

POEMS READ IN THE DARK

By Michael Ventura

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The discovery that you love poetry is, at its root, the discovery that poetry loves you. And while this is true of all the arts -- for every work of art, even the most embittered and maddened, is an act of invitation and of revelation toward you in particular, you who are beholding the art at this moment, and what else is such an act but love? -- poetry is language at its most personal intimate pitch, and its destination is your most intimate self, where you are most vulnerable to love. (It may be that all the readings these days warp and even corrupt this aspect of poetry, for a poem cannot strip you down for long at a reading; the applause at its end, the quality of performance, the self-congratulatory air of the room, instantly clothe you again in your public persona, and you tend to remember the poet more than the poem. And there's trickery in readings, for a good performer can easily make mediocre work sound fine.) Poetry is poor by nature, for there's no money to be made; resistant to media -- there's nothing rarer than a good film about a poet, much less about a poem; a shape-changer, existing in so many forms; without the audience-friendly comforts of a plot; with no recourse to special effects; and requiring, both to compose and to experience, the two qualities hardest to find in modern life, patience and time. A poem exists all on its own, with no strength but the skill with which it's done and the love it comes from and the love it invokes you. In her poem "The Angel of History" Carolyn Forché has written: "Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end." That is all the secret strength a poem can claim: its defiance of the danger at the heart of being alive. For we are born to die, hence we are born in danger. To meet this danger in so vulnerable, quiet, fragile, and generous a form as a poem -- that is the courage of poetry. And that is the courage it asks of us.

Once only have I seen on a screen a convincing story of a poet. It was scripted by the late Howard Rodman for an episode of *Naked City* nearly 40 years ago. The story has faded for me after all this time but I remember that the poet was ill, old, crazy, bitter. Had he been plagiarized by a more successful poet in his youth, had he been disgraced by something he himself had done, had he simply been (as most poets are) obscure to the point of instability? *Naked City* was a New York cop show, so he must have done something to interest the cops, and he was dying, and they were looking for him both to stop him from some rash act and to save his life -- a life he himself had no interest in saving. He had no love left in himself but the love he had saved in his poems. So -- a dying poet on the run, carrying a thick packet of unpublished poems, and perhaps they're junk or perhaps they're the greatest works of his time, and the one thing left that he cares about is to mail them to -- a stranger! A name he perhaps has made up. A packet that will in all likelihood rot in some post office warehouse until one day it's thrown away. In the last scene he finds a mailbox on some darkened street, squeezes the packet into its opening, dies in the gutter.

And the show closed as it always did, with a narrator saying: "There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them."

Melodrama, yes. It was TV, after all. What is memorable wasn't the old poet's desperation but his faith that his packet would somehow be delivered somewhere, and how he clung to that bundle of poems -- his cherishing of it made the poems real, so that

you felt you'd read them somehow. Which is strange indeed, for in *fact* these poems had never been written, the packet being merely a device in a story about a poet who in fact never existed; yet so powerful is the very idea of poetry that it was enough for the actor to believe in his character's poems for them to glow in my memory to this day, poems that never existed and yet that have the weight and force of poetry.

They seem to stand for all the unpublished poems that ever were -- infinitely many more than have been published. (And no doubt some of the best have never been published.) For few who can write at all have *not* written a poem at some time in their lives -- which is partly why poetry, though it seems the property of intellectuals because we are the ones who get to publish, is at its root a popular art, the people's art. Not many ever complete a novel; almost no one gets to make a movie; but poetry, like music, is exercised by many of whom you would not expect it. When I was 18 I worked in the mailroom at the prison on Riker's Island in New York City; my job was to open the letters to process any checks or cash and to take out any sexy material (though I always let the sexy stuff through); I'd get bored and read the letters, and was struck by how many primitive poems were written by the letter-writers, people who, if their writing was any indication, were barely educated at all. Here, on what is considered the lowest levels of society, poetry was not only alive, it was an urgent means of communication.

And I remember that when my stepmother Margie died of lymphoma at the age of 36, in her effects was a thin sheaf of rhymed poetry that she'd painstakingly set down in her best penmanship -- Margie, a savvy, sharp-tongued Brooklyn gal, a proletarian lass if there ever was one, who barely finished high school, and who, to my knowledge, never showed her poems to a living soul. That sheaf did not turn up in my father's effects early this year when he died, so it's probably lost forever, lost in some unaccounted-for box in one of his moves in the 30 years since her death. It's possible that he and I are the only ones who ever read them. She was street-tough, even hard, but her verse was child-innocent and plaintive. She was leaving a secret record of the tenderest, most loving part of her -- the part of herself that she trusted least, yet had to give expression to. Which is the job of poetry. And in the way that recorded jazz gets part of its force from the countless more hours of jazz that evaporate into Time the moment it's played, so the poetry we know gets some of its force -- and some of its innate humility -- from all the terribly private, terribly lonely, barely literate poetry that has disappeared like Margie's.

It is a mistake for published writers to forget that they are merely the surface of a great deep sea.

The poet George Seferis also saw poetry as something other than the possession of those recognized for writing it, but he located the quality of poetry above us: "The poem is everywhere. Your voice sometimes/Rises, emerges at its side -- "

Because poetry puts us at the crux of love, many have risked their lives to write it. I don't mean the risk of madness that any artist faces, for madness is a danger for anyone who feels deeply, artist or no. I admire Sylvia Plath's poems, but to kill herself in the house where her children were nearby was a despicable act. She is redeemed by her poetry because it is the record of how hard she tried to love during her losing battle with her demons. A "sophisticated" culture that often makes such despair almost fashionable neglects and discounts those who died for poetry in a very different way. For instance: When the Nazis occupied Poland, to publish anything not sanctioned by their regime was punishable by death. Yet all over Warsaw people met in secret to write and discuss and publish poems, printed on mimeograph machines and small presses. To possess such manuscripts and machines meant immediate incarceration in Auschwitz, for non-Jews

and Jews alike. Yet people wrote and published poems, vital testaments handed on in secret and on pain of death. And many died.

Most of their poems are as lost as Margie's so we'll never know if they died for good or bad poems, but that is not important. What is important is their urgent act of faith, a rebellion rooted in the love without which poetry cannot exist. In a merciless era of history they made their stand for the love that the thing we call "poetry" both nurtures and stores for human beings. Though most of their work was obliterated -- as most of the poetry ever written has been obliterated -- touching and transmitting the love that is "poetry" was reason enough for the risk. The Nazis were trying to conquer not only their country but their humanity, and in a paradox particular to poetry they endangered their lives to save their humanity, leaving behind them, to use a line of Tomas Transtomer's, "books that can only be read in the dark."

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