

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

January 2, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

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



Piano

Touched by your goodness, I am like
that grand piano we found one night on Willoughby
that someone had smashed and somehow
heaved through an open window.

And you might think by this I mean I'm broken
or abandoned, or unloved. Truth is, I don't
know exactly what I am, any more
than the wreckage in the alley knows
it's a piano, filling with trash and yellow leaves.

Maybe I'm all that's left of what I was.
But touching me, I know, you are the good
breeze blowing across its rusted strings.

What would you call that feeling when the wood,
even with its cracked harp, starts to sing?

Patrick Phillips¹

Reflections

You may have seen this poem printed before and used as an opening prayer for the Celtic service. I think it is a lovely example of the ways the Celtic openings set a particular tone for reflection, contemplation and stillness. I want to give the poem some attention here, ahead of Patrick Phillips's visit to Saint Stephen's, because it strikes me as a perfect poem for a new year. It's hopeful but not sentimental, honest but not resigned. The poem employs an extended metaphor that is, on one hand, quite simple: "I am like / that grand piano." On the other hand, it's a poem that seduces me, surprises me, and awakens in me a new question: "What would you call that feeling...?" The poem does not pretend an answer, but invites us into a kind of prayerful silence.

Formally, this is a sonnet; it's fourteen lines, using a (sometimes slant) rhyme scheme, and hinging on a volta, or turn. The volta occurs just before the final two lines and serves as a kind of fulcrum and, as one critic says, serves as the "seat of the soul." Or, as Paul Fussell puts it, "the turn is the dramatic and climactic center of the poem, the place where the

¹ "Piano" by Patrick Phillips from *Boy*, University of Georgia Press. Used by permission.

intellectual or emotional method of release first becomes clear and possible.” Sonnets often have love as their subject, and a strict form like the sonnet serves as a kind of container, a restraint for what is unwieldy and massive.

Before we get to the volta—the first twelve lines, that is—the poem sets up a pretty incredible scene: a grand piano, road-side, filling with debris after being heaved through a window. The poet quiets the more obvious simile, that the speaker is as broken as the trashed piano, and instead suggests something beyond that, something a bit more complicated. We read, “...you are the good breeze blowing” and it echoes the “you” of the first line: “Touched by your goodness.” Who is this “you”? To whom is the poem addressed? *Whose* goodness? God? Nature? The beloved?

The turn that the poem takes is a shift from detritus to beauty, from abandonment to companionship, from silence to song. I cannot help but think that a piano is really only *being* a piano (as in, doing the real work of a piano) if it is being played; otherwise, it’s just an instrument, a piece of furniture. It leads me to wonder how a human being can really *be* a human being without the company of another, the company of some other (perhaps sacred) presence. Maybe the real work of the human is music, prayer, touch, and goodness.

We might be as broken as a smashed piano; our strings might be rusted. But somehow we still find a way to sing.

*“What would you call that feeling when the wood,
even with its cracked harp, starts to sing?”*

I would call that feeling surprise, relief, mercy, tenderness. I would call that feeling love.

✂ About the Poet

Patrick Phillips is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Elegy for a Broken Machine*, a finalist for the National Book Award in Poetry. His nonfiction book, *Blood at the Root: A Racial Cleansing in America*, has been met with tremendous praise. He has been featured on Garrison Keillor’s radio show, “The Writer’s Almanac,” and has published his work in such distinguished places as the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Nation, and Poetry. Raised in the foothills of North Georgia, he now lives in Brooklyn, New York and teaches English at Drew University.

Patrick will read from his poetry and his nonfiction this Thursday, January 5 at 7 p.m. in the Small Fellowship Hall. The event is free and open to the public and will be followed by a question and answer session, book-signing, and reception.



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