

“Poetry is Hard, But Not the Way You Think”
Sermon by S.E. Gilman
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My name is Sharlene but I use my initials when I publish because of all those ‘Lenes -- cousin Darlene, Carlene, Arlene...

April is Poetry Month – a lot of what I’m going to talk about is the poetry I discovered when I was a kid and when I started writing in the 7th grade and a teenager. I remember staring out the window in Algebra 1 in 7th grade, thinking about my trip that weekend to Six Flags with a group of kids who didn’t go to my temple, but went to one in Houston. It was a big group of pre-teens and teens who got together for

the first time. Also for the first time, a guy from Houston chose to sit by me, and we ended up in inter-digitation – this is Latinate but family friendly: he held my hand on the bus going home. This had never happened before, and it sent strange feelings of acceptance that was pretty rare for me at the time, much more compelling than solving for X.

By the time I got to Algebra 2, I was writing pretty much non-stop, along with staring out the window. In fact, Mrs. Edwards saw me writing when I should have been solving equations. She picked up my paper, looked at the poem, and said, “Not bad.” She wrote poems herself. I remember that she told me about herself that she was a fan of the novels of Ayn Rand. But she did say, “not bad.” And “you get an F for the day.”

Last year at about this time, I was included in the anthology Keystone Poetry from Penn State Press and anthology of PA poets. And if Mrs. Edwards was alive now, I could tell her now that I do wish I had paid more attention in algebra class because I like science.

But the poems I was reading spoke to me about how I was learning to see the world. I saw history unfold on Walter Cronkite’s news -- villages of straw and bamboo strafed by napalm, by Agent Orange, our army shooting at civilians at Mai Lai, shooting from helicopters.

Ozymandias by Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Poems taught me what I was learning about war – particularly from the poets of the first Great War who continue to be poets I much admire: Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est,” the title and the very last line in Latin: “How sweet and noble it is to die for one’s country.”

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

As I grew up, poems about a child dancing on the shoes of their drunken father – “Such waltzing was not easy” – a boy growing up in the middle of a parent’s addiction from Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz”

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.
You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

There is a rhyme scheme because he writes of a waltz, but the pleasure of closeness and the mood and danger created by alcoholism is certainly one of the dancers.

Or killing a deer's fawn when the mother has been hit by a car and abandoned, rolling the dead but pregnant doe off the roadside berm in William Stafford's "Traveling in the Dark"

...her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.

Beside that mountain road I hesitated.
... I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Poetry is hard because it can say hard things. Because we all live hard things. Yes, it has forms, but its hardness is not a struggle to exact form as much as it is to really feel first. The cauldron comes to boil, the molten metal of language forges the edge, the tip of the lance. The target is hard as experience, the feelings, the intensity of joy sometimes and also of horrific waste and despair, true to our human experience. Everyone can make something of it, from it. Like Emily Dickinson's poem for which there is no title:

There is a pain – so utter –
It swallows substance up –
Then covers the Abyss with Trance –
So Memory can step
Around – across – upon it –
As one within a Swoon –
Goes safely – where an open eye –
Would drop Him – Bone by Bone.

Sometimes a poem is like a bird – sometimes it sings for food, sometimes for territory or mates, -- and sometimes the bird sings for the hell of it, just to sing.

Poems began as prayers. Poems began as invocations, those found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. In the Old Testament: The Song of Solomon, calling out beauty and desire.

Poems still incant; poems still pray. We do this as children. Everyone can do this, even adults: Do you sing? In the shower? Good. William Stafford tells us that children are natural poets. He wonders what happened to us --"what happened to those children as they grew up" and as adults abandoned their creations? Do you pray? Do you wish and imagine, intensely sometimes? Everyone can do this.

Mary Oliver tells us all we need to know to live a full life: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it" Anyone can write. Make a poem, a piece of prose, a prayer, an incantation.

Fools like me who write cannot make a tree, it's true. But anyone can: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.