

THINGS
THAT
JOIN
THE SEA
AND
THE SKY

FIELD NOTES ON LIVING

MARK NEPO



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

CONTENTS

The What and the How.....	xv
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STOPPING THE NOISE

Quieting the Thieves.....	2
Bring Me Close.....	3
Short Wisdom on a Long Planet.....	4
Speechless.....	5
Our Hands.....	6
Over and Over.....	7
This Is How	8

UNRAVELING OUR FEAR

Offering.....	10
Once Falling In.....	11
On Retreat.....	12
If I Could.....	13
The Only Task.....	14
We Try, We Try	15
Doorways	16
During the Storm.....	17

BEYOND WHAT GOES WRONG

Breaking the Clearness.....	20
Stone of Light.....	22
Circling the Sun.....	23
Everywhere I Turn.....	24
To Rise from Nowhere.....	25
Beyond the Telling	26
Eternal Two-Step.....	28
Stung Open for a Moment	29
Rhythm Beneath the Rhythms	30

THE GIFT OF DEEPENING

Take Me Down	33
Before We Die	34
Depth Seeks Us	35
The Other Name for Heaven.....	37
Being in Time	38
The Radiant Flow	39
A Delicate Crossing.....	41
The History of My Heart	42
From the Wooden Bridge	43

THE PRACTICE OF RELATIONSHIP

The Labyrinth to Shared Happiness.....	46
The Privilege of Awe	47
In Order to Be, Hold	49
The Urge to Fly	50
Things Get Complicated	51
The Wisdom of Strangers	52
Love Is a Guess.....	53
Poplars by the River.....	54
Matepn.....	55

WHAT HOLDS US UP

Love Is as Love Does.....	59
Daybreak	61
263 Prinsengracht.....	62
Quivering Angels	64
In Case	65
Toward What Is	66
Rising Out of Hardship.....	67
A Pebble in the Stream.....	68
Moment of Lift	70

NAVIGATING TROUBLE

How to Empty.....	72
Guns in the Stream	73
The One Who Goes Nowhere.....	75
The Life of Questions	76
Liberated by the River	79
Small Messengers	80
Inside the Darkness	81
Navigating Trouble.....	82

RIGHT-SIZING OUR PAIN

Drinking from Center	85
Cézanne in Snow	86
Staring into the River.....	87
Beyond Myself.....	89
In a Universe That Breathes.....	90
Etched.....	91
Over Many Months	92
Near the Center	94

SHEDDING OUR MASKS

What the World Asks	96
Perks	97
An Early Mirror	98
The Details Change.....	99
Getting Wind of It.....	100
Cô tô.....	102
In the Winter Cabin.....	103
Giving Way	104

THE REACH OF KINDNESS

The Swift One.....	106
Small Light and Timeless Light.....	107
Of Course You Can Come.....	108
Putting Down Our Broom.....	109

Natural.....	110
In the Sea of Dream.....	111
And So It Goes.....	112
The Symmetry of Kindness.....	113

THE RADIANCE IN ALL THINGS

Flow of Light.....	117
Grace Notes	118
Blood of the Sun	120
We're Intimate Now.....	121
The Thing Falling.....	122
The Oldest Song in the World.....	123
At Times, They Dance	124
Eye of the Crow	125

BURNING OFF WHAT'S UNNECESSARY

On the Edge of God's Shimmer	129
Becoming Conscious.....	130
This Tenderness.....	131
In Our Rawness	132
Catching Fire	133
The Mansions We Dream Of.....	134
The Dilation of What Seems Ordinary.....	135
Before the Waterfall.....	136
Saturn's Return.....	137

FINDING THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

Talkin' It Over at Ouzos.....	140
Your Presence.....	141
Unfiltered.....	142
Tilted Toward the Sky	143
How Many Waves	144
The Infinite Canvas	145
Inside Practice.....	146
The Golden Thread.....	147

