

At the East Fork Cabin, All is Well
Transcript of a reading by Kathleen Dean Moore

“All is well at the East Fork Cabin,” I shout at the satellite phone. Every day, at 7 am and 7 pm, I am supposed to call in to the communication center. If I don’t, they’ll send a ranger over to make sure we haven’t been routed by bears or nudged by a bus off Polychrome Pass.

“I read you,” Randy the dispatcher shouts back. “All is well at the East Fork Cabin. Talk to you tonight.”

“No really,” I want to tell him, “Really, all is really well.” I want to tell him that in this early morning air, each willow catkin glistens with frost, and the snowdrifts over the creek bed are hard and shining. Last night’s bell chorus of water drops from the roof of the snow bridge is quiet now – just a pock here and a pock there in the wet arch of darkness. Papery ice sheets grew across the shallows overnight, drawing silver topographic maps, rivers and ridges radiating from each pebble. Under the bank, ice crystals have raised crenelated towers and turrets, glass cathedrals with mud roofs. And on the bank, ice fills the perfect pawprint of a wolf.

I don’t want to keep Randy. I know a satellite phone is pay-per-minute and I have to make my prepaid 43 minutes last ten days, and he’s breaking up anyway. And maybe emergency calls are coming in, but I want to tell him how good it is that there is a time in the early morning when the river is not hurrying. It has not taken up its to-do list, which is mostly the slow demolition of mountains. First it will attend to the smaller work of tuning up the river, each riffle and stone, preparing to sing the praise-song to the morning.

I take my seat on the bench by the river in a grove of aspen trees. Sometimes, a morning is so quiet that you can hear the breath of quiet itself, the slow in and out that shimmers in new leaves. Leaves tick. They tick. Now as the silted current sifts over stones, it rustles like an orchestra getting ready to play. Flutists puff air through the narrow tubes of their flutes to warm silver and brass. There it is – the soft brush hush as violinists lean forward to adjust their scores and singers find the page. That little tap tap: a chickadee opens a seed and a percussionist tunes the tympani. Softly, a Swainson’s thrush whistles up the scale.

Do you know the sound when all the members of a choir stand, the rustle of their rising? That’s what the river sounds like, every pebble pushing up its wave. The road grader on the bridge beeps its backup warning. There is a sudden silence. Everything is poised to begin. The morning draws in its breath. Here now is the first flooding chord of water over pebble and cobble and boulder, and the basso profundo of the first bus downshifting on the grade over the pass. A ptarmigan cackles. A flock of siskins whistles. Silt rasps against rocks, and cobbles roll. So indistinct, but so musical, so full, the sounds

I hear could be the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and orchestra carried on the wind from yesterday, or from a hundred miles away.

Icy catkins are candles in this early light. Their flames flicker. Yellow light flows through new poplar leaves. The northern anemones are still sleeping, or maybe they are praying, standing up with their heads bent over, the petals closed across their faces. When I passed them last evening, their heads were thrown back like tenors, full open to the sun. But now, the cells on one side of their stems have lost their timbre, and their heads nod.

And Randy, I want to tell you this, that when my father was dying, he listened over and over to the chords of the old hymn that ends with a great upwelling of voices and joyous trumpets, All is well. All is well. That's the refrain he listened to, reaching out his hand to press 'replay.' All is well.

I didn't understand that then. How can a person who feels his breath failing, feel as well the gratitude and reassurance that flow over him like water and fill him like music? But maybe I am beginning to understand it now, because I've listened to a river carry a mountain to the sea. I've seen how light changes to darkness and back again, and ice to mud. The snow will melt, the white anemones will fade back into the earth, the wolves will pass into the stars, our fathers will be folded back into soil. But even when all lives are gone, there will still be the music of water on stone, and the faraway singing of the wind.