

Sometimes

I want you to tell me a story,
like the stories Mom told at bedtime
or the stories I heard
from family members or friends
after long absences
exciting things they did,
or some tragedy that intervened,
or something
that didn't make sense,
and they're trying to formulate
the sense that whatever it is
makes,
and they're trying to hand it to me.

Sometimes
I don't know
what they expect—
Advice? Affirmation? Solutions?
Just a listening ear?
Sometimes they give me clues
Afterwards, in their reaction,
I realize
I've misread the situation.

Listening to stories rarely has rules,
unless they're simply rules of decorum:
turn off your cell phone,
make eye contact with the teller,
nod your head once in a while,
laugh, but at the appropriate times,
clap politely at the end.

Sometimes
I need someone to listen—
not someone I know
who knows large portions of my story
already,
who has pre-formed solutions,

ideas, new directions,
who plays a key role in the story,
has skin in the game.

Sometimes
I need listeners to be strangers
following just a few
agreed-upon rules:
no fixing,
no saving,
no advising,
just listen.
If anything,
ask an open, honest question—
not one loaded up
with manipulation,
advice pretending
to be a question.
Be a mirror for me.
Let me hear my words
coming back
in your voice,
Or in silence.

Perhaps I can rehear
myself
in ways I haven't for decades.
Perhaps I can see
my words
scribbled in your handwriting.
You who don't know me—
you who act as a
sounding board,
who will hold me upright
when I feel like falling,
offer a fresh question
when I've lost
all my words,
who will sit in silence
far longer
than people
in this time and place tend

WHERE THE GROWTH BEGINS

to accept.

We will create this
odd, safe space
where my story has resonance
so that I hear it,
so that I touch it,
take it lovingly apart
piece by piece,
so that I finally,
perhaps for the first time
in a long while, know
that I've been heard.