

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

September 26, 2016

A weekly poetry resource

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



Blue Hour

The whole world swells
underneath the house;
the newspapers bloat
in their plastic skins,
a black heat damps
like the inside of a mouth.

I quit the whine that sent me here,
I crouch in the bright six o'clock dark
like a cave cricket, in its fear
and ricochet frenzy blind
and springing toward that which frightens,

that which could easily be you—

Jennifer Whitaker¹

✧ Reflections

It might be helpful to know that the blue hour is, essentially, twilight and that the blue hour is actually *less* than an hour each morning and each evening when the sun's indirect light assumes a blue hue for about forty minutes. This particular quality of light is cherished especially among artists and, I would argue, among all people sensitive to the ways in which the external world — time, space, light, weather, season — awakens an internal world. Maybe the outside aligns with the inside, or maybe it feels counter, depending on the peace and disturbance of our lives. Sometimes in despair it seems impossible that the world could be still moving and alive, even beautiful, in spite of our own personal anguish. Of course, the blue hour reminds us of sadness, too, our lonesome, soulful blues.

There is a metaphoric richness in twilight — or “time of two lights”— especially if we think about this hour as a prayerful space of “in-between-ness” when we are between worlds, a particular and fleeting time when we get to be in two places at once, or else in no place at all. We are in liminal, floating time, anchored neither here nor there and bound somehow to

¹ Whitaker, Jennifer. THE BLUE HOUR. © 2016 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted courtesy of The University Wisconsin Press.

both. Twilight is a Janus-like hour: Janus, that two-faced god of transitions, doorways, beginnings and endings, passages, and time, looking both forward and backwards at once.

Jennifer Whitaker's collection of poems is called *The Blue Hour* (this is the title poem from her book) and the twilight time sets a peculiar tone. It is in twilight, that transcendent hour, that it is more difficult to distinguish between night and day and therefore it is an hour perhaps more mysterious and more imaginative. Whitaker says she was drawn to this title as an "ephemeral moment of each day and a time of day in which the ordinary rules seem to change:... in which it's easy for our eyes to play tricks on us—hedges become menacing creatures, things seem to be always moving on the periphery."

These are the poems of a daughter victim to senseless abuse by her father. But she narrates the unthinkable with exquisite and beautiful detail. The subject of these poems is fear, incest, taboo, secrecy, endurance and survival and it is an inexhaustible collection. One recurring tension of the book has to do with complicity and remorse, the dark underside of memory and its trappings. Whitaker writes, "This is not to say, at all, that victims of any type of violence are complicit, but instead, I wanted to see where a speaker's silences, or inaction, brought about feelings of complicity, because I think that's one of the hardest feelings to reconcile." The parents in these poems are both "creator and predator, touchstone and absence," she writes, and "remorse is an emotion that tends toward the silent, and silence—self-imposed or otherwise."

I think that art invokes the particular in order to transcend it. While I do not have the direct experience that Whitaker does, I certainly don't feel I am excluded from participating, or from responding. What I can "relate to" is a more intangible experience of fear, or regret, or desire. While my childhood was in some ways far different than the youth of the speaker in these poems, there are certain universal truths we share; one of these truths for me is that the unsaid often "says" more than the spoken and that as we move through our lives the relationship we have to our own voice and to our own silence changes and that the changes might be as subtle as twilight beginning or ending.

One of the most interesting moments in this poem is the very last one, the very last word: *you*. Who is this "you"? To whom is this poem addressed? The self? An other? The speaker's father? God? Who is it this speaker fears? And is twilight a time where perhaps the perceived nearness of God awakens our fear?

❧ Other questions to consider

1. St. Stephen's Celtic service, in winter, occurs during the blue hour. How does the light (or lack of light) outside reflect how your internal landscape feels? Perhaps you do not notice a drastic difference, and perhaps you are more sensitive to the effect of the seasons outside the church on the seasons inside the church. How do you reconcile the "blue hour" of this poem with as difficult a subject as incest, and as complex emotions as

complicity and remorse? How would a different title affect the way you understand this tension?

2. Silence is a great instructor as it both reveals and obscures. In this poem, what are things you think are left out, unsaid, suggested in or by silence?
3. In Whitaker's poems, hard subjects are told gently and most of us have experience in this realm. When have you had to bear that responsibility? What is the cost of gentleness?
4. It is difficult for me to reconcile forgiveness and remorse. That is, I have a hard time making a direct equation. For example, I'm not sure what forgiveness requires: guilt, empathy, pity, kindness? I wonder if one is of more value than another, if forgiveness borne of pity, for example, is less noble than forgiveness borne of kindness. And I wonder about the relationship between pity and kindness. Gentleness and kindness. All kindness is not gentle — i.e. tough love— but is all gentleness kind?
5. In "Blue Hour," who or what is frightening whom? How can it be that you frighten your own self? You might have difficulty, as I do, naming the thing that frightens you. What is the thing that might have you in a "frenzy blind and springing toward" the very thing you wish to escape? Could it be God's nearness? If we are in the "blue hour" crouching in the twilight, which world are we hiding *in*, and which one are we hiding *from*? What are we turning toward, and from what are we turning away?

✎ Writing in response

1. The marking of time is rich material for reflection. Assign a color to an hour and explore the associations you make. For example, at what time of day is the green hour? The black hour? The silver hour? The mauve hour? And what happens in this hour? Does it last an hour or is the hour but a metaphor for other ways of marking time? Maybe the neon hour, for example, is the span of a childhood.
2. In this poem, the speaker compares herself to a cave cricket crouching. Explore a similar leap of imagination where you align yourself with a specific animal— perhaps a less familiar insect, or an animal of prey, or an extinct species. This could get really strange, but fear not! Sometimes our clearest moments arise when we imagine the unthinkable.
3. If you could retitl e this poem, what would you call it? How does the new title change the lens through which we view it? If the poem were called, "A Metaphor about Memory and My Relationship with My Father" what does that enhance or diminish in the poem? Make a list of titles that somehow alter our perception.

✻ Hear Jennifer Whitaker read

Jennifer Whitaker is originally from Midlothian and earned her MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She will read from *The Blue Hour* – which won the Brittingham Prize – on **Thursday, October 6 at 7 p.m. at St. Stephen's Church**. More information is available at ststephensRVA.org/poetry.



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