

THE POETICS OF EXPERIENCE

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Poetry is a suitably subtle medium for expressing and exploring the vagaries of human experience, echoing themes that resonate through constructivist writing. In this selection of my own poems, I offer a sample of verse that reflects a consistent concern with the quest for meaning in the face of life transitions, coupled with an invitation to readers to co-construct its significance by drawing on their own interpretations and feeling their way into the subjectivities of each work's characters, as well as that of its author.

[T]he brilliant scientist and the brilliant writer are pretty likely to end up saying the same thing—given, of course, a lot of time to converge upon one another. The poor scientist and the poor writer, moreover, fail in much the same way—neither of them is able to transcend the obvious. Both fail in their make-believe.

—George A. Kelly (1969, p. 151)

Setting aside any implication of brilliance, Kelly's prediction of the convergence of scientific and artistic writing describes aptly enough my own intellectual trajectory across the course of a career. Both in their general constructivist themes and in their specific content, my scholarly work over the last 30 years and my poetry over a much briefer period have come to explore similar terrain: our fragile attempts as humans to organize a meaningful world in concert with others; the insistence of language; the tension between transcendence and constraint; the inevitable encounter with loss; and—less predictably—reconstruction. Thus, the free verse I share with friends and colleagues in personal

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As is commonly the case in this genre of writing, I retain copyright for each of the poems presented here. "Petroglyphs" and "Opening" appeared in my published collection of verse entitled *Rainbow in the Stone* (Neimeyer, 2006), whereas the others appear here in print for the first time.

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correspondence, in workshop readings, and occasionally in print represents a thematic and substantive extension of familiar concerns about the human condition that will be recognized by many readers of this journal. As Kelly implied, literary treatment of a topic can complement the scientific and still be, in a sense, continuous with it.

But poetry can also offer something that theoretical, empirical, or expository writing does less well, or at least less vividly: namely, confront the reader (and often the writer) with what Kelly might call fresh “elements” of experience—pithy, poignant, or perturbing glimpses of a personal, social, or natural world that invite (or challenge) our meaning-making efforts. At the level of process, I also find points of difference, as well as similarity, when I shift my writing efforts from the computer keyboard on which I compose all of my “professional” work to the paper and pencil with which I tease lines from my poetic muse. Although both forms of writing flow best when I am feeling inspired and minimally directed by preconceived goals (which I take as something of a general principle for therapy and life, as well), poetry requires something more: a clearing of mind, a slowing of pace, a patient opening to experience, cultivating a kind of “connoisseurship” for its novelty, feeling tone, and contradiction. When the writing is going well, it comes in short bursts of images, with half-conscious attention to alliteration, rhythm, prosody—factors that also play a role in my academic writing but which are promoted to center stage when my focus is poetic. Something about this process makes me keenly aware of the dialectic between myself and the world, as I quiet my typically intense activity to “sit with” a memory, feeling, scene, or perception, while also noticing its reverberation in me at nearly a bodily level.

The mood is clearly an invitational one, bidding words to come, often in a way that surprises me, as I hope they might also surprise a reader. Forcing language on the experience is always deadly, producing just the sort of mechanical animation of an idea one would expect. Experientially, poetry feels like it is as much about “finding” meaning as “making” it—or, perhaps better, about letting *it* find *me*. Ironically, this quiet cultivation of a poetic receptivity ultimately gives way to intense editing, as I comb through the lines to remove the tangles, cut and shape what remains, invite the critical eye of fellow poets—all steps that

are conspicuously absent in my academic writing, which nearly always emerges unplanned and unedited, and goes to press just as it is written. When I consider the much greater editorial effort I exert to produce a one-page poem than a 30-page article, I am reminded of Mark Twain's comment to a friend at the beginning of a long missive, to the effect that he was sorry to send such a long letter, but he didn't have time to write a short one.

In summary, in the present short article I have accepted the invitation of Jörn Scheer and Viv Burr to compile a handful of poems that evoke broadly constructivist themes, albeit indirectly. In the ongoing evolution of my verse I've witnessed a shift, accelerated by the critical commentary of fellow poets, from a more abstract, explanatory style to a more immediate, evocative one. As a result, my poems increasingly invite the reader to do more of the "work" of unpacking the poetry's possible "messages," if indeed I had such in mind when I reached for pencil and paper.

