Good evening, Bodhisattvas.

It seems like the Williams poem has spoken to at least a few of you, so I'm hoping spending some more time with it tonight will feel like it adds another tributary to the flow of the retreat and mingles with it. What I want to bring the poem to bear on this evening is that compressed and enigmatic sequence in the koan: from inconsolable grief; to hearing a deer cry; being asked "where is that deer?"; and then, especially, hearing the teacher shout, being asked "who is hearing?", and Mujako's "flash of understanding"—and then we don't hear anything more, explicitly, about her grief. Let's start with Bukko's shout.

I've realized listening to Megan and Andrew and Sarah talk about the koan that I'm hearing something a little different in that shout, or at least I want to emphasize something a little different about it. I do hear something Sarah said, if I remember right, about this shout--how raw it is. But that's not all I hear. We know that a teacher's "teisho," which is traditionally a direct presentation of their dharma or the Tao, rather than a commentary about them, literally means "presentation of the shout." And those shouts of yore that populate the koans,—and maybe our own shouts too—feel like they come right up out of the ground, out of emptiness or the vastness, bursting into form and life with a force that supposedly knocked people down or deafened them or struck them dead (luckily reviving them again was another important piece of the teacher's tool kit). Let's say that's a myth: still it tells us something about the shout.

Then there's Suzuki Roshi. His biographer David Chadwick recalls a riveting moment from the memorial service for Suzuki's beloved student Trudy Dixon: "Then Suzuki let out a long, mighty roar of grief that echoed through the cavernous auditorium." But right before he did so, at the very end of his eulogy, he said something that might seem strange: "At this point, however, I express my true power"; then he roared. I guess a roar, which isn't a cry, isn't exactly a shout either. But both roar and shout, in the context of zen, are a manifestation, a coming forth, of tremendous force, of energy (qi) and power. I hear, imagining Suzuki's shout, great grief but also fierce affirmation, mingled or braided. I think Suzuki, in his great pain, says yes to all of it, letting it all rush through him and find expression. So--back to the koan—the way I hear it, Bukko's shout joins Mujako in her grief, but also confronts her with something, and offers her something, that might have felt startling, disconcerting, even abrasive: this shout of affirmation, full of life and power, rubbing right up against her grief. I think she carries all that with her down to the stream, and in some ways the rest of the koan is the story of how she's changed by that startling, freeing encounter.

But since it's a koan, we don't get many details about how she begins to process and work with this moment. That's where the poem comes in. It doesn't give us a sequence that matches the koan point for point, but it does slow down and attend to the speaker's psychology, unfolding the way something like Mujako's struggle plays out over time, and how her life begins to move again, joining the world's life, tentatively and almost despite herself.

The poem also explores something we might call the matter of two hearts Megan brought up Monday night: our own particular heart with its intense and specific griefs and joys, and the big heart of the Heart Sutra, the vastness--the world teeming with life and death and change. Not simply identical, not one, that's really important. But also not two. How might it feel when they rub against each other, and how might things begin to open and shift when they do?

OK then:

A woman walks into a bar, sits down and says: “Sorrow is my own yard.” Or a woman says that to her pastor, or therapist or zen teacher, or her friend. How to name what we hear in that somewhat peculiar phrase? It’s wrenching, and intense. It’s also maybe a little insistent, in its sweeping claim, its definitional quality. What’s my own yard to me? It’s nothing but sorrow. It’s kind of like Andrew’s first category of question, the pointed one that invites a pointed answer that points back at the one who asked, confirming what the questioner wanted to mean--a closed feedback loop. But, as Andrew said, there’s also another kind of question: it asks “what is this, I wonder,” where not knowing is most intimate, and we allow ourselves to feel our way into that unknown terrain, where things might begin to shift.

