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**By Heart**

I moved a small bookshelf into my study from the basement recently, some yellowed slips of paper fluttering to the ground as I carried it upstairs. I had taped the slips—copies of poems that I wanted to save in a visible place—to the shelf when it occupied a different study in a different house. My previous means of saving poems, collecting them in a folder or marking them in a book, had turned out to be ineffective because I'd forget about them. I never re-read the taped ones either, though I could see them from a distance every time I entered my old study, and up close whenever I sat at my desk. Even during the years that the shelf lived in the basement, I'd walk past the curling papers, remember which poems they contained, and keep going.

After placing the shelf in its new home, I walked back downstairs retrieving the scattered poems. Did I re-read them one last time before putting them in the trash and admitting the failure of my taping strategy? Yes and no. I looked at the first one, "Purple Bathing Suit" by Louise Gluck, directing my eye to the last line of the first stanza—"You might give some thought to that mouth"—which I remembered as my favorite line and the one that had prompted me to save the poem in the first place. The line's humor and the effect of its repetition depend on the four lines preceding it:

I like watching you garden  
with your back to me in your purple bathing suit:  
your back is my favorite part of you,  
the part furthest away from your mouth.  
You might give some thought to that mouth.

That fifth line also sets the tone of sexy sassiness that dominates the remaining four

quatrains, culminating in the poem's final blurt:

Also to the way you weed, breaking  
the grass off at ground level  
when you should pull it by the roots.  
How many times do I have to tell you

how the grass spreads, your little  
pile notwithstanding, in a dark mass which  
by smoothing over the surface you have finally  
fully obscured? Watching you

stare into space in the tidy  
rows of the vegetable garden, ostensibly  
working hard while actually  
doing the worst job possible, I think

you are a small irritating purple thing  
and I would like to see you walk off the face of the earth  
because you are all that's wrong with my life  
and I need you and I claim you.

Holding Gluck's poem after picking it up off the basement floor, I didn't re-read the last lines or the first four or any in between, needing only the fifth—"You might give some thought to that mouth"—to get the whole thing working for me again. Needed? Not really. Having partially memorized that line, I had been carrying it around with me as a kind of half-visual, half-aural mnemonic the whole time the slip of paper had been taped to the bookcase, and could use it to trigger the poem's effect at will.

So what did I do? Did I discard the clipping as unnecessary to my preservation of the poem or keep it as a reminder that I didn't need reminding? Neither. I re-taped it to the same spot on the shelf so that the new tape aligned with the old mark, but did so out of my chronic guilt that if I profess to like poetry then I ought to read the poetry that I profess to like. The same compunction led me to re-affix one of the other poems, Yannis Ritsos's "Healing," even though a quick look at the last line—"Now a sheep could lie down there"—was all I needed to summon my response to the poem.

The nights passed very darkly.  
Great cries ran in the wind.  
The next day we didn't remember a thing.

There was a deep hole left in time.

There where the wolf had nestled in,  
a pothole remained, spread with warm wolf-hair.  
Now a sheep could lie down there.

(trans. Edmund Keeley)

The only poem I discarded was Philip Larkin's "Days," which I know verbatim and repeat lines of to myself most days, so having it visible is redundant on all counts.

What are days for?  
Days are where we live.  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in:  
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats  
Running over the fields.

I have always been curious about the way people who claim to like poetry "consume" it, and self-conscious about how little of it I engage with through reading, especially compared to how much of it I write. Few people read poetry the way they read news articles—rather, they savor and dwell. But then what? After they put a poem down, how do they decide when to pick it up again, and do they then re-read it in full or selectively re-savor and re-dwell? At what point do these last two processes break free of the printed words and become something that happens in the mind? Are we still reading then?

I seldom turn to contemporary poetry books for daily pleasure the way I do the music on my iPod or the novel on my bedside table. As for the poetry of the past, my collection of that lives on another bookshelf in the form of a few dozen individual volumes that I have purchased and retained over the years and some Norton anthologies that I acquired as a college English major. I know that my annotated pages of "Lycidas," "The Rape of the Lock" and "In Memoriam" are there, but it's been years since I've sought them out the way I re-watch movies or visit favorite paintings in the university museum near my home. Just as I might as well have thrown out the taped-up poems for

all the attention they received, I could have discarded the anthologies rather than move them from home to home over the past thirty years.

