

The Poem & the Place

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POETRY SEEMS TO WANT to be made, and it will find in every generation, no matter how we pixelate the language and commodify our souls, some few whose lives will seem to them unfinished, if they do not sit, from time to time, and write the poetry that will not stay unsaid.

Poetry goes as far back in human history as language. We sang, it is said, before we spoke. Poetry is deep speech. Without it, without its being said and read and written, something in human nature will be off-key and out of step. If poetry stops, something in all of us stops. And the world loses depth, sense, sacredness.

Poetry is one of the elements; it's one of the seasons. Its rhythms perpetuate those of the spinning earth, the turning tide and the soul's own delight in the way things are. Poetry is a *sine qua non* of the scheme of things—of the robust revolutions of the globe and the tender revolutions of the human heart. As long as someone is hearing its quiet cry and trying their hand at getting it down, we have a shot at making something meaningful of our lives, of doing justice to the earth and our time on it, and in each other's lives.

Jane Hirshfield puts it this way: “a poem begins in language awake to its connections.” Verdi defined music as noise organized by wisdom. But that is truer still of poetry. And much of the wisdom that organizes a poem belongs to a mind beyond your own.

Making a poem, or reading one, one is reawakened, through wakeful language, to all the rest of what we've forgotten we're connected to, inside ourselves and beyond. Poetry can do this because it refuses, as Seamus Heaney has put it, “the intellect's eagerness to foreclose.”

Through giving ourselves over to language that leads us beyond where language normally takes us—and sometimes leaves us for dead—poetry can make a hearth we can share with all the rest of who we are and what the world is.

Poetry is what happens when we ask more of language. It's what happens to ourselves as readers and writers; and it is what happens to language; and it is what happens to the world.

Asking more of language, we find, through poetry, more in ourselves; poetry divines more in our world. It gives us back to our mammal selves, and it gives our minds back to the lyric silence that runs through things. The language of poetry—its deeper speech—lets us get at the sweetness and the sorrow, “the dearest freshness,” the contradictions and the miracles and the grief and the mystery of “deep down things,” as Hopkins put it—at the divine comedy we live out day by day.

Poetry will always be made **because**, as Seamus Heaney puts it in *Crediting Poetry*, his Nobel speech, it “satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust.” And these are always times of crisis, of one sort or another, in particular if one is past a certain age: “no time can be easy if one is living through it,” James Baldwin rightly says.

More intimately, Heaney says, poetry “can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago.” The scullery bucket of his childhood is an image Heaney offers up at the start of his speech, but one could substitute for it any other ordinary epiphany, such as these: the chrysanthemum in the vase, the curl of the wave as it carries you to shore, the cypress in the temple grounds, the martini at dusk, the blanket the grandmothers made, the photographs of one’s parents or one’s kids, an afternoon’s haying, the first night (or the thirtieth year) with a new love, the light-steamed vegetables, one’s childhood home, one’s father’s passing hour.

world. And as our lives go, so a fine poem goes. And it's my experience that as I dwell on all **that isn't** me or merely human, all that is lyric in me, all that is profoundly human, finds profounder, metaphoric utterance there; and when I dwell on *feeling*, all that that lifeworld of sense and sensation and emotion **is connected to, the ecology of which all that feeling is also apart**, finds more apt articulation *indirectly*. **Writing the place, I deepen the human; writing the human, I divine the places deeper.**

And so, poetry, doing justice to places as well as to selves, marries them again, implicates each in the other. **It animates places and domesticates them into dwellings; it worlds minds, greens and rewilds them again.**

"A poem is country, and it needs you to walk it..." And so a poet, as long as the social world lets her, does: making places on paper in which the world is recharged and unbearable human emotion finds company and consolation within the "family of things."

A poem must be local as well as vocal. It wants a voice and it wants a place. And if the gods are smiling, in the poem one becomes the other: the voice becomes the place, the place the voice. A poem is a place, and it becomes for the reader for a time a hearth, a sanctuary.