

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
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from *Lent*

VIII

I'm beginning to understand how wrong
I was, and long
it was I once believed that seeking you
was something I

could do alone. That was a lark.
The wind and the loud
hurrahs of cedar trees redress me. Stark
you are in this song.

Maurice Manning¹

Reflections

When I discovered Maurice Manning's long poem, "Lent"—a collection of 40 small and profound lyrics—in a past issue of *Image* (one of my favorite literary journals of all time), I had a difficult time choosing only one section to feature. Manning's poetry has a particular and exquisite gravitas and I have told many that if I had to sacrifice all but one book of poems I may very well keep his collection *Bucolics*, an extraordinary volume in the pastoral tradition consisting of untitled, unpunctuated love poems to the divine. "Lent" seems to be working in a similar mode, inspired by and addressed to Mystery—the divine "you"—in awe of nature's beauty and recklessness, "stark" and epiphanic in its resolution.

I wish to revel in Manning's craftsmanship and his ingenuity, beginning with the lark of the second stanza. Of course, the figure of speech that associates a lark with inanity, with foolishness or some impulsive amusement, is its own mischievous metaphor here. On the one hand, it "was a lark"—foolish entertainment indeed—that this speaker "believed that seeking you / was something [she] // could do alone"; on the other hand, the literal lark—the bird—becomes both the muse and the subject. And the more one knows about the lark, the more credit one must give the poet for his choice, the more compelling the metaphor becomes.

It's a ground-dwelling bird, the lark, preferring to nest *with* the earth rather than above it and, for its survival, its dull appearance camouflages it among the dirt and leaves. In a poem about

¹ Excerpted from "Lent" by Maurice Manning in *Image: Art, Faith, Mystery*, Issue 88.

seeking and finding, the lark—especially as part of the only full sentence to appear unbroken within the poem—is ever the more instructive symbol, inviting us to wonder whether the divine is ever hiding or if we are but too blind, too distracted, too unwilling to see.

Moreover, the lark is extraordinary not only in its song—a more elaborate call than most other birds—but also in its singing, preferring to deliver its music while flying rather than when at rest. Poets from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Blake have used the lark as a symbol of daybreak, of love, and of ethereal blessing, though no one but Maurice Manning has used the lark, coupled with “the wind and the loud / hurrahs of cedar trees” as redress, as remedy. It is the song not of the bird but of the divine, the song that sets right what has been wrong so long, the speaker’s inability to know with certainty “you are in this song.”

Formally, each section of “Lent” is, like this one, an eight-line, two-stanza structure with a semi-regular rhyme scheme and a mostly iambic—the rhythm of a heartbeat—meter. I will refrain from more extensive commentary on the meaning-relation of rhyme: the way, for example, “lark” and “stark” are not only the most visual rhyme (“Stark” is capitalized and situated on the longest line of the poem) but their monosyllabic exactness mirrors the speaker’s own certainty in such a way that the lark as answer, as evidence, appears as stark epiphany; or the way the off-rhyme of “loud” and “you” come to resemble the nature of the divine’s deceptive elusiveness, hiding, as it were, in plain sight.

The most pleasing element for me, though, is the three-word rhyme of “wrong,” “long,” and “song,” the way the final word comes back to essentially recapture the couplet from the beginning and therefore make a reunited whole. In this Lenten season, one of solemnity and reflection, the significance of that symbolic reunion is profound.

I could go on and on but will instead entrust Manning’s work to you, careful reader, who will surely be rewarded for your study.

✚ About the Poet

Maurice Manning (b. 1966) was born and raised in Kentucky. He has taught at DePauw University and Indiana University, and is currently on faculty in the MFA program at Warren Wilson College and the Sewanee Writing Conference. He is a professor of English at Transylvania University, a liberal arts college in Lexington, Kentucky, near the 20-acre farm where he lives. His first book of poems, *Lawrence Booth’s Book of Visions* (2001) was chosen for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. His other work includes *A Companion for Owls: Being the Commonplace Book of D. Boone, Lone Hunter, Back Woodsman, &c* (2004), *Bucolics* (2007), *The Common Man* (2010), which was a finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize in poetry, *The Gone and the Going Away* (2013) and, most recently, *One Man’s Dark* (2016) which continues his exploration of rural America and mankind’s close connection to the natural world.



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