**A fictional writing based on John 8: Christ, the Woman, and Dust**

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In the morning, I am alone in a circle of dust and men. I stare at a half-moon line of sandals, dirty like mine, but while my feet silently quake, the Pharisees’ shift noisily, shushing the earth to hear their questions.

I am near the most sacred space of my people, and here among my neighbors, I am shuffled before a Teacher and named by the sin that could mean my death. This is why I see only dust. If I bend just so I can see only my feet, that is all the shame I can bear.

A voice crescendos above the crowd’s murmurs: “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”

I understand now why these men seemed too eager when they learned of my transgression. I have not heard this Teacher, but my father has talked about the controversy. The Pharisees want to arrest him because some people say he is the prophet or the Christ.

I am his Mosaic law test.

The Pharisees only care about trying to turn Jesus into a fool in front of the crowd. Sensing beyond my own trembling, I detect their curiosity and envy, and deeper inside, they are afraid. My sin is a stone they can cast at this man, hoping to bruise his power with the people. I have seen this situation before. It is, once again, a power play between men.

Already, though, I am turning to stone, an inanimate thing without feeling in my fingers, mind, chest. This hardening of life has come upon me over time. The more functional I am, the more my sphere of being has tightened my core into rock.

Lately, when I hang clean garments between low branches to dry, I see a tree of slumped cloth, sagging between the branches for air, and my soul is just like them. My husband is pleased with my work, but honor for labor is not enough for a living thing.

His brother, a frequent guest, came to me yesterday by the water. Normally, I go with neighbor women, but I had been sick and came later in the day. When my neighbor saw I was feeling better, she offered to watch my children so that I could gather water quickly, and I went alone.

When I heard his footsteps, swift and intentional, I knew why he was coming. I had seen the interest in his eyes for some time. I don’t know what to say for myself except that I did not care anymore. I was fine with my soul slumping from the branches and falling into the dust.

Now, with my dusty feet in the midst of other men’s shoes, I want to be like David and hurl one stone into each forehead. And if it could talk, it would say, *why am I here alone? Why did you not shuffle the man into this shame with me?*

Even with my head bowed, I see the Teacher bend low over the dust with a single finger reaching toward the earth. At first, I thought he was reaching for a stone, but there were only fine grains around his hand. Perhaps because I am used to the daily tensions of dirt and cleanliness in my home, I wonder why he would soil his clean hands before the temple, before these men.

In my mind, I see an invisible line. It begins high, touching the Pharisees heads’, angles down over the shamed curve of my head, and finally reaches its lowest point on the bending form of the Teacher. Why has he lowered himself, even below the adulteress?

With my downcast eyes, he is the only man I can see, and I am familiar with his posture. I have bent and bent and bent my body to conform to the lowness of dust in washing, caring for bedding, giving birth. Considering the rigid shoulders of some law-filled leaders, I know it is good to come low, but the only stooping I was expecting here was for gathering stones.

The Pharisees impatiently shuffle their feet, and the leader asks the question again.

In the silence after his words, I watch the Teacher. Seeming weary of the questions, which even I can tell were not seeking truth but meant to trap him, he pauses from writing and slowly, musing, he stands. If he wrote something in the sand, the men could probably read it, but I can’t.

Opening his hands, he says, “Let him who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” His voice carries with the authority I have heard others ascribe to him, but after he bends and begins reshaping the earth again. My hands move to protect my head from the first stone, which I see will not come from the Teacher.

No one speaks, and all I can hear is his finger lightly pushing the dust. Who has been on trial here? Me? Though I have sinned, I am only the tool to try the Teacher. How is it that he has turned the case so that the accusers stop pointing fingers outside of themselves and instead feel the soft pressure of the finger nudging the soil in their own souls?

I grip my head when I hear movement, but after tense moments, it decrescendos. I have never wondered at anything more than this—the men and the crowds are leaving me with my life. The space around me enlarges, I remove my hands, and freedom almost painfully settles into me.

Though people are not far off, the Teacher and I are the only souls in this space before the temple.

When he unbends from the earth, I unbend with him so that we are standing with full faces to each other.

“Woman, where are they?” He is serious with a breeze of amusement. “Has no one condemned you?” This is the first time all morning that someone has asked me a question, inviting my voice.

“No one, Lord.”

He stands fully into his posture with the dust still on his hands. “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

I notice one finger slightly indicates the dust he had left, a heap of it, like a child might push together dirt to make a little mountain. In the days that followed, when I felt ostracized by neighbors and at a loss how to heal my home, I kept seeing that mountain raised by his finger.

I do know whether he meant it, but I thought of other dust I have heard quoted from the Torah. God created the first human from it and breathed into his nostrils. Woman was made from this dust-man’s side. God breathed life into inanimate things. Even Adam’s side was nothing without the breath.

Weary of my hardened core, I drop the stone I keep casting at myself and begin seeking what it means to be a humanly created being.