

Michael Milburn

Seen Sideways

Only what is seen sideways sinks deep.

E.M. Forster

I heard a story recently that illustrated for me the best way to appreciate poetry, or at least the way that I prefer to appreciate it. I should preface it by saying that I had an incomparable education, and thanks to my passionate teachers and comprehensive curriculum, I never needed to do much intellectual or creative exploration on my own. For example, my interest in painting began with an art history course held in my university's museum, just steps from some of the paintings being flashed on screen. My music professor supplemented his lectures by organizing field trips to concerts by the local symphony orchestra. And while my love of literature was sparked by the readers in my family, I was introduced to creative writing by a high school English elective and continued my apprenticeship in college workshops.

The downside to all this scholarship is that from my earliest encounters with art I have approached it as something to be studied, analyzed, critiqued. This remains especially true of poetry, as in the past thirty years I have become what J.D. Salinger called "a lifetime English major," teaching college and high school English and continuing to write poems. I occasionally come across good poems by accident—that is, without having sought them out for inclusion on a syllabus or as a means of keeping abreast of the contemporary scene—but my initial motivation in reading poetry is usually to teach it or learn from it rather than to be entertained. In fact, I can't recall ever reading or writing a poem without examining its workings, subjecting it to a workshop-of-one in my mind.

Though studying poetry in this way gives me some satisfaction, it also partly ruins it. Technical expertise can help one to recognize subtleties of craft, but I wonder if an untutored audience that likes or dislikes instinctively derives more pleasure from a work of art. The novelist Michael Cunningham recalls meeting a reader of the latter kind while working in a hotel bar as a young man. One of the hostesses, Helen, was an overworked single mother in her forties

who loved to read. After seeing Helen with "a trashy murder mystery" Cunningham recommends Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

When she had finished it she told me,

"That was wonderful."

"Thought you'd like it," I answered.

She added, "Dostoyevsky is much better than Ken Follett."

"Yep."

Then she paused. "But he's not as good as Scott Turow."

Although I didn't necessarily agree with her about Dostoyevsky versus Turow, I did like, very much, that Helen had no school-inspired sense of what she was supposed to enjoy more, and what less. She simply needed what any good reader needs: absorption, emotion, momentum and the sense of being transported from the world in which she lived and transplanted into another one.

I also admire Helen's criteria. It depresses me to approach poetry like a homework assignment, and to know that most readers in the genre, coming as they do from the ranks of poets, editors, students, and teachers, read poems in this way. Who could blame poets for writing accordingly, with an eye toward being evaluated by an expert or someone aspiring to expertise? The novelist and writing teacher Richard Russo complains about "the propensity of my lit colleagues to mine both poetry and prose fiction for its sparkling nuggets of meaning (instruction) while allowing its many delights to run off like so much slurry." It's ironic that people who love an art form enough to make it the focus of their studies or profession, or to practice it themselves, should be prevented from enjoying it in an uncomplicated, consumerist way, like a four star chef unable to bite into a soufflé without all the technicalities of texture and flavor crowding his consciousness.

Now to my story. I was listening to a radio program when the guest, a cancer sufferer, described his fear of MRIs. In order to take his mind off his claustrophobia, he recited poems to himself while inside the tube. His favorite was Elizabeth Bishop's "Letter to N.Y." which he repeated from memory.

Letter To N.Y.

In your next letter I wish you'd say
where you are going and what you are doing;
how are the plays and after the plays
what other pleasures you're pursuing:

taking cabs in the middle of the night,
driving as if to save your soul

where the road goes round and round the park
and the meter glares like a moral owl,

and the trees look so queer and green
standing alone in big black caves
and suddenly you're in a different place
where everything seems to happen in waves,

and most of the jokes you just can't catch,
like dirty words rubbed off a slate,
and the songs are loud but somehow dim
and it gets so terribly late,

and coming out of the brownstone house
to the gray sidewalk, the watered street,
one side of the buildings rises with the sun
like a glistening field of wheat.

--Wheat, not oats, dear. I'm afraid
if it's wheat it's none of your sowing,
nevertheless I'd like to know
what you are doing and where you are going.

I knew Bishop's poem, but had not read it in a long time, and had never heard it read aloud. Listening to it, I was pleased in a way that poetry rarely pleases me when I seek it out in my usual sources: literary journals, books, or anthologies. It occurred to me that discovering poetry in this way—obliquely, unexpectedly, and in a context other than a classroom or other literary forum—was how I appreciated it best.

The reading of "Letter to N.Y." came to me not as part of a poetry aloud program, but to illustrate an anecdote having nothing to do with poetry. It entered my life as I was in the midst of doing something practical and unliterary—driving home from work—rather than when I had set aside time for appreciating art. I was too focused on the reader's and my circumstances to "nerd out" on the poem, as a musician friend calls his habit of dissecting every piece of music he hears. The recital became as incidental a part of my commute as the woman I glimpsed crossing a street or the stop I made at a gas station to buy milk. Poetry hardly ever sidles into my life in this way. Even when I come across poems intended for oblique encounters—displayed in the subway, for example—I'm aware that the opportunity for culture has been set up in advance. Finally, the man saying the poem didn't care about it as a "text" or model of craft, but as a comfort at a stressful time. I realized that he was the kind of reader I want to write for and to be. As Cunningham said of Helen

I began to think of myself as trying to write a book that would matter to Helen. And, I have to tell you, it changed my writing. I'd seen, rather suddenly, that writing is not only an exercise in self-expression, it is also, more important, a gift we as writers are trying to give to readers. Writing a book for Helen, or for someone like Helen, is a manageable goal.

