

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Picnic Beside the Railroad Tracks

She goes places I cannot go. She knows
Corridors. She knows the hidden rooms,
Shade dark muddy roads, fields, weed-filled fields,
Lonesome fields, field upon field, I've never been.
All familiar places when first revealed.
Hauntingly familiar. The same with the city streets,
Neighborhoods, quiet and crowded beaches,
And the shopping malls, other places
Long buried. She goes there, a seemingly natural
Evocation translated. The symbols, not mine now,
Another place: I've never been,
but then again, I must have.

Jack DeLoyht

Reflections

I offer this in honor of Jack DeLoyht, who died recently, one month shy of his 90th birthday. He wrote this poem just a few weeks ago and read it to me from his hospital bed, wanting to know what I thought, if it was clear, if I was moved.

My visits with him over the years most always included poetry—he often read to me what he was working on, or asked me to read his own work back to him, so that he could hear it differently. He had rediscovered the Beat poets—Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsburg—and on his last day, I read to him one of his favorites, Ginsburg's "Sunflower Sutra." Truthfully, that poem is only *okay* to my ear but was, to Jack's, sublime. Even perfect. He admired its cadence and imagery, its surprises and turns, its "utter truth," as he would explain it. He couldn't speak that last day, his eyes were closed, and I'll never know if he heard me reading to him; but I like that I'll be able to recall the beauty of those final moments—poetry, a large window, the February trees stark against a white sky, the sound of his breathing.

I don't know a lot about "Picnic Beside the Railroad Tracks," am not sure who the muse is, or what Jack might have meant by those large blocks of white space, or how the title

connects exactly. But knowing him as I did, and knowing his other poems well, I can say that this one is wrestling with what I think the best of his poems are also wrestling with: the thin place, that liminal space where the distance between heaven and earth collapses, where one might be both disoriented and profoundly centered at the same moment. This poem strikes me as wonderfully metaphoric for such an experience; caught between worlds, Jack's final days were full of lucid dreams and vivid memories. There was a kind of fluidity to his being—in a thin place all his own, a place between Here and There as if he were floating, suspended, and unmasked.

Once, he woke himself up laughing. Once, he looked into the eyes of his hospice nurse and said, "This is the most interesting experience!" Once, he tried to explain the word "edgelessness" to me while drifting in and out of sleep. His final poems seem to capture the essence of that mystery of in-between-ness, the space concerned with what one writer calls "the Infinite Whatever." In this case, it's a pastoral picnic beside the railroad tracks—those evocative tracks leading forever into some sightless beyond.

This is, I think, a poem about *that place*. And about desiring that place. About memory and familiarity. About that ineffable sensation of *knowing* what cannot quite be named. About the feeling of having been here before, of coming home.

✞ About the poet

Jack DeLoyht, a parishioner at Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, is the author of *Lion in Thin Places*, a collection of poems concerned with Celtic spirituality: nature, mystery, music, love. He died peacefully on February 3; the last words I understood him to say were, "it's amazing, it's amazing." May he rest in peace.



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