

Table Talk

“WHAT ARE you *doing* here?” the poet demanded.

It was a good question.

The reading had been interrupted by “a danger alarm,” the student in charge of the university-owned town-house explained. He seemed to feel this would reassure us. We should just stay seated while...

Several company’s worth of firemen burst past him, many wielding medieval-style pikes and staffs. We made for the door, waiting on the sidewalk while the distant bell continued to toll.

The poet, who had been interrupted in mid-stanza, was understandably suspicious. She found out I did not write poetry myself and wondered what brought me to such a hermetically sealed event. Everyone else was either a colleague or student. They all seemed to know each other. I glimpsed the makings of a severe pecking order: grandees, priesthood, aspirants. Or so it seemed to an outsider.

“I like...poetry,” I shrugged, managing to sound both ashamed and insincere.

Yet it’s true. When I go to the library and cruise the stacks, it is poetry, not prose, I end up bringing home. Perhaps this is a simple act of self-preservation. If I really took in how many novels there are in the world, with hundreds more appearing on the shelves each week, I might legitimately question what I am doing, what I have to contribute by trying to tell yet another story. I think there is more to it, though. I think it has to do with poetry not being written in sentences. I deal with sentences in the tens of thousands. I am made dizzy by them. By the end of a book, I know each one, its history, its transformations. My brain teems with their rhythms, their placement, their brothers and sisters, their opposites. At the final rewrite I fantasize or fear I can recite them all, in addition to their rejected alternatives, the way a professional chess player reels off not only the moves but the analyzed variations, the near-infinite possibilities, of a recently completed game. Particularly a game he lost.

But in poetry the unit is the line, which strikes me as fundamentally different. In a line, words are suspended like particles. Their individual properties are revealed, their chemistry. Some pulsate like stars. Others vibrate in a magical stillness, flaunting their crystalline structure. When they do interact, there is not the rush of a sentence but two creatures encountering each other, unsure if they are the same species, or if the other is even alive at all. Given such space and weight, the words invite me to expand in a similar fashion. Instead of being swept along, my reading mind disengages, loses its sense of forward and back, reaches all around, exploring a hitherto unimagined space. Poetry is a way *in* for me, though to what or where I still can’t say, which is why I keep coming back

to it, hugging armfuls of slim volumes from the library’s Newly Published section, turning the pages with far less certainty of what I will find than in most novels. Poems (some, not all) contain a nutrient my mind instinctively hungers for. They inform what I do.

Of course I told the poet none of this, which is why I am trying to explain it now. Other people came to talk to her. I drifted off. After half an hour, the bell stopped. We filed back in but took—why?—different seats. I found myself behind a young woman wearing a backless dress. The poet picked up where she left off. I stared into skin.

—Thomas Rayfiel

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