As a claustrophobic myself, I have long dreaded having to undergo an MRI. My gift from the reciter, and by extension from Bishop herself, was to realize that poetry—perhaps this particular poem—might help me to endure the procedure should I ever require it. I thought of other times when poetry had affected me in this way, and it was often when I had come upon it obliquely: in eulogies, when it helped me to articulate my feelings about a death; in marriage vows, when it verbalized a couple's love or marital love in general; even stuck to a refrigerator. For example, Stanley Kunitz's poem "Route Six," recalling summer drives to Cape Cod with his wife, functions as a kind of credo for the married friends of mine in whose kitchen it is displayed.

I envision the audience for my own poetry as a few friends and family members, or editors to whom I submit it for publication. I don't think of strangers reading it because it's unlikely that many will. This doesn't bother me; the size of my audience has no bearing on my motivation to write. But the guy on the radio, a non-specialist using poetry to get him through a tough situation, suddenly represented an audience that I coveted. For one of my poems to help someone through an MRI would give me the same satisfaction as when I introduce my high school students to books that please them. Not only would the effect gratify me, but it would be a relief to cease seeing poetry, if only briefly, as the demoralizing, envy-prone enterprise that it often feels like for struggling poets.

I don't know how to increase my unplanned encounters with poetry. Occasionally I'll try to force an oblique experience by opening a book and reading a single poem in a bookstore, but I still find myself wondering if my students would like it, or measuring it against my own work. The same thing happens if I come across a poem while reading short stories or articles in the *New Yorker*. As my eye moves from the prose or cartoon on the page to the first line of the poem, a switch flips in my mind from "fan" to "expert." My critical sensors power on, preparing me for a direct analytical assault. I'd like to keep my poetry reading switch set to "fan" all the time. This may explain why in reading for pleasure I'm drawn to biography and short fiction, genres that I neither practice nor teach.

The epiphany produced by the radio show coincided with a related change in my approach to writing. Here, too, I discovered that my most rewarding relationship with poetry is an oblique one. I have long found it torturous to write, even to get myself to start, first drafts. When I first began writing poetry in college, I was boiling over with poems, and had so many veins of subject matter to mine—childhood, family, love, day to day experiences—that my only concern was finding time to get my words down on paper. Gradually, however, my relationship to inspiration changed. I had to shut down some of my subject matter sources—for example, I had written too many poems about my father, and as potent as my feelings about him remained, I was starting to repeat myself.

Also, having taken a few workshops and become more serious about writing, I became more self-conscious. Ideas for poems no longer rose up in me and clamored for transcription; now they were met by inhibition (which remains to this day). “Poetry can unleash a terrible fear,” Jim Carroll wrote. “I suppose it is the fear of possibilities, each with its own endless set of variations.” I dreaded the experience that every writer knows of ruining a glorious idea by putting it into words, or eagerly starting a poem and having to discard it as a failure. Thus was born my hatred of first drafts. While writing, I felt great pressure to keep the draft “alive”—that is, to protect it from my judgment that it was going nowhere or had gone somewhere banal and was unsalvageable. Each failure made it harder to start again.

I conquered this problem by confronting it, undertaking many new poems in quick succession in a kind of agony of self-discipline. I wrote a draft a day for a month at a time, immediately filing it away without looking at it, then returned to the first one and started revising it. This made it easier for me to finish a draft without worrying whether it was good, and eased my despair if it succumbed during revision—there were many more where that one came from. My headlong approach also allowed me to come upon inspiration obliquely, keeping my judging mind at bay long enough for language to come to life. “The writing of a poem is like a child throwing stones into a mineshaft,” James Fenton has said. “You compose first, then you listen for the reverberation.” A similar process helps my middle school students overcome their writing inhibitions. My most effective exercises involve leading them through manageable steps—creating lists or prose descriptions, for example—that can eventually be shaped into poems.

My system for generating first drafts isn’t for everyone, and for a while I felt self-conscious about its forced quality, so far from the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings of my college days as to make me wonder if good poetry can be composed this way. Reviewing a

poetry book in the *New York Times*, the critic William Logan deplored “that evil thing, poems written for the sake of writing poems.” I had to laugh—not only has it been decades since I wrote poems for any other reason, but I doubt that many ambitious poets wait around to be visited by the muse. William Butler Yeats’s and Robert Lowell’s published worksheets show two writers obsessed with their craft, their poems’ subjects and concerns mere literary fodder.

I don’t believe writing on demand diminishes the art. For me, it’s a way of gaining access to inspiration. During my poem-a-day regimens, the first few lines are grueling, then words begin to emerge uncensored by self-consciousness, showing me the way to what I might want to write about. “The trick is to will yourself into the hypnotic state where you believe your own language and your own story,” the short story writer Wells Tower says. I don’t claim any direct connection between my preferences for sneaking up on poetry in my own writing and for coming across others’ poems unexpectedly. Just that art, however one creates or encounters it, abhors predictability, and it’s our unanticipated discoveries that yield what the Syrian poet Adonis called “that knowledge which is explosive and surprising.”