We’re not there yet, though. Or perhaps we are, she is: but not yet in a way she can even begin to acknowledge. Still, I’m suggesting that “sorrow is my own yard,” in its insistence, might be pushing back against, or fending off, a sense that this familiar definition doesn’t quite cover the whole terrain for her anymore. Not something easy to let in, especially in a circumstance as intense and freighted as this one. I don’t think we’re too far from practice here. How can we get better at hearing the stories we tell about ourselves in ways that allow them to loosen and begin to shift? In part by listening carefully to our own language. If, for instance, you hear yourself saying “Sorrow is my own yard,” it’s time to pay attention with what we sometimes call warm curiosity. In the poem, this kind of shift doesn’t happen right away, and, when it does, she doesn’t do it all by herself; which also sounds like our practice.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

In the poem’s next few lines, I still hear something of that insistent quality, an intense grief held onto tightly, offering, at least, the reassurance of familiarity, however painful. Here are the lines:

> Sorrow is my own yard
> where the new grass
> flames as it has flamed
> often before but not
> with the cold fire
> that closes round me this year.

That sudden “flames” is startling, registering how the new grass shooting up suddenly now in spring startles the speaker with the intensity of its emerging life, bursting into being. It also seems painful, and dangerous, a fire leaping up. But, she says, it’s a “cold fire”: it doesn’t warm her, or shift anything for her—or so she says. So we might say: well, maybe, maybe not. Or: are you sure?. And “cold fire / that closes round me this year” sounds final, but feels less like a statement of fact than a determined refusal. It doesn’t feel settled though; it feels, well, unsettled, a response to something unsettling. It’s a strange phrase, an oxymoron, a noun and the adjective that modifies it at war with each other. Self-contradictory, it evokes a strange and uncomfortable sensation, disconcertingly in flux, as if her own body feels out of sync with itself (as if something were starting to change her very bones, we might say). It reminds me of Megan’s guided meditation yesterday morning, where she invited us to locate and welcome specific points of physical discomfort, and let them speak to us: how to pay attention to something like that.

Here's what's next:

> Thirtyfive years
> I lived with my husband.

That's like a summation, and it closes the book, or a book. But what might it open? For me it's hard to know how to hear her tone here, as she hovers among contradictory feelings—in that unsettled, unresolved quality, maybe she moves toward not knowing. Thirty five years I lived with my husband. This was my life, and now that life is over. My own life is over? What is my heart, right now? And which heart will answer, and for whom?

This feels like a bad moment for a detour. But I'm going to risk a short one:

There's a great short passage in Emerson, describing how the world seems when we're feeling intense bereavement. I want to quote it and riff on it a bit. It probably sounds a little strange on first hearing:

> Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. . . . there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

"Less worth in the population"! There's an arch and oddly mordant quality here that barely conceals a deep tenderness, maybe even awe: the world as if drained, stripped bare, emptied out. But here's my riff on the passage, based on my own experience: that drained world, emptied out, can also feel empty in our sense: each living creature and each thing less solid, more fragile and evanescent, but also more tender, more interconnected. And, strangely, out of that, another aspect of emptiness can also flare up, flaming as it were: to the grieving body and spirit, tender and fragile, things can also seem, suddenly, intently alive and intensely present, exactly themselves, impinging on us with a particular, startling sharpness. It's painful, thin-skinned as we are, but it's also painful because we want to let it in, and also don't want to. As in the poem, abruptly:

> The plumtree is white today
> with masses of flowers.
> Masses of flowers
> load the cherry branches
> and color some bushes
> yellow and some red

This feels unexpected, for the speaker I think, and for us if we're reading the poem for the first time. We're not so far from practice here, maybe especially our practice in retreat, as we get porous and things impinge on us, or flow through us, with unexpected immediacy. In this passage, it's partly the profusion of colors, bursting through the monochrome of "sorrow is my own yard," that registers her unanticipated engagement. "Green is green and yellow is yellow. Where do you see them?" Yuanwu asks in case forty of *The Blue Cliff Record*.

