

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Love (III)

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.
A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert¹

☞ Reflections

Last week's edition of *Wellspring* featured George Herbert's "The Collar" and I have not quite been able to put Herbert to rest! Rather than say more about that poem, I offer another one of my favorites of his, "Love (III)." I own a letter-press broadside copy of this particular poem, which has lived on the wall of every apartment or office of mine for a decade or longer.

To my surprise and delight, I heard this very poem—now almost 400 years old—featured on a brand new poetry podcast called "The Slowdown," a beautiful narration by current U.S. Poetry Laureate Tracy K. Smith in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation. "The Slowdown" is a five- or six-minute interlude on public radio during which

¹ "Love (III)" by George Herbert. Public Domain.

Smith briefly introduces a poem and then reads it aloud. It's luxurious! This particular project of Smith's was inspired by her on-the-road reading series called "American Conversations: Celebrating Poems in Rural Communities." "The Slowdown" is, in her words, "a conversation between the listener and whatever poem is up for the day."

More often than not, that poem is a contemporary one, but several weeks ago it was Herbert's. Smith claims "Love (III)" is one of the first she memorized, one she's carried with her for years, part of "an arsenal of insight and delight," she adds. Years before Smith was even born, the French philosopher Simone Weil had recited the very same poem which led to an ecstatic religious experience as she spoke the words: "Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache," she wrote in her *Spiritual Autobiography*, "I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines... during one of these recitations Christ himself came down and took possession of me."

"Love (III)" is the third of three, the ultimate poem in Herbert's triptych in which he attempts to reclaim, reconstruct, and reaffirm the inextricable nature and interchangeable use of "Love" and "Lord." Here, Love is a person, a character with the ability to speak, smile, and reassure this speaker that indeed he is (we all are) worthy to sit with God the host despite his (and our own, too) worry: "I the unkind, ungrateful?"; notice the rhetorical markers of hesitation—"yet," "but," "and," "so"—that conclude in a seemingly unequivocal resolution: "You must sit down.../ So I did..."

Herbert's is obviously and primarily a religious poem, but as part of Tracy Smith's introduction, she points out that there are always ways to re-interpret it and that the distance between religious love, romantic love, and parental love is ever shrinking when one considers the nearly unutterable miracle of love at all.

In our current age of digitization, technology, and a (virtual) reality that favors quickness, efficiency, and certainty, things like Smith's "The Slowdown"—especially as it celebrates a centuries-old poem like this one—fill me with hope. I know there are those who say that poetry is dead, but from where I stand poetry—in all is curiosity and its mystery—has never felt more alive.

✧ About the Poet

George Herbert (1593-1633) was a 17th century poet and a priest of the Church of England. Born into an aristocratic, literary family, he excelled at music, studied at Cambridge, and rose to the position of public orator, an office that brought him in contact with many of the most important figures of his day, including King James I. Associated with the metaphysical poets, he is considered one of the most influential devotional lyricists of any age.



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