

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Late Fragment

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.

Raymond Carver¹

☞ Reflections

Raymond Carver was known as a minimalist writer and though the poem presented here is one of his briefest it is also, in many ways, as expansive and as emotionally unabridged as anything else he wrote. The title—"Late Fragment"—is itself a complicating if not ironic lens; a fragment of course is but part of a whole, an abbreviation perhaps, and indeed the clauses that comprise the complete poem do suggest something unfinished or, more hopefully, something still in progress.

I am generally a reader who tries to avoid biographical inference but, in this case, it is difficult to divorce the poet's circumstances—he composed this as he lay dying—from the poem itself. Surely there are several ways to interpret the dialogue here—that is, who is speaking to whom?—but it is reasonable to imagine that the poet might be asking himself these questions, the voice of both the call as well as the response. Who has not engaged in this kind of internal conversation, the self asking of the self questions only the self could answer? It is the work of reflection, the work of the inner teacher prodding us toward discovery or wisdom.

Considering that much of Carver's life was spent in suffering and hardship—his marriage failed, he endured nearly life-long poverty, he was in poor health—it is not so hard to recognize the voice of a man dying, the voice of a man resigned though not at all despairing. Of all that I admire of the poem, I am especially drawn to the second line's "even so" and

¹ "Late Fragment" by Raymond Carver from *A New Path to the Waterfall*, Atlantic Monthly Press. Used by permission.

everything it implies; in spite of whatever sadness, regardless of failure, nevertheless and finally, when all is said and done: Did you, after all, get what it was you wanted? And then, with certainty: I did.

Another way to interpret the poem might be to assume the questioning voice is the voice of a caretaker, or of God, or of a beloved to the beloved. We are not to know and instead begin the poem as though we have walked in on a conversation already begun. What we *are* to know instead, I think, is what good poetry has always to teach us: that the question matters as much as the response and at least as much as the voice who asks. In this case, I am led to wonder if the answer is universally true, that all any of us want is not necessarily to have lived without suffering, but to have lived fully, not only to be *called* beloved but to *feel* beloved. And if ever that voice, from wherever it comes, asks if we have not just what we need but what we *want*, may we all answer yes, we did; we do.

✧ About the Poet

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) was an acclaimed American short-story writer and poet whose 1988 fiction collection *Where I'm Calling From* was nominated for both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award. Carver lived in poverty and suffered from alcoholism; he died of cancer at age 50. *A New Path to the Waterfall*, from which this poem is taken, is a collection of verse written while he was dying, and the work is characterized by Carver's signature melancholy and unflinching honesty. "Late Fragment" is the last poem in the last book that Raymond Carver ever published.



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