

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

April 16, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

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



Do You Love Me?

She's twelve and she's asking the dog,
who does, but who speaks
in tongues, whose feints and gyrations
are themselves parts of speech.

They're on the back porch
and I don't really mean to be taking this in
but once I've heard I can't stop listening. Again
and again she asks, and the good dog

sits and wiggles, leaps and licks.
Imagine never asking. Imagine why:
so sure you wouldn't dare, or couldn't care
less. I wonder if the dog's guileless brown eyes

can lie, if the perfect canine lack of abstractions
might not be a bit like the picture books
she "read" as a child, before her parents' lips
shaped the daily miracle of speech

and kisses, and the words were not lead
and weighed only air, and did not mean
so meanly. "Do you love me?" she says
and says, until the dog, sensing perhaps

its own awful speechlessness, tries to bolt,
but she holds it by the collar and will not
let go, until, having come closer,
I hear the rest of it. I hear it all.

She's got the dog's furry jowls in her hands,
she's speaking precisely
into its laid-back, quivering ears:
"Say it," she hisses, "say it to me."

Robert Wrigley¹

¹ "Do You Love Me?" by Robert Wrigley from *Lives of the Animals*, Penguin Books. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

Even if I weren't a dog lover, even if I hadn't myself held my own dog's furry jowls and begged, especially in his last painful days, to be told what to do and when to do it, even if I hadn't felt before a similarly urgent pleading to be made sure I was loved, to hear it said aloud to me, even then I would feel this poem like a fist to the heart. It gets me *right here*.

Robert Wrigley is one of the very first contemporary poets I came to admire and “Do You Love Me?” one of the very first poems I wrote out by hand and hung on my wall in my first graduate-school apartment. I wanted to see it every day for a single important reason: it reminded me that poems can illuminate an essential truth about the human condition—about our need and desire and fear—and keep us company with good humor, tenderness, and song. Here's a 12-year old girl asking a dog, but it might as well be me asking the Divine: give me a sign! tell me something! In this scene from domestic life, the speaker is a witness the same way we the readers become witnesses to what strikes a universal chord—a desire not only to *be* loved but to have that love articulated, evidenced, avowed.

We learn early on in this poem that the dog loves the girl (of course it does) but we also acknowledge its helplessness, its “awful speechlessness”: the dog can't speak to her no matter how earnestly she pleads, and as badly as we might want to step in and reassure her, or giggle at this impossible conversation, we also see ourselves reflected in her desperation.

Recently, a dear friend of mine lay dying. And though he was old and ready to pass from this life, I clung to him. When it finally happened, I looked into his unseeing eyes and held his gone-cold hands and asked for him back, an impossible request. “Where are you?” I pleaded in his ear. “Where have you gone?” And isn't this a version of what we all sometimes want? Some “miracle of speech”? A reassurance of what we *almost* know for certain? An answer to perhaps our most daring question: *am I loved?* “Say it to me,” we might all be heard hissing.

I feel the girl's desire nearly as acutely as her parent's, the witness who stumbles into this scene; initial delight seems to darken toward a complicated nostalgia for that time when “words were not lead / and weighed only air, and did not mean / so meanly” and for a more innocent time (or was it?), when she did not *have* the language to articulate a *desire* for language.

I used to teach this poem in a class that held as its grounding principle the belief that all poems are love poems. To this day “Do You Love Me?” is one of my favorites to share. I love to point out the way Wrigley manages both playfulness and depth, his use of that titular question that is both answerable and not, the stanzaic structure that orders and contains an ever unwieldy desire to have our needs and fears known so that they might then be satisfied and soothed.

“[S]he's speaking precisely / into its laid-back, quivering ears” and she's speaking right to me, too. A fist to the heart. It gets me *right here*.

✧ About the poet

Robert Wrigley, an Illinois native, was born in East St. Louis and raised in Collinsville, a coal mining town. His poems, often informed by rural Western landscapes and the natural world, have been widely anthologized, twice included in *Best American Poetry*. He is the author of 10 books, including *Box* (Penguin, 2017), *Anatomy of Melancholy & Other Poems* (Penguin, 2013), *Beautiful Country* (Penguin, 2010), *Earthly Meditations: New and Selected Poems* (Penguin, 2006), and *Lives of the Animals* (Penguin, 2003). He has been on the teaching faculty at Warren Wilson College, the University of Oregon, the University of Montana, and the University of Idaho. He and his wife, the writer Kim Barnes, live on Moscow Mountain in Idaho.



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