

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Cat Moving Kittens

We must have known,
Even as we reached
Down to touch them
Where we'd found them

Shut-eyed and trembling
Under a straw bale
In the haymow, that
She would move them

That night under cover
Of darkness, and that
By finding them
We were making certain

We wouldn't see them again
Until we saw them
Crouching under the pickup
Like sullen teens, having gone

As wild by then as they'd gone
Still in her mouth that night
She made a decision
Any mother might make

Upon guessing the intentions
Of the state: to go and to
Go now, taking everything
You love between your teeth.

Austin Smith¹

Reflections

If motherhood has taught me one thing it has taught me a thousand. The lesson I relearn daily is that tenderness and fierceness are not, after all, opposites. I might once have thought so, and perhaps in other circumstances they do exist on either pole of one axis. But in mothering my son, I am at once vulnerable as a wound—every feeling at surface-level, defenseless as a heart outside its cage—and as ferociously protective as a wild creature, aware

¹ "Cat Moving Kittens" by Austin Smith from *Flyover Country*, Princeton University Press, 2018. Used by permission.

of every lurking danger, any possible predator, and even a sudden gust of wind, if too ungentle, alerts me to its temperature, its possibility for havoc or chill. It is primal: a mother will die to save her young and, be sure, she will kill to protect what she loves the most.

But for whom is it any new wonder that one word cannot contain the whole of itself? I say “mother” and language has already failed to mean what it says. I am tender as a kitten and fierce as a cat on the move with that kitten in her mouth.

I have been thinking about poetry and how its necessity and its uselessness are not, either, opposites as I might once have thought, how that word “poetry” does not begin to match that which it actually is, can only hitch itself to something close enough. Turning over what I know is an old subject, I end where I began, in romance and reality: poetry puts into language what logic argues can never be put, and therefore offers a kind of salvation; and yet poetry, for all its soul-saving and heart-rescue, cannot fix a broken body, cannot invent a vaccine, or house the homeless, cannot bandage the bleeding. The paradox of poetry: it will save your life and it will not save your life. It is neither nothing nor everything and there is neither opposite nor substitute.

I have read as many poems lately—poems of quarantine and pandemic—that are gentle, uplifting, reflective and lovely as I have read those that lay bare an essential truth that is stark if not bleak, urgent, active, resisting any romance at all. The world’s a mess and pain is everywhere and for every balm there is a burn. It’s likely I prefer—and my *Wellspring* audience prefers, maybe—a gentler poetry much of the time, but I am ever more convinced (publicly, out-spokenly) that the real work of art is—now more than ever, I think—beyond loveliness, beyond delight. After all, the world would not have jailed nor put to death its finest artists if they were not capable of far more.

Poetry is necessary and it is useless and the two functions are, bewilderingly, no more opposite than motherhood being one thing or another. I admire this poem for bearing witness to the paradox of love, tender and violent. It has triggered in me an important reminder that I turn to poetry not to feel better but to feel more, which is better.

✧ About the poet

Austin Smith grew up on a family dairy farm in northwestern Illinois. He is the author of two full-length collections, *Almanac* and *Flyover Country*; his work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, and other fine publications. He teaches at Stanford University and lives in Oakland, California.



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