ALWAYS BUILDING AND MENDING

Trying to Map the River..... 151

Pilot Light..... 152

Around the World..... 153

Accessing Resilience 154

After the War155

A Star after Rain 156

Next of Kin..... 157

Always Building and Mending..... 158

THE STRENGTH OF OUR ATTENTION

With Things That Break..... 163

Swayed in All Directions 164

Between Troubles.....165

The Way We Practice..... 166

Vellum..... 167

The Creative Storm 169

As the Snow Falls 170

In Full Praise 171

The Unheard Symphony..... 172

LETTING EVERYTHING IN AND THROUGH

Instructions to My Smaller Self 174

Time Is a Rose.....175

The Conflict from Assignments..... 176

The Great Teacher..... 178

The One Cry 179

However It Might Appear 180

To Be Received 181

Every Chance We Get.....185

Receiver-of-the-Waterfall 186

Landing Face Up 187

HOW WE MAKE OUR WAY

Inside Every Burden..... 190
Calling It In 191
Inheriting Now..... 192
Let Them Go Where They Will..... 193
The Deepest Place on Earth..... 194
Life after the Ocean..... 195
How We Make Our Way..... 196
For Instance 197
Becoming a Small Gesture..... 198
In Love with the World 199

THREADING INNER AND OUTER:

THE PRACTICE OF JOURNALING

In Return to Promise (An Essay on Journaling)..... 203
Questions to Work With 210

Gratitudes 225
Notes..... 227
Permissions 233
About the Author 235

STOPPING THE NOISE

*When there is silence, one finds the anchor
of the Universe within oneself.*

LAO TZU



ften we're cast about by the noise of the world and the noise in our heads. Often we're mesmerized by the stunning cacophony that masks itself as excitement.

And though there's much to be gained for being in the world, we can't make sense of it till we stop the noise, till we go below the noise, till we go below the habit of our own thoughts. But it's impossible to be still and quiet all the time. As a whale or dolphin must break surface, only to dive back down, only to break surface again, each of us must break surface into the noise of the world, only to rest our way back into the depth of stillness, where we can know ourselves and life more deeply, until we have to break surface again. No one is ever done with this crossover between noise and stillness. Not even those committed to a contemplative life. Not even those who are blind or mute. For the noise of the mind never dies. It can only be put in perspective, quieted until we can hear the more ancient voices that give us life. At every turn, we need to stop the noise, our own and everyone else's, not to retreat from the world but to live more fully in it.

QUIETING THE THIEVES

Today I am sad, or so I thought. But more I am tired of keeping up with all that doesn't matter. I'm sipping coffee, listening to rain. I like watching the leaves hang in long weather. I like to close my eyes and feel the rain quiet the earth. I welcome that quieting. I like to have my habits of going here and there interrupted. I was caught in the rain when coming here. The cool blotches sink in all over. The many lists I carry in my shirt are wet. I take them out to dry, and all the tasks have blurred. At last. Unreadable. Forgettable. We carry these lists near our heart and finger them like worry beads. It doesn't matter what is on them. They are the thieves, and it is the insidious virtue to have everything in order *before* we live that is the greatest thief. I feel the rain drip down my neck. I think I'm becoming unfinished.

BRING ME CLOSE

When I stop, the smallest things make me weep: the afternoon light dusting our dog's face, the beads of rain darkening the head of St. Francis in the neglected garden, and my father's stroke-laden tongue falling through the phone. The ache of being here reveals itself as the heartbeat of Eternity. I hear it in the throng of birds beaten back by wind, in the wall of silence that crumbles between old friends too stubborn to forgive, and in the swollen minds on the train trying to find their way home. The ache of being here undoes my need for fences.

SHORT WISDOM ON A LONG PLANET

We keep turning one thing into another and calling it progress. We keep machining the beauty off of things as they are, creating more and more things to hide in, as if that will let us live longer. We keep burrowing into everything but ourselves: churning trees into lumber, animals into meat, wind into electricity, vegetables into remedies, and silence into noise; turning the earth, continent by continent, into one giant anthill. We keep eating our way through the arms of the Universe, desperate for something large and quiet to hold us.

