddle is pretty much the same across species. Poor kid, I thought to myself – she’d better hurry and find a place or that baby will be born in the dust of the road. Unbidden, my brother’s harsh voice was in my head - *“Another baby soon”...the voice said... “ another squawling bit of gristle and blood and bone that will soon enough be dust again”*

I passed them with only that thought but then.... it was the strangest thing – I stumbled. Fell sideways into the cleft of a rock, twisting my ankle in the process. As I did, I looked back at the young woman, who was looking back at me too. Our eyes met, just the briefest of moments....and then came a sudden gust of hot, dry wind from nowhere – as unbidden as had been the ungracious thoughts just seconds before. It didn’t disturb the dust the way an ordinary wind should, but rather, churned it up into mysterious shapes. She saw them too, I know she did – it was as though in looking back I had seen – glory. The moment passed. I confess I cursed with the pain of my ankle, and when I looked again I could only see the back of her, the bottom hem of her garment as she laboured on through the crowd. I limped on toward my own destination.

So...you're wanting to know about that night, I can tell. Get on with it Adam, you're thinking – we don't have eternity! That's ok – everyone says that. I do tend to go on and on....but no story is only about one moment

But then again

Maybe they all are

So...yes. That night.

I wish I could tell you it was a magical night but truly – it began as a boring and cold ordinary-as-dust night. Jacob had broken a piece of pottery by accident and he pulverized it the best he could - then went off to bury it so that the jagged edges wouldn't cut the animals' feet.

He was gone a long time. Jacob went to find him after a bit – to see if he was alright.

I think I fell asleep. I woke up to a sound....and a sight –for which I have no words to explain.

The sky was as light as midday....and the clouds formed shapes....but no, they were NOT clouds...all I know is that from the sky came voices, singing...and then one voice – you know what it said - And then it was gone. The sky was dark, and I lay there, afraid to move. Jacob came to find me, Daniel right behind him. They both looked....well...I knew they had heard, had seen it too. We looked at each other, turned and started toward town, each of us in our own world.

To be honest I don't remember the walk to town, or how we knew where to go – all I remember is that suddenly we were at the door of an old animal shed. And suddenly – the spell was broken and I was afraid – Jacob too. We looked at one another as if to say *"this is too strange let's get out of here and never speak of it again"* But It was Daniel, bless his cynical heart, who said *"we have to go in"* and he knocked on what passed for a door. The man who opened it was....he was radiant. You never hear that about men, but he was. He didn't speak at all, but welcomed us in as though he had known all along we would arrive and took us to the back of the place, where the animals were.

And there *she* was....crouched in the shadows, suckling a child so newly born that the cord was not cut and he was still covered in the stuff of birth. The straw beneath her was red with blood. Our eyes met as they had on the road just hours before. She smiled, and I did too. They could use an experienced hand, that little family, to get cleaned up and warm. Now THAT was something I knew how to do

I did it.

I helped them - not exactly the way I would for a sheep but not so different either. We're made of the same stuff in the end, aren't we? So there they were, a woman nursing a child, and singing a lullaby and murmuring a magnificat that we will never know; that only the child had ears to hear.

The wonder of it drew me to my knees in the dust.

I'm sure there were sounds: the animals, the movement of our feet in the dusty straw...the song the mother sang and the baby's brief cry of protest as she changed sides...

But what I recall is the silence. It was...complete. And it spoke more eloquently than even an angel chorus could. It was as though we were in a bubble; isolated, insulated, suspended in the womb of the world. And that beating I felt in my chest, drawing me to my knees in the dust, that beating came from a place unknown until this moment. Outside, the heartbeat of the world was filling the skies with alleluias

But inside

Inside the moment was still,

With nothing more required than our own imperfect presence.

And in the silence I swear I caught a whiff of my grandpa's smelly pipe

There is a mystery here.

No star of heavenly anthem can explain

They merely point and say Emmanuel.

Years later, that child would walk the roads of our land, and make holy the dust of our lives.

He'll write in that dust, messages of hope and peace.

He'll spit in it to make mud that would soothe and heal eyes grown dim

He'll stoop to wash it from the feet of his followers

And bleeding and exhausted, stumble in it carrying a Roman cross

But just now? Just now he lies there, just hours old

In his infant hands he takes the dust of our lives: our losses, those whose lives are now ashes in the wind – those worlds beyond our knowing, brought into being by that wild dust explosion of which my cousin Jacob dreamed....he takes the dusty hope we've stored away in the corners of our souls for fear it would not be true...

He takes the dust of our very bodies....

All of it. And with those little hands –the soft, wrinkled hands of a newborn...or of one old as the ancient of days....

With those hands fashions it into something beautiful

And hands it back to us, whole, and holy.