It's hard for me to re-read the previous paragraph without feeling guilty all over again. As someone who claims to love poetry without actively partaking of it, and spends more time creating it than reading it, I would seem to represent the kind of hypocrite deplored by publishers, literary magazine editors, and other poets. ("I've had it with these cheap sons of bitches who claim they love poetry but never buy a book," the poet Kenneth Rexroth wrote). Yet my neglect of the poems that I had liked enough to post in plain sight led me to an unexpected realization—that for all of my apparent indifference to reading poetry I consume it as avidly as the most hands-on reader; it's just that my enjoyment depends on memorization, or more accurately, internalization. I'm rarely able to learn poems by heart without trying to do so, but I do remember phrases, rhythms, line breaks, stanza shapes, tones, moods, or details, and use these to summon a poem's effect.

With "Purple Bathing Suit," for example, my aural/visual image of the line "You might give some thought to that mouth" was enough to remind me of its roots in the previous four lines and role in the next sixteen. The means by which that image led me back into the poem resembles one described by Joshua Foer in his book *Moonwalking with Einstein*, on the art of memory. According to Foer, we remember things better if we associate them with familiar objects and then organize those objects by filing them in mental compartments. For example, to retain the title of a novel called *Mr. Fox* that I wanted to check out on Amazon, I thought of a fox-shaped beer mug that my father owned, and imagined it inside the mailbox at my childhood home. Later, when I found myself browsing on Amazon and blanking on what I had wanted to look up, I returned to that mailbox in my mind, opened it, saw the fox mug, and after a moment's puzzling remembered that I wanted to investigate the title *Mr. Fox*.

Thus the slip containing "Purple Bathing Suit" became the equivalent of my mailbox, and the image of "you might give some thought to that mouth" my fox mug leading me back into the poem. The same cues help me to recover poems from the books visible on my shelves. A page of one Norton anthology, for example, contains Milton's "Lycidas," which I first read without interest as a college freshman, reread after

graduation when I decided that if I was going to write poetry I ought to familiarize myself with the canon, and later analyzed in my master's thesis on Robert Lowell, whose poetry it influenced. Today I know "Lycidas" and other classics well enough that I don't need to reread them so much as to ignite what I remember. I don't have them fully memorized, but full memorization and regular rereading are no more essential to maintaining a relationship with a poem than constant interaction is essential to maintaining a relationship with a person.

Given how much I depend on my memory to re-conjure poems, why don't I just sit down and memorize them instead of settling for passive, impressionistic, possibly inaccurate recall? For one thing, I neither enjoy nor believe in rote memorization. Contrary to conventional English teacher wisdom, mastering poems in this way tends to ruin them for me, diluting their mystery as much as illuminating their workings; I no sooner learn a poem verbatim through constant repetition than I no longer want to revisit it mentally or in print. Most people will retain what they love without prodding by a teacher or their conscience. My grasp of "Purple Bathing Suit," from which I remembered just enough to set off a series of associations to the poem, strikes me as the most natural kind of memorization.

My dislike of rote memorization began with a self-improvement project I tried twenty years ago. Browsing through college syllabi in preparation for teaching a poetry workshop, I noticed that many older poets required memorization as part of their courses, describing it as essential for anyone serious about learning the craft. At the same time, a friend of mine had a habit of praising people's erudition by saying that they could "quote Shakespeare by the yard." Not wanting to be seen as a dilettante, and longing to earn the "Shakespeare by the yard" compliment by showing off my repertoire in public, I set out to learn a lot of poetry by heart. I chose material—the endings of "Samson Agonistes" and *Paradise Lost*, "Ode To Autumn," and soliloquies from *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Henry V*—that would impress an audience at a cocktail party.

The cocktail party scenario never happened (they make me too uncomfortable to mingle much less declaim). And on other occasions when an impromptu recital might have enhanced my image—for example, when someone mentioned a poem in conversation that I could have delivered in its entirety, or when I might have impressed

my ninth grade students by quoting Shakespeare during class discussions—the gesture felt pretentious. Not many people can get away with spouting verse in public. As for my fear of being a dilettante, I hope that my preference for assimilating poems naturally gives me as much of a claim to seriousness as someone who repeats them until they stick.

On the positive side, I liked having all that poetry available to mumble to myself on walks or drives, even though I could never quite figure out how to enjoy it. I'm a laborious memorizer, proceeding a phrase at a time, repeating and repeating and going back to the beginning to incorporate each newly mastered line into the whole. By the time I'm done, the poem that once unfolded pleasingly before my eyes and lingered in my mind has worn a groove in my memory, losing some of its charm. And while memorization does help me to analyze poetry, I'm not sure that preserving some mystery isn't desirable, too. I prefer—and am more likely to strive to equal—a poem that still strikes me as a miracle of literary genius than one I'm getting sick of.

