

Shimmering and Shuddering

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Preachers should read more poems and fewer commentaries. A great poem can jolt your faith. Like a 2:00 a.m. knock startling an old dog into her best self, the right poem will make a preacher howl. Finding the right poem is a challenge. Reading poetry can be like trying to find a good song on the radio. There is so much music, and so much of it is awful.

The hit-to-miss ratio in these art forms is abysmal. No matter what shape your own taste takes, you have to skim (or ignore or endure) a lot of dross to get the gold. But the gold is incredible. Who wants to live in a world without songs that make you wave your hands in the air and wish the drive was longer?

Here is the second half of Richard Wilbur's poem, "Epistemology,"

"We milk the cow of the world, and as we do
We whisper in her ear, 'You are not true.'"

Like most readers of this journal, I habitually proclaim a Paul Tillich-derived definition of the human condition. *Sin is separation, experienced in a tri-fold, disastrously galvanizing manner. Living in a state of sin, we are separated from God, separated from each other, and separated from ourselves.* Such precision clarifies, perhaps too much. I love how Wilbur's understanding of the problem illustrates and obfuscates our orthodoxies.

As our story nears its apex, it shimmers and begins to shudder; a speeding train exceeding its own capacities, or a child careening down a hill, arms akimbo, about to spill or fly. As we near the cross and resurrection, we approach what Karl Barth called "an event that takes place precisely at the boundary between what is possible and impossible, what is historical and what is unhistorical, time and eternity."¹ Suddenly the narrative shifts from one rooted in time and history to a story "confronted by obscurities and irreconcilable contradictions."² A congregant told me, "We should hold the Good Friday service once every three years. It is too intense." Our longing for God and our inability to withstand His proximity is reflected in the story's capacity to carry His presence even as His presence explodes it.

At this point, it is good to remember Emil Brunner's insistent observation: "Direct communication is paganism. Direct communication cannot communicate the message of God, but only that of an idol."³ How are we to preach amidst such tension? I am not suggesting that we proclaim in poetry. The sermon is its own form. But, when prose, even the prose of the Gospels, shudders with the power it is trying to convey, a retreat or a leap into poetry's indirect communication seems wise.

In her poem "Prayer" Marie Howe names perfectly our hammering desire for God, and our flat refusal of His nearness.

The poem's opening lines say it all.

"Every day I want to speak with you. And every day something more important calls for my attention—the drugstore, the beauty products, the luggage I need to buy for the trip. Even now I can hardly sit here"⁴

How can luggage and skin cream be more important than God? The answer to that question points toward the cross.

Galway Kinnell's short poem "Prayer" shares its title with Howe, but is far more opaque. The poem reads as a prayer of supplication, but what Kinnell wants is unclear.

"Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is what
I want. Only that. But that."⁵

Is he asking for the world, renouncing desire, or surrendering to automatic necessity? This poem is either a declaration of outrageous faith, or the dullest sort of atheism.

Nate Klug's poem "The Choice" offers a distanced consideration of faith. But the poem's cool tone is undercut by a disgusting image. The choice Klug presents to the believer is modernity or orthodoxy, an opportunity to analyze your own faith, or to be engulfed by it. The first option:

"To stand for once
outside my faith
to steady it
caught and squirming on a stick"⁶

Klug told me a childhood memory of giggling frogs informed the poem. But, faith held up and "squirming on a stick" calls to mind a deeper memory: God commanding Moses to mount a metal serpent on a pole in order to heal his snake-bitten people. It is faith's object, caught and squirming on a stick, that Jesus uses to define himself in the Gospel of John. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." This is the struggle Christianity inflicts on the believer's brain. To hold the cross in "mind's inviting light" is both necessary and repulsive. We are left, like Klug at the end of his poem, irritated with our inability to understand our faith and waiting to be claimed by it; to be bathed in what another poet called the crucifixion's "ray of darkness."

In the meantime we are stuck with our sin.

One of the few poems I have memorized is "Dinky" by Theodore Roethke. I did not memorize it intentionally. When our children were small, my wife and I read it to them over and over and over again. I wonder where our minds were. "Dinky" sounds like children's verse, but probably isn't. The opening lines echo Lewis Carroll.

“Oh what’s the weather in a beard?
It’s windy there and rather weird.”

“Dinky” is a five verse poem. The first four verses observe the work of “Dirty Dinky.” He ruins good weather, lets you step barefoot on a worm, causes pain, ruins your sleep.

“Last night you lay a-sleeping? No!
The room was thirty-five below;
The sheets and blankets turned to snow.
He’d got in: Dirty Dinky.”

Who is Dirty Dinky? He’s a trickster; the rotten actor in the story of your life. He sins against you. He is your enemy; the villain. Which means you must be the hero. That’s the logic until the fifth verse drops the hammer.

