

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

January 28, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



A Closer Absence

There's got to be a word
for this longing
that kneels beside you
in an empty chapel
or follows you beneath bare trees,
a word inflected
with pulse and handclasp and breath.

You would need a thousand tongues
just to speak it,
unless you found
you were one of the tongues
and the word
was being spoken
through you. Was you.

Temple Cone¹

☞ Reflections

I believe that the engine inside every poem is desire.

Of course, the engine is not necessarily the subject, which may be a hawk or a lover, a landscape or memory, a grief, a war, an error; but the engine, the poem's desire, is what sets the subject afire. If the subject is a hawk, the poem's desire is to observe, describe, embody, transcend. If the subject is grief, the poem's desire might be to soothe, to confront, to wade into some dark agony of truth and mercy. The poem's desire, no matter its subject, is for truth-telling, for clarity, for union, for contemplation and sense-making. The poem's desire is not to solve or to simplify but to see—see better, see clearer, see deeper.

If we do not think poetry is capable of these most noble feats of language and meaning, we reduce it to mere banter, to luxury rather than necessity. Even light-hearted poems carry with them an enormous responsibility; our humor, irony, joy, and play are as much a part of the human experience as our melancholia, our sarcasm, our resignation, our ugliness. If we do not honor the obligations we have to the language to which we are bound, we risk a way

¹ "A Closer Absence" by Temple Cone. Used by permission of the author.

of living that the poet Linda Gregg warns “corrodes the spirit and eventually rots the seed-corn of the heart.” To put it another way: Words matter. The truth matters.

This is perhaps a long-winded introduction to a poet well-known to many, Temple Cone. I find his work—this poem in particular—committed to those noble feats. The subject of “A Closer Absence” is language itself and it underscores poetry’s fundamental conundrum: an attempt to wrestle into form that which defies form, an attempt to contain in words that which defies all language.

“There’s got to be a word,” we read, and yet the poem does not resolve itself as one might expect; we are not given the word, not literally anyway. Instead, in its absence, we are given an opening, a possibility, a moment of near-epiphanic clarity presented as a direct address: What if in the absence of that word there is instead something greater and what if that something is *you*? What if *your* tongue is the tongue tasked with speaking truth? What if *your* language—and yours and yours and yours—is a vessel by which and through which we are all to carry the news of the spirit, of the sacred? What if the stakes are that high?

The writer Li-Young Lee reminds us, “The kingdom of God is coming and the kingdom of God is here. It is the task of the poet, and of the faithful, to name it.” It is an idea worth marveling, I think. A marvel indeed to (re)consider human speech a privilege, a gift. Perhaps if we considered ourselves as vessels this way, we would more fully appreciate our responsibilities as practitioners of language and perhaps then we would speak more carefully, more truthfully, more honorably. If, after all, we are made in the image of God, what higher task could be asked of the human voice than to speak as though we embodied the divine?

☞ About the poet

Temple Cone, Poet Laureate for the city of Annapolis and professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy, is the author of four collections of poetry and numerous essays and book reviews. A graduate of St. Christopher’s School and of Washington and Lee University, he earned an MA in creative writing from Hollins University and an MFA in poetry from the University of Virginia, as well as a PhD in literature from the University of Wisconsin.

He will present a talk and poetry reading at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church on January 31 at 7 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.



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