

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

May 29, 2017

A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Excerpt from *Silence*

I have known the silence of the stars and of the sea,
And the silence of the city when it pauses,
And the silence of a man and a maid,
And the silence for which music alone finds the word,
And the silence of the woods before the winds of spring begin,
And the silence of the sick
When their eyes roam about the room.
And I ask: For the depths
Of what use is language?
A beast of the field moans a few times
When death takes its young.
And we are voiceless in the presence of realities—
We cannot speak.

Edgar Lee Masters¹

Reflections

Note: Jane Fergusson, a graduating senior at Collegiate School, offers this week's reflections. Jane is completing a two-week internship at St. Stephen's and will attend Lafayette College this fall.

I have been feeling a desperate need for silence recently. The world feels too big and bright and loud, too much for my small mind to handle. But as much as I'd like to silence the world for a while, it is really I who am silenced. I find myself "voiceless in the presence of realities." Over and over, I reach for words but instead of finding clarity, I flounder, feeling like language has failed me. Masters writes, "And I ask: For the depths,/ Of what use is language?" He questions the utility of language, how something whose sole purpose is communication could be so inadequate in the face of death, in the face of sickness and sorrow. Hard as this pill might be to swallow, words *do* fail at a certain point.

When I first found this poem some years ago, I was taken by the opening line: "I have known the silence of the stars and of the sea." It may be one thing to *feel* the silence of the stars and sea, but as the first line indicates, this is not a poem about feeling at all. It is one about knowing. I learned from my teacher, Allison Seay, who learned from Gary Jones, (family tree of knowledge!) this explanation concerning "Greek" and "Hebrew" ways of knowing: if you were to ask a Greek for the height of a diving board, he would measure

¹ from "Silence" by Edgar Lee Masters. Public Domain.

angles and lengths, calculating a precise height with trigonometry. But the Hebrew would take you by the hand, covering your eyes, and lead you to the very edge. He would then uncover your eyes and say, “That jolt you feel when you realize you are at the edge? That is how high you are.”

I am reminded that there is something more to knowing, something visceral, something underneath. *Knowing* is a multi-sense affair, requiring the heart and the mind. One might define silence as the absence of sound, and that is one kind of silence, but there is also “the silence for which music alone finds the word,” or “the silence of the sick,” which may not be literally silent, but spiritually and emotionally so. And there is, of course, the silence of an empty tomb. Imagine the solemn silence, the shocked, stunned and confused silence that Jesus’ disciples must have felt in the days leading up to Pentecost. Christ is risen indeed, but he is now a stranger walking with them in the streets. And just as the disciples recognize him, he leaves again, and they find themselves bewildered and alone.

When the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples during Pentecost, there is “a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” tongues of fire rest on their heads, and the disciples begin speaking in tongues. A crowd forms, and foreigners each hear their native language spoken. The crowd *hears*. Peter stands up, gives the first sermon, and the crowd *hears*. There is a kind of silence that accompanies hearing. The silence of together-ness, of love and fellowship, and certainly the silence of wonderment. And I don’t know how Peter felt during his first sermon, but I imagine he might have felt something like Edgar Lee Masters describes: “voiceless in the presence of realit[y].” He might have felt like words were failing him to describe the gravity of this holy mystery, but even if that was the case, it would be okay. Because perhaps words do not have to be perfect. The silence of hearing speaks for itself.

✂ About the poet

Edgar Lee Masters was born in August 1868 in Garnett, Kansas, and moved soon after to Lewistown, Illinois. He attended Knox College for one year, but was forced to withdraw as a result of his family’s finances. He read law in his father’s law office, was admitted to the bar, and built a successful law practice, Masters turned to his previous passion of writing, publishing his first few books under a pseudonym. His poetry was influenced by the work of Edgar Allan Poe and the English Romantic poets. He died in a convalescent home in 1950 and was buried in Petersburg, Illinois.



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By Jane Fergusson
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