“You’d better watch the things you do.
You’d better watch the things you do.
You’re part of him; he’s part of you
You may be Dirty Dinky.”⁷

Paul, Augustine, Luther, and the newspaper are all relentless in their insistence that Sin’s dominion is both the cause and the result of the sins we commit. None of them get at this in the innocent rhythms of a children’s poem, and so none of them hit so wickedly.

The Polish poet Vasco Popa’s poem “Nails” is eerie, and fable-like. It is part of a series of short poems titled *Games*. Each of these poems purports to be instructions for a children’s game. To play “Nails” one person is the nail, another the pliers, and the remaining players are workmen.

“The pliers take the nail by the head
They grip him with their teeth and arms

And tug and tug
To get him out of the ceiling
Usually they only pull his head off
Getting nails out of the ceiling is hard.”

As a result, the workmen step in to remedy the situation. They express disgust with the pliers’ failure

“And smash their jaws and snap their arms
And throw them out the window”
The poem concludes

"After that someone else should be the
pliers
Someone else the nail
The others being workmen."⁸

In a 1966 essay hailing Popa's genius, Ted Hughes described the action in "Nails" as "tireless cruel play within a mysterious nightmare." I think of soldiers, rolling dice for Christ's clothing, and the thief mocking him with his dying breath, as perverse as schoolyard bullies plucking wings from butterflies. I think of our annual observance of Christ's death, a way to name our daily habit of shoving him from our lives. Of the poems in *Games* Hughes writes, "They are deeper than common reality in the way puppets are deeper than common reality." Imagine a passion play cast with dead-eyed marionettes. Imagine pulling the strings.

A great poem can lift you into a mode of existence more light-filled, effervescent, and delightful than the everyday, revealing the everyday to be delightful. Danielle Chapman's poem "Coda" is transporting.

"- beyond our grand stupidities -
the urgency won't perish; to be known
In one's own person as crocuses are known
by sun, conceiving green to breathe it
for ravishment by light."⁹

But just as surely, a great poem can turn the ground beneath your feet uncertain, strip false assurances away, and leave you desperate for Easter. Most preachers know that denouncing sin or bemoaning the tragedy of existence is the easiest part of writing a sermon. I suspect that even poets who do not believe in sin experience a similar truth. After all, we witness and anticipate death in ways we will never encounter resurrection.

I set out to identify a few poems good enough to shock a preacher into the deeper truths of Lent. The search for equally unsparing Easter poems will take much longer. The effort and the search are worth it, because the need is so great. One of the strongest ironies in Christianity is that the resurrection, an event that demands proclamation, utterly defies explanation. Maybe there is no other way. As Emily Dickinson says in poem 1668

"If I could tell you how glad I was
I should not be so glad-"¹⁰

The best preaching advice I have ever read came at the beginning of a long poem I struggle to understand. HD's poem *The Flowering of the Rod* has forty-six sections. In the third one she writes,

"In resurrection, there is confusion
if we start to argue; if we stand and stare,

we do not know where to go;
In resurrection there is simple affirmation,

but do not delay to round up the others,
up and down the street; your going

in a moment like this, is the best proof
That you know the way."¹¹

And if you need an image to hang all this on, I suggest you do what Connie Wanek does in her poem "Peaches." Buy a dozen peaches, and eat them

"peach after peach
without hesitation or apology"
She finds them disappointing.

"I wondered what exactly
I expected of them. Flavor, I suppose."

She is left with her disappointment and with the pit, the stone of the last peach she has eaten. She holds it in her hand and thinks, hopes, that the stone, the pit

"might offer me I can't say what,
like tea leaves or a fortune cookie,
some hint of a changed life.
Still moist, still bearing a tassel of flesh,
the stone requests a sympathetic burial;
it believes that any amicable clay, even mine,
is suitable for resurrection."¹²

May be it be so.

Notes

- 1 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Baker, 2017, p. 132-33
- 2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume IV part 1*, Scribner, 1956, p. 335
- 3 Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, Wipf and Stock, 2002, p. 50
- 4 Marie Howe, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, Norton, 2008, p. 27
- 5 Galway Kinnel, *A New Selected Poems*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000
- 6 Nate Klug, *Poetry Magazine*, November, 2010
- 7 Theodore Roethke, *Collected Poems*, Anchor, 1975, p.174
- 8 Vasco Popa, *The Rattlebag* eds Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, 1985, p. 171
- 9 Danielle Chapman, *Delinquent Palaces*, Northwestern, 2014, p. 37
- 10 Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Back Bay Books, 1976
- 11 Hilda Doolittle, *Selected Poems*, New Directions, 1985, p. 165
- 12 Connie Wanek, *Rival Gardens*, University of Nebraska Press, 2016 p. 36