

A Note To The Reader

If humanity can be divided into two groups—those who love poetry and those who don't—I am clearly on the side of those who do. But it wasn't always so. I met a real poet once, when I was younger. He worked a forgettable 9-5 job, but he told me that his real job was being a poet. I still remember the small gag reflex in the back of my throat. I pitied him as a kind of second-rate citizen, ill-equipped to pull his economic weight; a drifter without any real ambition who probably dropped out of high school and desperately needed a title to justify his existence. So much wasted potential.

The truth is, poetry was more like a strange uncle than a friend for most of my life. I dodged poetry and

sympathized with those who found poetry ornery, peculiar, unwilling to confess its meaning in a clear, simple formula, even under the most grueling interrogation. Reading poetry with any strict structure was a grind, and any poetry liberated from such forms struck me as a waste of time.

For me and those like me, mystery is fine so long as it doesn't come clothed in poetry. I did not know that a complex world demands poets willing to dislocate common language and startle the soul, willing to tell the truth from a slant, willing to breach the inner life. I did not know that poetry must be "a raid on the inarticulate" (T.S. Eliot, "East Coker") and I did not know that a poet's purpose is to "transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange" (ibid, *Personal Essays*).

Not until I suffered a massive health collapse did I finally discover the friendship of poetry. It was there all along, untouched by time, ready to serve, stir the soul, shift the gaze, or strike a match in the heart. Poetry is written by commoners who know what it's like to suffer. And they're not afraid to talk honestly about it. They know what it's like to enjoy simple, common pleasures, too, and they enjoy waking us, complete strangers, to those gifts of moment.

I have discovered rather late in life that poetry is a necessity, like our need to be touched. Garrison Keillor taught me that simple fact in his introduction to *Good Poems for Hard Times*. That short essay is, in my humble opinion, a nearly perfect invitation to the world of poetry and most of my thoughts in this note to you are borrowed with humble gratefulness to him. He reminded me that poetry is not a riddle to be solved, but a rendering of gravity, grace, and beauty that lends courage to strangers. Poetry does that for me.

How thankful I am for poetry's generosity in that regard and for its patience with me. It's true, poetry is sometimes ornery, peculiar, and difficult to understand, but so are most of my closest friends. And, like those friends, poetry that matters is never smug. It's never evasive or slippery, coded or disingenuous. Poetry is more direct than most of our daily conversations, more sincere than the rabble noise of politicians or sitcoms, more comforting than the common cliches on our billboards and virtual spaces. Have you noticed how rare it is to hear someone offer you something from the heart? Poetry that matters always does.

Good poems, like good people, are earnest. Like those people, they touch our lives in their own, unique way. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” wrote that “each mortal thing does one thing and the same/...goes itself; myself it speaks and spells/ crying What I do is me: for that I came.” Like other mortal things, a poem exists as a unique thing. It leaves the poet and walks through the world as itself, crying “What I do is me!”

So it was in my deepest need that I found courage and hope and perspective in the bold, heart-felt writing of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Li-Young Lee, T.S. Eliot, Theodore Roethke, Rainer Maria Rilke, William Wordsworth, Billy Collins, and Mary Oliver. Each, in his or her own way, loosed the chains of my self-absorption.

But more than all these, I found comfort and aid in the Christian scriptures. C.S. Lewis suggested that we read stories to know we’re not alone. I read the Bible to know that I’m not alone. During my health collapse, certain scripture passages spoke radiantly and sympathetically into my desert place, so I collected *some* of those passages and included them in this volume of poetry.

The poems in this book are largely inspired by these

passages. I did not attempt to write poetic translations or poetic renderings of those verses. I simply wrote to capture what I felt was the central spirit of the passage and its poignancy in my life. I tried to write in imitation of the psalmist, who bared his heart—all its doubts, shame, fears, ecstasies, and shams—before God. David was a poet king who recognized his weakness and his status as a sojourner. For that reason, the Psalms are a comfort for those of us who feel alone in our frail and wandering humanity.

That comfort is not limited to the Psalms; the entire Bible is for sojourners. Yes, it provides directions and rules for the road, but more than that, it describes a context for their stories—where they came from and where they are going—and songs to sing along the way. It also provides promises for sojourners who feel lost in a desert: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Weeping, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion” (Psalm 84:5-7).

These poems are an attempt to turn my valley of weeping into a place of springs. Many of them recapture

my deepest feelings of despair during that health collapse so many years ago. I wrote them for me and for those whose hearts, like mine, are set on pilgrimage. May this book be a pool of fresh water in your desert place. May it help you go from strength to strength beneath the open sky of God's grace.

Finally, some readers might wonder why I chose to write these poems in free verse. Honestly, after I finally came around to poetry, I still harbored a prejudice against free verse. Convinced that the sonnet was the high point of poetic expression, I disdained free verse as the irreverent, slipshod child of a post-modern age. I preferred the simple, easily identifiable external restrictions of the sonnet and overlooked the more subtle, more complex, internal discipline of free verse. In my prejudice, I failed to recognize the limitations and guiding principles of free verse as an art form.

Poetry is the precise, rhythmic, playfulness of words. The seeming unrestraint of free verse belies a precise, poetic rigor which demands a metaphysical awareness from both poet and reader. As such, meaning in free verse, as in life, is found in more than words. Even the space around words

carries meaning. Isn't the silence between spoken words as significant to conversation and relationship as the words themselves? Or consider the visual arts: negative space in a painting is equally important to positive space in the cohesion and meaning of a piece. I find in free verse a preferable rhythm and line intention which allows the mind and heart to breathe, undistracted by so many of the formalities found in other kinds of poetry.

I have organized these poems in four sections which follow the liturgical hours. For many Christians through the centuries, the liturgical hours marked and anchored the hours of each day with prayer. It seemed natural to structure this poetry collection upon the practices of those who recognized their status as sojourners. Because we are sojourners, our experiences run the gamut of deep despair to buoyant exultation. The first section of poetry recalls the works of God and assesses the present, the second section largely anticipates the long night ahead, the third section wrestles with the despair of suffering, and the final poems reflect the hope offered by the rising sun. However you read these poems, by reading straight through or by selecting those poems which fit your circumstances, I

hope they serve as good company on your journey.

I offer these poems as a peace offering to those whom I have loved and to those whom I have hurt. Perhaps a spiritual alchemy will transmute my personal agonies and private joys into something rich and strange for you, dear reader. As they are, I gift them to you.

These are the poems of a pilgrim. These are sojourner songs.

Ben Palpant, 2016