"Where do you see them?" So there's something else. Repeated, and followed by "load the cherry branches," her word "masses" registers the heft, the burgeoning profusion of blossoms sagging the branches down a little, a weightiness that's not a burden but a delight:

> The plumtree is white today
> with masses of flowers.
> Masses of flowers
> load the cherry branches

Where do you see them? Can you feel it? What if you held out your arms, branchlike, the gift of that heft in your arms. I think the widow feels it, right here, as it were, in her body—"as if she were the trees" is a little too strong, maybe, but, if not one, then not two either. So what she sees triggers an experience of weight and slight movement—loading, sagging—that's primarily tactile and kinetic. Where are the trees? right here! in my body and my heart. Where is that deer? Who hears? The koans are full of such moments, sight or hearing sliding into an imagined but palpable sensation of motion, kinetic rhythm, texture, and phantom touch. And touch is intimate, and, in Chan, the character for intimate is one way to write enlightenment. Which, by the way, might help explain the "show me" bugaboo in Work in the Room: no we're not playing charades, and you don't have to be as good a mime as Marcel Marceau. It's not a game and it's not a test. It's a gift: the koan, and the world, right here in your own body, your own heart.

Detour two. In the Open Source, we're interested in fostering a zen that acknowledges the ancient ancestors in part by rediscovering them in our own culture and its traditions. So I want to explore what's happening in this part of the poem by turning to a couple short quotations from the romantic poet John Keats. First, Keats's version of the intimacy of not-knowing, into which the widow has more or less slipped:

> I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a [person] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.

In this moment in the poem, the speaker isn't reaching, irritably or otherwise, for her story, or trying to reason out or wrangle with what she sees to make it fit into that settled narrative. (Though that's pretty much what she will do just a nanosecond later.)

Next: here's an instance of what, for Keats, might happen in this state of not knowing or negative capability:

> Or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.

In the porosity of not knowing—not buffering what's present by running it through my settled categories or stories--I feel the sparrow's picking, right here in my body. I could show you, my hand miming the motion of the sparrow's picking beak. Actually, I can feel those movements in my hand right now, even if I refrain from actually making them. Or the heft of the blossom-filled branches, loading and sagging my arms outstretched like branches.

Keats pulls these aspects together in the image of the "chameleon poet," an ideal figure who would have no fixed conceptions or self-conceptions, and who would be especially liable to being washed over by intense identifications:

> As to the poetical Character itself [. . .] it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing--It has no character. . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because

he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other body--

Sounds like a zen student, no? To put it a little differently, it's as if the chameleon poet dissolves into and moves through "the circuit of forms," circulating through the emptiness and interpermeation of beings. Or, in this no longer logical space, as if the circuit of forms circulates through him. I know that Sara, in the *Lanka* classes you held a while ago at SMS, talked about the sutra's perhaps surprising assertion that Tathagatas have Tathagata bodies—they've changed their very bones, as Hakuin says. I suppose those Tathagata bodies are capable of astral projection and all sorts of other pyrotechnical wonders I haven't experienced. But I think Keats's chameleon poet, who feels himself sliding through beings or feels beings sliding through him, is at least a Junior Birdman Tathagata, his experience of his body already profoundly transformed. Be that as it may: we're not too far here, as the speaker senses the heft of the blossoms filling her arms, from "where is that deer?" or "who is hearing"? and the opening up they begin to set in motion.

In this unexpected moment, it's not so clear that "sorrow is my own yard" is a wholly adequate summation of the speaker's feelings. What is my grief becoming now, she might ask. The heart of the one who asks is zen. But which heart? Not one, and not two.

But what happens next, though it's a letdown, feels wholly human:

> but the grief in my heart
> is stronger than they
> for though they were my joy
> formerly, today I notice them
> and turn away forgetting.

I think there's a kind of inverted logic, or a psychological sleight of hand, at work here. *Because* I notice them but turn away forgetting, I know that the grief in my heart is stronger than this new feeling. Look, I've just proved it, by turning away, by forgetting. So I'm back home, in my separate body again, and in this by-now-familiar place where sorrow is my own yard.

