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Risky Business

Tonight our topic is risk,
mostly how we do not take it—
or them.

There are hazards: You might slip a disk
or spouse or friend, not quite make it
to the last waltz, or choke on phlegm.

God forbid that we might risk abandonment,
of all drear dreads the adult child's basic fear.
It screws all loyalty to pathology.
And faced with intimacy we act queer:
You can't abandon me if you can't get to me.
We make life's high points punishment.

Damn the torpedoes! Full risk ahead.
Some of us in our circle talked out loud.
Others signaled they weren't dead.
When it comes to taking risks, two's a crowd.
I sat and thought: This is what I need to hear.
I also thought: Let me out of here!

Making Amends

We read our book around the circle,
a chapter a week, then talk
not by turns but by compulsion
whose needs we know too well. Its miracle
moves most of us to speech despite how chalk
mounds in our mouths just then.

This week we list exactly everyone we've hurt
and, what is worse, must make there-from amends
for our lifetimes of dirty deeds.
Are you kidding? My accumulated dirt
mounds deep. To probe it hazards the bends
or pushing up noxious weeds.

What veils our spirits slowly rends,
slowly, soothed by tears, gratis,
as is our protocol.
From here on out, make your own amends.
This former fixer's new-won status
is deserter. He's no more AWOL.

Today Admit, Tomorrow Confess

Do not fear this day
whose Sun will rise, then orb the sky and set
—with you or without you.
February seems designed to pave the way
to that horizon you would rather not have met,
but do not fear this day. I do.

Late winter's flu screams nightmares in my head:
feathers flying from an antique pillow,
Vicks VapoRub's heady fumes,
grandmas coming back from the dead,
my baby blanket, teddy bear. But please no
chicken soup fat's yellow algal blooms.

I admit it: I am powerless
over the effects of my addiction,
which are not to admit it and then deny
the sinking feeling. Today admit; tomorrow confess.
Come March, if it will, I may decide
to donate my body to science fiction.

Taking Moral Inventory

Now for a searching and fearless moral inventory:
Fetch pen and paper, quick!
Let's rate ourselves against the Seven Deadly Sins.
We'll storm the Sea of Morality by hunky dory.
—Face it, no one wins.
Still ticks this deathness unto which we're sick.

From sackcloth, stout, a voice of iron—Do I dream
or is this someone dreaming me? Manic wails
this pastor? priest? or prophet? The latter, it would seem.
No one rushes to gird me with gladness
any more than Jesus rushed to proffer Pilate nails.
Destination: the pit, by way of madness.

Spare, balanced, quiet, I bow
to simpler beings.
Let's stake our lives again in what we dream
and dream as big as the Super Bowl.
Lord. Temptress. Therapist—someone: make me whole
and bid me live one moment in the now.

Keep Coming Back, It Works

Across our self-help circle someone bottoms out
—shouldering paroxysms of sobbing punctuated by
apologies for self-pity, confessions of self-doubt,
and sundry inner execrations money cannot buy.
I know her feeling. A slant of numbness in the head
and suicide looks like a week at Club Med.

Someone else's family ostracizes her
"because you go to meetings." She wants to get well,
which wish betrays *their* sickness bred in Hell.
(Fix me a drink and put some menace in my slur.)
What can we tell each other but "Keep it up!"
we scions of our lengthy lines of sick, sick pups.

We do. We empathize. We hug our weird ways out
of it. I find I envy anyone their lowest point,
their nadir of all fears. How lucky, it happens here,
not home at Christmas, putting loved ones out of joint.
My grandmas pegged our angst as faithless doubt,
pulping it with scripture verse and gobs of prayer.

Nurturing Our False Selves

"I love myself," he said, burnishing
the commonplace with flagrant oxymoron.
His eyes betrayed a further twist
to expectancy, as though his inner child
might have transgressed a boundary
elusive as an edge of the Milky Way.

Even in his chair tonight he looked
like Br'er Rabbit locked in Tai Chi
combat with the dreaded Tar Baby.
After the meeting we vent our crosstalk
if only as interior monolog.
Dreamless sleep or sleepless dream,

which would you choose?
History nor fact suffice.
All day an unacknowledged feeling
sacked me like a quarterback
running a double reverse solo,
mid-field, mid-life, mid-all and -nothing.

Owning Up and Letting Go

Nonstop tirades of ugly vitriol
—from his coffin in a dream her father
won't shut up but yaks and yaks at her.
He is in fact dying, but why does she bother
not to let him? All her life this utter cur
gnashed his teeth at her soul.

Once a week we make our circle here
to confront dysfunction's needs.
"I'm an adult child of well-meaning parents,"
says someone clutching anger in her fear.
"Let go and let God" is how another vents
the urge to rescue others from their foul misdeeds.

"My name is Ed, and I'm an adult child
of an overly religious family system."
"Hi, Ed!"
Suddenly, my tongue feels like a twist-em.
It's December—in this life? this year? Weather mild
except a blizzard rages in my head.

Protocol

Her dog—let's call him Beppo
for anonymity's sake—
cradles like a stuffed toy in her arm
noiseless tonight. In fact, no
one called on him. Did he also ache
to bark but fear that doing so might harm

his image? Well, it's not group protocol
to call on man nor beast.
Our Higher Power moves us
—or we're not moved at all.
Frustration leavens like baker's yeast.
Our urge to rage gets muted to mere fuss.

Some nights I would like to bark
or, better, to howl at the waning moon.
I'd turn this group into Noah's Ark
listing on our last pontoon.
We ache for shore leave, to blow our cool.
Life is too much like Obedience School.