SPEECHLESS

I pause under that summer tree, the one that feels like a friend, as my dog wonders why we've stopped. She was trotting in such rhythm. But when this still, I wonder what part of me, way down, remains untouched by dream or memory? What drop of being remains out of reach of the opinions of others? When up close, each thing reveals its shimmer. And it's the unexpected closeness that holds everything together. The light spreads across my dog's face, her eyes so devoted to wherever I want to go. Can I be this devoted to the pull of life? Last month, I saw a dolphin and her calf slip back into the surf, and the pucker of the sea where they went under said, *This is what it feels like to shimmer and go speechless*. There's a closeness we recognize in everything simple, as if we knew everything at the moment of our birth, and living is how we remember it all, piece by broken piece. It can happen when I stop to pick up what you drop in the supermarket. As your eyes shimmer, I realize we've known each other forever, though we just met.

OUR HANDS

Sometimes, with no warning, we suffer an earthquake and have to remake the ground beneath us. Someone we love may leave or die or think us cruel when we are kind. Sometimes the tools we need break or are stolen or simply stop working, and we have to invent more. Sometimes it feels like we can't get through, that the phone won't get reception, and the computer gets jammed. And sometimes what gets through is partial and misunderstood. It's then we're forced to go barefoot and refind our hands. Sometimes we're asked to drift away from the crowd in order to be found by what we love.

OVER AND OVER

I'm not afraid of dying, but losing those I love. I can't quite imagine the world without them. Like waking to a rip in the sky through which the sun might leave. The only thing that helps is to go below the noise. There, I listen to the same piece of music day after day. I play it over and over till the squirrel in my head stops chewing and my heart admits it's tired of why. So many things show their beauty when we go quiet. So many truths are present when we look up from under our trouble. To fall below the world while still living in the world makes us remember that the truth that waits under our opinions is our home. So tell me, am I home? Are you home? When was the last time you looked up from under your trouble? And when will the fugitive we hide inside accept that our self-worth was there all along? What sort of rain will make the seed inside our head grow?

THIS IS HOW

When we can open our hearts and work with what we're given, loving what's before us, life stays possible. Then, through effort and grace, we do what we can with what we have. And when exhausted by all that's in the way, we're faced with the chance to accept and love what's left, which is everything. This is how we discover that Heaven is on Earth.

UNRAVELING OUR FEAR

*I am troubled by my shapeless fears. My God, these anxieties!
Who can live in the modern world without catching his share of them?*

VINCENT VAN GOGH

*I was born when all I once
feared—I could love.*

THE FEMALE SUFI SAINT RABIA OF BASRA

Fear has been a great and unasked-for teacher. At every step of my cancer journey, fear was there to greet me like a dark elder, nudging me closer to all I was afraid of. I was continually forced to face what I feared with no instruction. At the bottom of every fear, when I could reach it, was my want not to die. I think all fear unravels to our want to be here. When we can get through the rush of fear, when we can endure its intensity, its real gift shows. For under all fear, no matter how legitimate or inflated, is the shimmer and glow of how precious it is to be alive. If seen all the way through, fear allows us to live as if we mean it. More often, fear hangs around like a nagging cold or toothache we can't seem to get rid of. It can discolor everything and agitate our soul. An important practice then is how to unravel our fear when it wraps itself around us, which it will.

OFFERING

We fist up to weather the days, though no one told us it has to be this way. We just constrict to keep what is tender from being hurt. If blessed, we crack and are pried open anyway, till the heart like an oyster shows its softness. Opened by time, I am more fallible, more humble, able to trip more easily into joy. Who would have guessed that the softness between us glitters like the stardust that it is. Who would have guessed that offering what is tender is what saves us.