Except for an odd detail, something seemingly small that turns out to be the elephant in the room. It's not "I noticed" or "I turned," past tense; it's present tense: "I notice them" "and turn away forgetting." So: I'm not thinking about the elephant in the room right now, trust me, I just told you so. I'm not noticing these masses of flowers that load the cherry branches right now, I'm forgetting them, right now. Which contradicts itself in the saying. Meaning, in its contradiction: forget them right now, a command or maybe a heartrending plea to herself, please forget them; or a kind of word magic, I hereby forget them, poof! . The delight I take in them despite myself is just too painful. "Isn't that how it is, " Joan used to say in Work in the Room, with a kind of rueful wisdom.

I suspect there are a lot of entries in everyone's lifetime retreat diary pretty much like this: we start to slide out into the chameleon body, along the circuit of forms, and pull back. In my experience, a lot of times it's out of fear, but also sometimes from a sense of something like guilt that from another vantage seems bizarre: I don't deserve this, I'm not a good enough person to experience this great joy, or, maybe, there's a sorrow or grief my joy is disloyal to. In the widow's case, the guilt, if that's what it is, doesn't seem surprising. How could I turn away from my grief and from my beloved husband, seduced by new life into betrayal of his memory? The phrasing makes this either/or struggle palpable, almost like

a bodily sensation of pulling herself back: “the grief in my heart *is stronger than they*”: I turn away, it pulls me away, I pull myself away, when I was turning towards. Because I say so.

It’s good that we get to go on more than one retreat, and I’m glad this isn’t the end of the poem. What happens next isn’t something the speaker can do for herself. The trees in her yard have already begun to fetch her. Now her son comes to her aid. He doesn’t tell her how to fix things, but he accompanies her, an intimate companion. He accompanies her by leaving her alone. But he offers her a landscape into which she might wander: something he saw that becomes for her a kind of dream image that draws her in, in a reverie that continues to take shape around her as she imagines it—she makes the road by walking it, in imagination—feeling her way, as I hear it, toward some possible resolution and release. We could call it her awakening, continuing to unfold:

> Today my son told me
> that in the meadows,
> at the edge of the heavy woods
> in the distance, he saw
> trees of white flowers.
> I feel that I would like
> to go there
> and fall into those flowers
> and sink into the marsh near them.

It’s hard to know how to be a tactful here: pulled partly toward a clinical literalism that isn’t quite legit, since she’s an imagery person with no existence other than the specifics the poem gives her; and pulled in the opposite direction toward reading the poem as a koan, which it isn’t, quite. But let’s go down each of those paths at least a little.

Department of real living persons: this doesn’t feel like a 911 emergency to me, in part because it’s so conspicuously imagined and conjectural, in a drawn out, feeling-her-way-along-the-contours-of-a-dream sort of way. She imagines a kind of liminal, initiatory space: the son sees something “at the edge” of a woods, which the speaker seems to respond to as a symbolic threshold, a zone of possible transformation. And she says the woods are “heavy,” a slightly odd word --thick with trees, yes, but also like something out of a fairytale. She enters this liminal space tentatively, as if it takes shape around her slowly as she inches toward it, feeling her way toward a vision of possible opening: at the edge, in the distance, I feel that I would like / to go there.

Here’s a funny thing: a crucial part of what provokes this revery is something her son tells her he saw that’s actually pretty similar to what she’s just seen right in her own yard, which she claims to turn away from, forgetting: trees of white flowers. It’s as if she’s circled back, revisiting a gift the world has already brought her that she wasn’t quite ready to accept, feeling her way into it—what are those flowers, what is it to move toward them? In her revery, the flowers have fallen to the ground, caught up in a process she brings into the story, embellishing, so far as we can tell, what her son said. How many? Well, enough to fall into, dreamlike, to hold her when she falls, to cushion or pillow her: a place of springtime profusion and growth in which she might rest; and, because they have fallen, a gentle, comforting image of time’s passing. There’s something incredibly tender in this image of process: “sink into,” in this dream context, is like melting into. In her yard, the flowers seem intensely themselves, Tathagata. Here’s another, inevitable aspect: dissolving and interpermeation, drawing her in.

