

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Extinction of Silence

That it was shy when alive goes without saying.
We know it vanished at the sound of voices

Or footsteps. It took wing at the slightest noises,
Though it could be approached by someone praying.

We have no recordings of it, though of course
In the basement of the Museum, we have some stuffed

Moth-eaten specimens—the Lesser Ruffed
And Yellow Spotted—filed in narrow drawers.

But its song is lost. If it was related to
A species of Quiet, or of another feather,

No researcher can know. Not even whether
A breeding pair still nests deep in the bayou,

Where legend has it some once common bird
Decades ago was first not seen, not heard.

A. E. Stallings¹

✧ Reflections

One of the most interesting interviews with a poet I have ever read appeared this summer on a site I visit daily called LitHub. Before I offer an excerpt of it here, I wish to appreciate what most *Wellspring* readers may have noticed right away: Stallings' use of rhyme. She is known for writing in form—though she is vocal about the arguable social dangers of contemporary poets being labeled formalists, in some circles a wildly unpopular branding—and one of the qualities I admire most about this particular formal poem is its irony: a poem about silence that is inextricable from the intentional (rhyming) sound it makes by existing. It is a poem about extinction that calls meditatively into being the very thing it mourns.

¹ "The Extinction of Silence" by A. E. Stallings from Poetry Magazine, February 2006.

In the poet's own words, "Rhyme I would say is a kind of metaphor—a likeness between unlikes—and has some of the same mysterious power. It is a driver of composition and not an ornament (if done properly)... I am fairly often critiqued for rhyming poems that might somehow be good (or better) poems if they didn't rhyme, according to the critic—although without the rhyme they wouldn't exist. That said, people love rhyme until they are taught to distrust it [which is] a distrust of pleasure..."

Because to paraphrase or summarize would do it an injustice, below is an excerpt of A. E. Stallings interview with the poet Peter Mishler. You may read the interview in its entirety [here](#).²

PM: I wonder specifically about you as a poet of what is both unconscious or mysterious—what observations might you have about that aspect of your writing in relationship to, or in opposition to, what we've been discussing about the technical effects of poems.

AS: Frost famously said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." I would perhaps add, no discovery for the writer, no discovery for the reader. Ancient poets believed that they had access to knowledge and wisdom beyond their own human experience because of the divine intervention of the Muses. I also believe that. Inspiration is a state of receptiveness to things larger than or other than oneself, a kind of empathy not necessarily with people but with objects, slants of light, shadows, and the sounds of things. A good line is always a little bit of a mystery.

You learn to trust things you don't necessarily understand intellectually... This doesn't always get easier with time and experience. The more experienced in a technique you become, the harder it can be to surprise yourself. Paradoxically, I like things like rhyme and meter precisely because using these random limitations (as a more avant-garde poet might say) can leave you open to things beyond your control, spaces for the Muse to move through.

PM: A question I ask nearly everyone in the series: what is the strangest thing you know to be true about the art of poetry?

AS: It will outlast scores of species on earth.

PM: Could I ask you to say more?

AS: I think many poets, myself included, are struggling with how to keep writing in the face of the environmental degradation that is looming over us and our children, the beauties and seasons that will be lost, the diversity of flowers and trees and butterflies and fish. These are in danger of vanishing before the words for them do. Poetry is extremely hardy—it was around before the alphabet and will outlast many kinds of human technology. I am robustly optimistic about poetry, but that is maybe the only thing I am optimistic about.... So much of our language is rooted in the old seasons, and in a miraculous natural world. It is terrifying

² <https://lithub.com/a-e-stallings-im-optimistic-about-poetry-but-thats-maybe-the-only-thing/>

to think that the language will outlast some of these. On the other hand, I suppose there will be new metaphors, and the poets of the future will find a way forward.

✧ About the poet

A. E. Stallings (born 1968) was born and raised in Decatur, Georgia, surrounded by books; her father was a professor, her mother a librarian, and her grandfather was an Episcopal priest. Stallings studied classics at the University of Georgia and the University of Oxford before moving to Athens, Greece, where she has lived for most of her adult life. She directs the poetry program at the Athens Centre and is a frequent contributor to Poetry magazine and the Times Literary Supplement. Author of several books of original verse as well as verse translations, she is the recipient of fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation and the Guggenheim Foundation and has been nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award as well as the 2019 Pulitzer Prize.



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