Most of the lines that I memorized twenty years ago are still with me and run through my head as I buy groceries or drive to work, sometimes as a welcome soundtrack and other times like a persistent song lyric that I can't shake off. Perhaps the best result of my memorizing was that it lodged in my consciousness poems that I'd otherwise have forgotten. But how necessary could they have been for me to carry around if I had to make myself remember them?

There's a logic to which parts of a poem stay with me and why this happens with some poems and not others. Affinity for subject matter is one criterion, as with the refrain from Philip Larkin's "Wants," which I first read as a morose college student:

Beyond all this the wish to be alone.  
Beneath it all desire of oblivion runs.

I have outgrown the state of mind that these lines express, but still take pleasure in their blunt honesty, the rhythm as abrupt and attenuated as a breaking wave.

Sometimes sound alone is enough to fix poetry in my mind, as with the heavy stresses that open Robert Frost's poem, "Directive," or the sliding assonance of Prince Hal's speech to his childhood friends in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*:

Back out all this now too much for us,

Back in a time made simple by the loss of detail  
“Directive” (l. 1-2)

I know you all, and will awhile uphold  
The unyoked humor of your idleness.  
Henry IV, Part 1 (I. ii. 173-195)

The accomplishment of these lines is twofold: they create an effect that outlasts my reading and they provide cues that allow me to reproduce that effect—the slapping “Back”s in the first example and the sonorous “o,” “u” and “y” tones in the second.

I seem to store poetry at two different levels of accessibility. Certain poems accompany me constantly—in the case of Larkin’s “Days,” the first two lines and final image rarely leave the forefront of my consciousness. Alternately, a poem like “Purple Bathing Suit” resurfaces in response to some prompt like that slip of paper retrieved from the basement floor. Whether or not these levels correspond to my preferences for these poems, both involve a deeper immersion in writing than the act of reading words on a page. My most intimate engagement with poetry, which takes the form of an extended mental replaying of sounds and words, takes place when I’m out of sight of it, suggesting that my reading is an audition for poems that will stay with me when the volume is closed. These auditions used to be more fruitful. I imagine that most readers have the experience of gorging on great poetry when they are young and amassing an inner repertoire of lines and images that flicker in and out of consciousness. As they move beyond the classics to keeping up with contemporary publications, the pickings get slimmer and they spend more time dwelling on work that survives in their memories.

This doesn’t mean that I never need to open a book again or that all the poetry I love lives in my head. Many poems that I admire fade as soon as my eye leaves the page; not even years of extended exposure such as I had with “Lycidas” is enough to fix them in my mental library. Perhaps “admire” is the critical word here. Is there a difference between admiring a poem and involuntarily preserving it beyond the page? A fourth slip taped to my bookshelf contained Charles Simic’s “Old Soldier,” which unlocked no associations when I picked it up off the basement floor. This told me that I had probably saved it intending to try it out on my high school English class. In twenty years as a

teacher I have become accustomed to identifying teachable qualities in poems that my mind chooses not to possess.

The filmmaker Martin Scorsese's longtime production designer, Dante Ferretti, describes how Scorsese prepares for a shoot:

When we begin a film, I read the script and then Marty shows me films. Many, many films, with many different references he wants me to think of for the look of our movie. He carries all these films in his head. He shows me whole films for just one shot, telling me, 'Remember this image, that's the feel I want.'

Similarly, my mental archive of poetic references helps me to achieve a "feel" in my writing, making it as much an expression of my reading as of myself. I regularly identify phrasings in my poems that derive from my admiration for certain poets' styles. What writer would not credit reading as a creative resource and motivation? The novelist Jonathan Lethem said:

I began writing in order to arrive into the company of those whose company meant more to me than any other: the world of the books I'd found on shelves and begun to assemble on my own, and the people who'd written them, and the readers who cared as much as I did, if those existed.

With a process as instinctive as the one I have described, it's hard to capture the precise nature of what we retain from poems, or to what extent it allows us to reconstruct a whole. Yet internalization strikes me as our most important—perhaps our only important—response to art, which can be measured by its ability to insinuate itself into our minds. It's how we liberate what we love from its printed, painted, celluloid, or digital form in order to bear and be borne by it into the world.