If we're reading as amateur clinicians, the poem's final line might feel rather more bleak: "and sink into the marsh near them," an image of death and decay. But here it feels, at least to me, less like a plan for ending her life than an acknowledgment and letting in of the inclusive, inescapable undoing that will take in everything, including herself and everything she loves. "First we get to enjoy the feast," I remember our cousin teacher Susan Murphy saying in a dharma talk: "then we are the feast."
I think it matters that the last two lines present dream images that are not exactly sequential: it's not, first, the joy of the flowers, and then, just kidding, that was just an illusion, look: blub blub, the grim truth hiding underneath them. Instead, they're spatialized: two visions imagined as next to each other, side by side, inclusive: "*and* fall into those flowers / *and* sink into the marsh near them." So it's not, as it felt to her in her yard, either/or, the pull of the springtime profusion of flowers "**but** the grief in my heart is stronger than they." It's and/and, both/and, or maybe even, from the largest perspective, as some second-language speakers of English say, "same/same." To fall into the profusion of flowers is to fall into the marsh, and to fall into the marsh is to enter the circuit of forms and rediscover, as if in an endless cycle, the heft of the flowers, heartbreakingly beautiful, felt right here in my body. Turning toward one isn't turning away from the other: "sorrow is my own yard" *is* also the burgeoning blossoms.

It's good to be careful here, and not grab too fast at a neatly extactable moral, running headlong toward "the great circle of life" and the lion king movies (which actually weren't too bad) with their patented Disney gloss. But I think what this dream image opens up into is something that was already there in her yard, in the branches loading the cherry trees, weighing them down: to fall into the circuit of forms and slide along them, or to pass them through your body, is to enter a space that is simultaneously evanescent--everything fragile and fleeting and mortal--and full of that strangely eternal quality that zen can reveal to us-- a vast stillness in which everything is both living and already dead. Here's Norman Fischer's formulation:

> you and I are already dead. We think later we'll be dead, but that's baloney. Actually, right now in each breath we are alive and we are dead. We don't know that and that's why we are suffering. . . . Actually, every morning, every day we should be in mourning. Every moment we should be mourning.

Grief and elegy are right there, with the burgeoning flowers filling and loading your arms, the ponderosas and blossoms along the path, the streams. No need to turn toward, or turn from.

Here's Joan, from "Invisible Ceremonies":

> Grief is a form of love, how we go on loving in the absence of the beloved. It is the transformation of love through loss, and how we are initiated into a new world.

And:

> The woman in the story, whose name is Mujaku, went on to accomplish great things, helping other women meet their own hearts. Generations of nuns wrote poems about her; one said that the water from her bucket filled many puddles. She was able to do this not because she found a way around her grief, but because she went quiet inside and listened for what grief was asking of her. Her cry for help, the cry of the deer, moonlight pouring from a broken bucket : her grief spread further than the edges of her skin, belonged to more than her particular heart — and so did her awakening. As she was held, so could she hold. That is what awakening is.

Here's another koan, which likewise doesn't insist on clinging to autumnal dissolution or resisting spring's profusion. No need to. They're inside each other, inextricable:

One day Changsha went off to wander in the mountains. When he returned, the director of the temple met him at the gate and asked, "Where have you been?"

"I've been strolling about in the hills."

"Which way did you go?"

"I went out following the scented grass and came back chasing the falling flowers."

"That's exactly the feeling of spring," said the director.

"It's better than autumn dew falling on the lotuses," said Changsha.

(Xuedou [said]: "I'm grateful for your reply.")