

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

October 2, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

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



Nursery

Fall hasn't been for long, yet
already I miss summer's promise:
Ever endless days are past

where if I drew a chart
of what I've done, it would
be what I hadn't quite.

I know the shape of what remains—
kicking up August dust,
evoking waxen words

that won't be touched—
a gourd-sized box, implying
what's inside it.

Gabriel Fried¹

Reflections

This poem is one of my favorites from Gabriel Fried's first collection, *Making the New Lamb Take*, and I intend to make a specific request that he read it when he visits St. Stephen's this Thursday.

There is much I admire about the poem: its careful, measured lines; its evocative title; its pared-down and essential imagery; its use of the gravity of the unsaid. As I write this, in late summer, I am acutely aware of the seasonal transition with which the poem begins—the days that feel like summer, but don't *look* like summer; the days that are no longer endless but getting shorter by the minute. It's a perennial longing.

And no doubt as fall begins, conversations start with some variation of the question, *How was your summer? What did you do?* I never know how to respond. I did everything; I did

¹ "Nursery" by Gabriel Fried from *Making the New Lamb Take*. Sarabande Books, Inc. Used by permission.

nothing. The days flew by; the days were endless. Suddenly, it was August; I know not what happened. Fried's poem meditates on this kind of melancholy, but in far fewer words. Such is the genius of the poet that he is able to give precise language to a feeling beyond words. I am reminded of what Ezra Pound said: that "it is the business of the artist to make humanity aware of itself." The best literature does just that—enlivens me by naming a desire I could not have named alone.

But it is the title—"Nursery"—that makes me love the poem. Sometimes, in reading, my favorite moment is the one that happens in the space between my reaching the end of the poem and my remembering the title that informed it. A nursery—whether for trees and shrubbery, or for a new baby—is a space set aside specifically for taking care, for fostering, for nurture; a nursery is a place of tenderness, gentleness, protection, so that whatever is vulnerable—bulbs wintering over, seedlings growing roots, babies becoming toddlers—has a safe place to rest and to be kept. I can't pretend to know all the poet intended here—the seasonal shift, the waxen words—but I do feel something important happening when I read "the shape of what remains." As fall approaches and I realize all that I have not done, there is a shape, the exact size of my longing, a shape the size of summer; it reminds me of the image used sometimes to describe grief: a hole in the heart the precise size of the person we miss.

But the nursery is ultimately a hopeful place—of growth and change and strength—and you do not have to be able to predict the future exactly to know that it, too, can be a hopeful place. In preparing a nursery for my own soon-to-be-born baby, I do not yet know how to imagine a new life, but the space I have prepared for it suggests it is near, and it is beautiful. For me, this poem is about recognizing what is past, what is here, what is coming, indeed an awareness of humanity itself.

✂ About the poet

Gabriel Fried is the author of two collections of poetry, *The Children Are Reading* (Four Way Books, 2017) and *Making the New Lamb Take* (Sarabande Books, 2007), named a Best Book of 2007 by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He is also the editor of an anthology, *Heart of the Order: Baseball Poems*. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Paris Review*, and other journals and magazines. He is the longtime Poetry Editor at Persea Books, an independently-owned, literary publishing house based in New York City.

He reads at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Thursday, October 5 at 7:00 p.m. A reception and book signing will follow. The event is free and open to the public.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church © 2016