

By Lynn Watson

Morning Circle

The labyrinth beckons just ahead as the stones curve toward me. Fingers of light trace pathways, twining around this illuminated, sacred ground. A cross at the center extends its arms through the labyrinth's concentric rings. The cross overlaying a circle represents male and female united. Together in ritual, planetary wholeness, they are an ancient symbol used worldwide, for centuries.

Under the bluest of skies, the labyrinth lies, welcoming. A path guides footsteps, flat stone following flat stone, in serpentine coils. Folding forward, backward, forward, the winding of the labyrinth's ancestral arcs encompass the glistening meadow. Walking it will clear my mind. Labyrinths have only one way in and only one way out. It is not a maze, an avenue to confusion. It is a release from time in a rhythm of mindful steps and breathing. Hushing sounds of my feet, Shhh-Shhh, will glide from stone to stone. Serenity will begin my solitary, contemplative journey.

The doe is lying on her side. Just there. Shiny black hooves touch the labyrinth's entry stone. Her gaunt, angular body, brown on brown, sprawls in the dirt. Her front legs churn in futility. A scrabbling run takes her nowhere. Her head lies on one delicate cheek. Dirt cradles one brown eye. The one I can see is closing. No sun glints off the opaque pupil. Each deep breath is a silent struggle. Leaves on the bush above her tremble. The doe's free ear swivels and strains to hear what is no longer visible. Her breath slows. Each expansion does not make it to the last rise. She strains upward, but the pulsing flank hollows more deeply. Her usually upright, white flag of danger drags in the dust.

The doe's eye does not move. Her ear lays all the way down. Her back legs give a final flail, then stop their crippled prance. Her joints, at shoulder and hip, relax, her taut, bounding springs un-wound.

Waiting until the key turns in the lock. Within the cathedral of her ribs, her heart slows. The push for life is barely enough to pulse blood, one last time, through its circulatory orbit. Unlocking the constellation of the doe's body will allow her to dissipate into the Great Mystery. Life into death into life is the circle for all creatures. This doe enters and returns within her life's labyrinth, and effervesces into the glowing morning.

I had taken the long tour in the stillness of this morning. The rising sun backlit the trees in gold, spangling the dew into stars. The trees had dropped rainbows of leaves that I scuffled through with my feet. The trail had encircled the lake where ducks had drifted among cattails and geese

fed in flotillas of families. The calls of Sandhill Cranes had cascaded from overhead. The rim of the lake burned with the reflected orange and yellow of the season. Bright trees flamed up between the dark pines: right side up mirrored upside down. The details were perfect in the balance of the dawn.

Now, standing here in front of this labyrinth, and this dead doe on the first stone, my heart takes me back without permission to the entrance of my mother's hospice room. A nurse says, "I think you should prepare to stay for the next few days." I stay and four more days gather. Mom's lucidities and confusions continually change places. This last morning with her is brilliant with winter. Curtains of snow glitter as they drift by the window. Her hand is cooling on the thin blanket in this too warm room. I carefully cup it between my two.

"It hurts, it hurts. Don't touch me!" she whimpers like she has for these past many months.

"We love you," I offer. "Jeannie, Lynn, Nancy and Suanne. Your daughters." She winces. There are too many words for her to hold or understand. She is deep in preparation to leave this world where everything hurts.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." I whisper. I reassure her the same as I did for my restless kids at bedtime. Like you, Mom, they were caught in between. Not able to sleep, not able to wake up. I didn't turn the lights on, but left the door open a reassuring crack, to let them know I was near.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." was the pulse of your heart above me while chambered in your womb.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." is the sound of waves as they curl ashore. Mom had a lifetime of tidal dramas. They tumble together in this last surging surf. The fetch of waves is stronger, the farther out they start. Pushed with the power of her 85 years, I sense the profound tollings of her life.

Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . . under her straining silence.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." A rush of waters, days and years, in and out. Love and joy and sorrow all breathe in . . . and out.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." I am old enough to share memories, Mom. I have been able to live some of your dreams. My shhh . . . voice smooths like my hand down the back of a running horse. Shhh . . . remembering all the trees and animals and wildflowers of the North Shore you taught me . . . I married and had my own babies. Shhh . . . here I am for your dying, Mom. You fade over the hours. I hold your ever-colder hand, my forehead bent to your bed.

“Shhh . . .” The sound is longer and longer as it fills in the pauses between her breathing. I watch her eyes glaze, flare, and focus. But not on me. It’s on something out beyond this room. She smiles in greeting, like the best birthday present ever. She closes her eyes, lies back and gently sets sail. She goes out, and I breathe out, too. All is still on this empty bed and shore.

Bright bird song brings me back to today, in the meadow with the labyrinth. My mother is quickened in me, as I was once in her. The doe is lying on her side. Just there. Her shiny black hooves touch the labyrinth’s entry stone. Do I step over the doe? This doe that marks my path of spiritual welcome? The labyrinth beckons:

You come round, now,

Labyrinth doe, labyrinth mother.

Labyrinth fawn, labyrinth daughter.

Labyrinth self, labyrinth all.

Labyrinth in, labyrinth out

Lynn Watson enjoys writing poetry, short stories, and flash fiction. She has written a women’s fiction novel based on her experiences bush teaching in Alaska and is seeking a publisher. Her work has placed 1st and 2nd in the Lake Superior Writers Contest. She has been published in the University of Minnesota Duluth’s Roaring Muse, with upcoming pieces appearing in the 2024 editions of *The Thunderbird Review* and *The Nemadji Review*. Lynn enjoys paddleboarding, x-c skiing, hiking, kayaking, and traveling in the family camper van with her husband, Don. Lynn grew up in Bloomington, Minnesota, and now lives in Duluth.