

## The Self I Know

How fragile first appears  
the self I know –  
against the world's vast space  
and time's unceasing flow

How can this so fleeting form  
belong to such immensity?

And yet to inward eye this form unveils  
unbounded light! a flame,  
alive in color glow –  
and its heart  
the cosmic Child of Grace –  
    Becoming  
The Self I seek to know.

So may it be said of Katie Nolan in Betty Smith's 1943 novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Katie was a widowed mother of Francie and Neeley – living amid the poverty stricken tenements of Brooklyn. Making ends meet had been so difficult that Katie learned early to live without illusions. She became a hard-nosed realist and taught her kids to steer clear of romantic expectations. Yet throughout the story epiphanies of grace occur as when, to celebrate Francie's graduation from elementary school, Katie took her and Neeley and their two aunts to an ice cream parlor for a rare treat. The waiter placed down the check for 30 cents. Aunt Evy thought, *I hope she's not fool enough to tip him*. Katie had only a 50 cent coin in her purse, so she laid it on the check. *The waiter . . . brought back four nickels . . . waiting for Katie to pick up three of them. She looked at the four nickels. 'Four loaves of bread,' she thought. Four pairs of eyes watched. . . Katie never hesitated. With a sure gesture, she pushed the four nickels toward the waiter. 'Keep the change,' she said grandly.* Francie wanted to stand up and cheer!

And then there was that midnight gesture on New Year's Eve, 1917. Francie had thrown open the window of their top floor flat. *All was still . . ., the backs of houses were dark and brooding . . . they heard the joyous peal of a church bell. Whistles came in. A siren shrieked . . . someone began "Auld Lang Syne". . . the Irish joined in – the neighborhood Germans singing "Ja, das ist ein Gartenhaus."* Soon there were catcalls . . . insults. *The Jews and Italians withdrew behind their blinds . . . Finally all settled down; . . . Then Francie grabbed her mother and Neeley. 'All together now,' she ordered. The three of them leaned out the window and shouted, 'Happy New Year, everybody!'*

*How can this so fleeting form / belong to such immensity?* The above poem was written by Melissa Kay pondering this season of the year. She visited me at my seminary fifty six years ago to talk of the disparities of friendship. As she left I said, "Well, everybody needs a friend." She returned the next day and said, "I want to be your friend." She has been ever since.

**Geoff Wood**