By minimizing my own editorial remarks on these pieces I encourage readers to ease into the work, reading it no more quickly than they would aloud, as I do when I edit my own verse or explore that of other poets. I hope that in accepting this invitation in a quiet moment, readers might find that some of the pieces stir something in them, as well as suggest something of the experiences of other persons—my subjects or myself—as we collectively engage the vagaries of living or negotiate its subtle or unsubtle transitions.

In a Strange Place

Sometimes I awake in a strange
place, a bed of down pillows,
the sudden silence of an air conditioner
cycling off. Before me I see the lines
of cast shadows, grey, black,
the inked map of a dreamt city, its streets
unwalked.

To one side, the wall of glass and sheer
drapes shimmer like a cloudbank
pregnant with storms. The cicada pitch
of traffic thrums, thrums with a mechanical
throb, the breaths of a city,
asleep.

Always in such awakening
I lie still, blanketed in anonymity,
vigilant as something new.
Sometimes I will lean with my ears
into the night, catalogue the sounds
like minerals, rocks, each in its own
small box.

Or else I will fall back,
drop into the cracked egg of sleep,
find the blue pool and dive down,
and down, back toward *her*, warm, soft,
her face luminous, remote, unreachable as a
new moon.

Airport

It's 4 p.m., and for three hours
the counters and checkpoints
have been organizing the time.
They process us like cookies
on conveyors, sort and wrap,
ship to destinations. Above,
the high arches of girders fly
skyward, lift our hopes
beyond expectations. Down here,
feet planted on etched granite,
we shuffle, herd through inspections.

Aboard, I gaze out at a day
that could be anywhere,
but is nowhere,
hear the absent news
of the mechanic tending
this bird's reluctant wing.
It is raining outside the portholes,
a tear running down the cheek of window
for everyone I have ever loved.
The tarmac gathers the sadness,
its gray expanse the color of forgetting.
The worm of jetway
has detached its thick lips
from the hull, pulled back
to a respectful distance
to await the departure of its beloved.

Finally, over my right shoulder
a voice that knows my name

speaks it with Asian exactness.
 I turn, drawn to the glowing lantern
 of her face, and order the beef,
 for later, when my heart lifts
 toward home.

Petroglyphs

There is a grace
 in going free of talk,
 swimming upstream
 toward the source of words.
 Before its birth,
 all speech grew ripe in silence.

It was in that time
 that sense sought stone,
 that hands red as the rock
 scraped patina from the cliff.
 They found the shape of deer,
 of snake,
 sacred in their primal light.

They told the way
 of coming and going,
 traced the great circle
 and the four known winds.
 Gods too ancient for a living name
 moved these hands
 to define their form.

Now,
 the canyon murmurs their chant,
 a wind of words just beneath hearing.
 The old hands with their tongues of flint
 have long grown still,
 turned to dust.
 They have entrusted their ways
 to the walls of rock
 that lock tight their secrets
 like an echo in the stone.

Coal Town Hospice

On the banks of the Ohio,
 far from the namable places,
 the town squats, wounded.

The sturdy girders
of the bridges carry cars
away, away,
across the brown expanse of river
bleeding these hills,
across the tracks of the C&X coursing
with their loads of coke
and steel. In the pre-dawn drizzle
Main Street stands empty
as the stores, their vacant eyes
leaking the dreams
of grandfathers.

On either end of town tower
the Goliaths of the plant, the refinery.
They announce the descent
into this valley, bar the exit,
squelch hope with belching fumes.
Between them the town crouches,
subservient.

There is still work here,
deposits to be made
to bank accounts,
to lungs.
The cancer sends its metastases
winding down the wide streets,
the back alleys.
The eager tendrils find the unstopped
cracks under doors, the open
windows, mouths. For the young,
there is one sure way
out.

It is here that hospice
does its dark work,
lays its light hand
on laboring chests.
The plants have set down roots
in the furrowed brows,
sewn seeds of need
in the fertile flesh. Questions seep
like oil from the pores.

