

Robyn Creswell, a frequent reviewer, was appointed poetry editor of *The Paris Review* in 2010.

December 31, 2001 Washington DC

Dear Robyn Creswell,

Thank you for your warm response to my letter, and for clearing up my bewilderment about how Sandy McClatchy came by your review [of *The Darkness and the Light* in *Raritan*]. (I hope he signs you up as a regular reviewer.)

It seems to me you are quite right in your feeling that poems don't console. I have never felt them to be consoling, in the usual sense of the word. Instead, they provide a curious kind of communion, which is what Auden must have meant when he said that our reading of literary works was a way of breaking bread with the dead. We become aware of certain kinds of intelligence, resonances of feeling, sympathetic vibrations of knowledge that speak to us from the words of total strangers, and it may be that we feel less alone—if that can be called consolation. I find this to be true of music as well as poetry. To be able to give full attention to a work of music—full enough attention to apprehend every quirk and turn, modulation and contrapuntal filigree—is to adapt oneself, in trust, to a complete coincidence with another mind, and to rejoice in the bond that has been so established. I should imagine that performers especially must feel that (all matters of technique apart) they are thinking as the composer thought when they are playing. For a large part of my own life I was very lonely, even when in close contact with others, and my experiences of music and literature were those I felt most intimately, and where I felt most sure of myself.

As for your suggestion that poetry criticism seems a willfully blinkered pursuit when considered against the backdrop of the Twin Towers and the bombings in Afghanistan, I think the only reasonable response for such as you or I would be that of Yeats's in "Lapis Lazuli." It takes the disciplines of a good part of a lifetime to command the faculties that go into the making of a good poet or a good critic, and these faculties are not the ones employed to address the calamities of existence. We should do what we have committed ourselves to doing, and do it as best we can; and if upheaval demands that we take up arms or help the wounded, we set aside our principal task until the emergency has been dealt with. Whereupon we resume what we had elected as most important to us.

This will not reach you before the beginning of the New Year, a year which