

Magical Thinking and Modern Times

Recently I sent this poem to a poet-friend. It's by the late Irene McKinney:

Low Red Moon

Full of watery blood, the soiled skin
of white snow washed pink, and the
stark—there is no other word—
black branches. From the low moan,
wordless, without the grace
of thought, without the consolation
speech could give him, from the
cranked-up bed and the twisted sheet
he cannot draw over his breast
to cover him, from the insistent
daily room, the voice of the nurse
he no longer cares for, from the
montage of death-scrap—the early
deaths of his brothers coughing blood
in 1918, spitting in a bowl; the team
of horses, Bess and Clancy; the woman
on horseback who dropped her baby
in the river—from these he cries
to escape. There is no turning
as always in his days before,
no starting over with determined face,
only the long slide, excruciated
every second that he breathes,
and no one—he cries this—
no one can hear his garbled voice
as words received, as words
that lift the weight.

My friend wrote back and thanked me for sending her an “extraordinary poem.” I like the adjective to describe this poem because it's such a straightforward poem—someone is dying. It's full of realistic details about a nurse, a team of horses, a bed, brothers. The syntax is very cunning as the poet uses repetition to great effect to build that tremendous middle sentence. There is the boldness, too, of the opening metaphorical leap with its assertion of a

correspondence between the moon and the man's condition. The ending is quiet yet huge. "As I lay dying," we think. To go that place is extraordinary.

And yet this is the work that good poems do. They are able to take up the challenges of our unknowing and bring us closer to the feelings that reside therein. They are able to go to that very ancient place where we make intuitive sense of our being so purblind. As a fact or a datum, the poem accomplishes nothing. As with any poem, it's merely a series of verbal assertions. Yet it trusts in the sense making that poems can perform. It trusts its ability to make something whole. It trusts the relationship between the putatively real—1918—and the purely imaginative.

There is something uncanny in this trust. It can't be proven that a poem is "right" about anything. Poems are always individual never categorical. The trust is something personal on the part of the poet but also something impersonal. The trust lies in the feeling that something magical can happen in the poem's precincts. The words don't just fit together. As they embody the physicality of sound and rhythm, they electrify one another. The poem is always a sort of spell in this regard. It tries to get back to that place where words could speak to all forms of being, where words are "received," to quote McKinney.

It's fair to consider my last sentence as utterly preposterous. Modern times have been dominated by reason and science. We adore explanations and causes. We consider myths to be precisely that—fabrications of primitive people who didn't know what microbes were. No one really emerged from a hole in the earth or received the gift of maize from the breast of Mother Earth. We know and we know and we know. The mortal tissue of unknowing that surrounds us is easy to toss aside or never engage in the first place. It's irrelevant—at least until we lay dying or fall in or out of love or lose someone dear to us or find ourselves in an unknown place, which is to say, its irrelevance is very conditional. I once worked in a school where one sunny morning five students died in a car crash. To say that in the aftermath of that catastrophe our students needed to write poems would be an understatement.

Were those laments for their dead friends and evocations of times past magical? I'd say, "Yes." The poems were able to summon up what couldn't be summoned up any other way. Religion consoles but poetry makes the impalpable palpable. The door that poems open up is the door to the soul. I mean the word in a non-doctrinal way. I mean it as the spirit-shadow of being human, the margin that can't be accounted for by explanation, that can't be reduced or explained. I mean it as the feeling that we are much more than a given identity. We partake of something extraordinary (that word again) in our being human. This feeling gets scuffed away by time, daily life and the exertions of self-assertion.

There is more magic at work however in McKinney's poem and in the poems my students wrote about their dead friends. There is the act of communing with spirits. We use the noun *communion* in religion quite commonly but the

verb seems proper to poetry. This reaching toward and making contact is by definition magical. It posits that there is something outside the self that can only be known by the divinations of words. It posits that the issue is not self-expression, which limits and trivializes the individual, but the attempt to commune with what is beyond the individual. The feeling grows as the poem grows. “Way leads on to way,” as a poet once put it. We turn and turn and turn in the woods of the poem and we reach something like an ending, something like the feeling that more is there than we thought was there. Even when the ending is bleak, more is there than when we began.

Where is poetry, which is in love with the inexplicable, to turn in our world of explanation and information? Poetry isn't knowledge. Although any port is appreciated in a rational storm, schools are dubious havens. Poetry doesn't have a GPA. Poetry doesn't want to be part of a multiple choice test. At best schools can allow that there is something called “poetry,” however ill-suited its focus on emotions may be to the tenor of the sciences and pseudo-sciences. (“Poetry is so female,” a male teacher of social studies once complained to me.) At worst harried teachers (“Got to get through these poems for the test”) reduce the various body of a poem to a sniveling meaning. At the higher echelons, professors can reduce the poem to an emanation of a theory or social construct.

The trouble is that poems constitute lore, which is something very different from knowledge. Knowledge is agreed upon; lore is intuition that has evolved over time into usable yet many-sided truth. Knowledge is firm yet narrow. Its perspective is a small one—a date, an identification, a proof. Lore is what keeps the imagination in touch with both the cosmic and the human scale. It tells us how we fit in. Lore isn't salvation. Lore doesn't offer heaven. Lore is earth-bound and celebrates that while acknowledging how the earth is part of the enormity of the universe. Lore is tribal and pre-modern. As a Native American I knew once said of the practice of grade school teachers and their students “making up” creation stories, “You don't do that. The stories are the stories. You don't mess with the magic.”

The issue isn't what to make up. There are plenty of poems to go around. Some modern poets—Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Plath, Eliot, among others—have been up to the paradoxical task of inventing lore, to say nothing of the many who have created marvelous individual poems like Irene McKinney's. The issue is what to hold onto or, more precisely, how much there is that might be a help to us that we ignore at our own peril. Like pots, poems want to be handled on a regular basis. The basis can be a Sabbath of sorts or a powwow of sorts or a séance of sorts or a simple discussion of what the words are in the poem. I well understand that in a mass society devoted to individualism, agreement on anything is difficult. I well understand that lore can't be mandated. But there doesn't have to be agreement. What is important is that there be some recognition that the magic of poetry exists and matters, for it's the magic that is endangered. Young people literally perish each day for the lack of that magic. No one has bothered to show them that there is a margin for their spirits. The margin can't be measured, neither can the spirit. For many, if it can't be measured, it doesn't exist.

When we reach an extreme place—those terrible sudden auto fatalities—we reach for poetry. We don't live everyday in that place. We couldn't. But poetry is always there. The magic is always there. The words can do the divination. We have to be honest, however, about it. Poetry has been beaten down and cheapened by the forces of knowingness. In many respects, it has sold its birthright for a mess of smarmy pottage. Reputations are little more than billboards that are constructed to be torn down; the depth that poetry operates at is the uncanny one, the one that can't be pinned down, the trickster level where shadow and act merge. It's very hard to say in our world that there is magic. We give love a wide berth in this regard but even there the word is scarce. Poetry, offering as it does mere words, is ever a target for the ravening mind. If, however, we don't feel that there is more here on earth than those minds, then we are in deep trouble. How poetry is treated by a society represents a true canary in the coal mine. Prizes and official months don't do it. Poetry is a dimension of being. The prizing that poetry wants is recognition of how it allows for our humanity to blossom. Perhaps this is too modest—or too extraordinary.