

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 6, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

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



from *Bucolics*

V

you're the hay maker Boss
you light the candle in the sun
dip the water in the rain
O for the whole big picture
you're the painter Boss I know
it's you the biggest boss of all
you must have a sack full of wind
somewhere a barrel full of salt
a recipe for stone things like that
you keep them close to your chest
you keep your secrets Boss
you flash a yellow eye then crow
away you're like a rooster Boss
sometimes you're like a fox

Maurice Manning¹

Reflections

This poem is one of seventy untitled and unpunctuated lyrics that make up Maurice Manning's *Bucolics*—a collection that feels, essentially, like a love letter to life, to every living thing. The word “bucolic” is synonymous with “pastoral” (from *pastor*, Latin for shepherd) and refers to poetry (or any form) that meditates on rural life (as of the shepherd), creation, earthly beauty. Each of the poems is addressed to “Boss,” that invisible, mysterious benefactor and creator of the idyllic.

¹ “V” from *Bucolics* by Maurice Manning. Copyright © 2007 by Maurice Manning. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

There is a lot I admire here: the delicacy, the detail, the precision. Manning balances a tone that feels at first a bit irreverent; what moxie, what gall to speak to the divine this way! With such informal and unpolished abandon! But with each of Manning's bucolics, and every reading of this one especially, I sense a care, a tenderness, an awe. After all, what kind of speaker is this who can wonder how the hay was made, how the sun was lit, how "the whole big picture" came to be painted? It reminds me of the ways in which children are often much more attentive to—and more likely to ask questions about—the natural world than adults. They delight in texture and smallness and curiosity—bug carcasses, sand, rain water. This poem strikes a similar chord with me, one that resonates in the true pastoral tradition seeking to honor the natural world.

The relationship that I think Manning asks us to consider—that between nature and the divine—is one that many of us ponder anyway. How often have we felt closest to God while watching a magnificent sunset, or while witnessing outrageous beauty in the wilderness, or on a mountaintop, or overlooking a canyon? The pastoral tradition often tries to reclaim this wonder by essentially using the poem as a kind of *pause*—to allow time to observe, meditate, celebrate. It's a lovely poem on any day, but especially a day during the Epiphany season.

When I have taught introductory writing workshops, I often start with an oversimplified but fundamental and distilled lesson on what makes a poem work: the fruitfulness of metaphor which is, plainly, x is (or is *like*) y . Whatever happens or does not happen—that is, the feeling of being moved—is largely dependent on this equation. The speaker's assertion that Boss is "like a rooster" and sometimes "like a fox" illuminates for us the infinite possibilities of what God *could be*. Anything, everything: the earnest, intelligent, confident rooster; the sly, swift, flirtatious fox. The lesson here might be *Boss, you are an animal among us; you are and are like every living thing*.

✂ About the poet

Maurice Manning is the author of several collections of poetry. His first book, *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* (2001), was chosen by poet W.S. Merwin for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. Other books include *A Companion for Owls: Being the Commonplace Book of D. Boone, Lone Hunter, Back Woodsman, &c.* (2004), *Bucolics* (2007), *The Common Man* (2010)—a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry—and *The Gone and the Going Away* (2013). He is on the faculty at Transylvania University and at Warren Wilson College. He lives on a 20-acre farm in Washington County, Kentucky.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church © 2017