Like history,
nurses have no answers to give.
They fill the beds, fill the bags
hanging on steel poles,
coax the anodyne

into collapsing veins.
 With each loss, chaplains
 suture the wounds with familiar verse,
 lay the dead to rest in the scarred soil.
 Social workers apply their gentle press
 to the bereaved, nudge them back to life,

 back to the factories. In the end,
 the survivors carry the memory
 on their bent shoulders,
 feel the heavy hand of obligation
 that follows them to the furnaces,
 to their homes,

 like grief.

Survivors

He has stopped trying
 to grasp her remoteness
 that he mistakes for calm,
 this cooling that accompanies
 the wintering of her grief.

Since their daughter's explosive
 departure, its echo
 like a slammed door,
 she has pulled in, and in,
 away from the pain,

 away from him.
 What he cannot know is how
 she slips inside the sleeve
 of her music, the lyrics
 of angels
 touch
 return,
 draws down into the bubble
 of her hope.

Alone in her car,
 the music builds a room
 around her, around the room
 a house through which
 she strolls.

It is in the nursery
 that she feels the peace,
 rocks her child, rocks herself,

restores the bond.

Too soon, the car turns itself
into her drive, slides
into the vault of garage.
Her hand finds the latch,
pulls her out. She takes the steps
like a condemned man.

The forced hello fades,
yields to the distance.
She glances up at him,
sees the eyes,
the terrible mirrors,
and turns again to stone.

Travelers

You know the lucky thing about my hip replacement?
she asked, not waiting for the answer.
It made me think about advance directives,
my living will, how I'd like to die.

Yeah, he said, her colleague
who chatted amiably with death
each day, like two old men
playing checkers in the park.
I know what you mean.

This is how it is
with the nurses, doctors, therapists
who walk down the halls of dying
as through the home of a relative,
pausing to leaf through the *Geographic*,
or straighten a family photograph on the wall.

They have earned their ease
the hard way,
learned to reach through the bramble
to find the fruit, add weight
to the rusty pail.

They have not so much grown inured
to pain as they have learned to savor it,
taste the sweetness in the grapefruit's bite,
feel the glow of a day's hard toil.
In the end, we need them

as we need seasoned travelers
 met in an unfamiliar land.
 They greet us on the steep trail,
 in the twisting streets, point the way
 to a good *taverna*, trace the path home.
 Most of all, they help us
 parse the dark syllables in our hearts,
 bare them,
 and seek cleansing
 in the gathering storm.

Poets' Workshop

We wash into the room
 in waves, swirl around the table
 in an eddy of words.
 Tousled, outfitted
 by the Salvation Army,
 few of us could be mistaken
 for managers.

Most bear notebooks, backpacks,
 duffle bags bulging
 with crumpled language,
 lay our loads around
 the common table.

Slowly the work fans out,
 oversized cards
 in a low-stakes game.
 Words spill from our bags,
 from our mouths,
 until I have the feeling
 that the whole room is awash
 in words—
 poems clinging to the underside
 of chairs like barnacles,
 the walls *papier maché*,
 the matted scraps of free verse
 that came unglued
 from their stanzas,
 the table a huge book,
 unopened.

We reach for our java
 in identically-lettered Starbucks cups,
 sip our espresso haiku,

linger over our French Vanilla sonnet,
bolt down our hard realism, black.
In a moment I am Ishmael,
wandering in a sea of verse,
the workshop leader a driven Ahab,
wincing eyes scanning
the horizon of table top
for the Great White Whale.

My own poem surfaces,
and all eyes dart
to the movement,
each poised pen and pencil
a tiny harpoon.

Opening

On the far side of your life
something calls out,
seeks union with what
it has not met.
Like the hollow of a bowl
it sculpts the shape
it must contain
in the form of its absence.
Without this fullness,
it is merely decorative,
 waiting.

Only in stillness
can you discern this void,
know the emptiness
as specific as your open mouth
or the chambers of your heart.
Only in cultivating receptiveness
like a cupped hand
can you let the world pass in
 and through,
and ready yourself
for the meeting.

References

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