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Lecture 22: "The Beautiful Changes" - Poetry at the End of the Century

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“THE BEAUTIFUL CHANGES”: POETRY AT THE END OF THE CENTURY

By Kenneth W. Brewer

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PART ONE: "TO REACH THE HUMAN HEART"

“Some things change the world
   Too much to believe.”

--Katharine Coles
  From “Love Poem for the Nuclear Age
  Utah, 1950--[ ]” in The One Right Touch

In his 1947 poem, “The Beautiful Changes,” Richard Wilbur writes:

The beautiful changes as a forest is changed
   By a chameleon’s turning his skin to it;
As a mantis, arranged
On a green leaf, grows
   Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves
Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows. (Perkins 1558)

I want to talk about American poetry at the end of the twentieth century by focusing on three aspects: literary history, mythology and poetic voice. I want to look at where we were as poets one hundred years ago, where we are now, and where we might be going. I chose Wilbur’s poem for its title; that it was published in 1947, exactly half-way between 1897 and 1997, falls into my grand non-scheme of life: the accidental. My current favorite philosophers are Odo Marquard and Richard Rorty; my favorite “light reading” is Marquard’s In Defense of the Accidental. So I was not surprised that Wilbur’s poem fit so neatly into my timetable.

Before I begin, though, let me clarify some disclaimers. This is not a “lecture”—I can’t remember anything long enough now to trust myself to present a lecture. So I have written an essay—a triptych, which will not surprise my students at all—and I will read it to you. I am not a scholar, either; I am a writer. I don’t think I read or respond to other writers the same way literary scholars or critics do; in fact, I don’t generally like how literary scholars and critics treat writers or works of literature, especially poetry. Since I don’t like to be pigeon-holed, to be shelved as a such-and-such type of writer, I try not to do that to other writers. Since I don’t believe that literary “movements” truly exist, except in the minds of scholars and critics, I don’t like to talk in those terms. I believe that many great writers have “disappeared” because they didn’t fit some scholar’s arbitrary classification; just as many writers have been dubbed “great” merely because they “fit” the critical schemata or the literary canon of a particular time. In short, I believe that many literary reputations live or die because of accidents, more than because of the actual achievements of the writers. Having stated that, I shall begin.

I believe that the job of poets is to name human experience and to create our own mythologies in the context of our particular culture. “Beauty,” then, is not an absolute, but occurs, if at all, in our experience and expression of life: as Wilbur tells us, the “beautiful changes.” The poet’s
particular role as namer goes beyond content to encompass form as well. Walt Whitman’s
greatness, though not recognized by most scholars and critics during his lifetime, lies as much in
the creation of a “form” large enough to contain the brashness, the immensity, the freedom, and
the “manifest destiny” of the United States of America as it does in his naming of experience.

In his poem, “There Was a Child Went Forth,” Whitman gives us the image and the form to
guide us toward the American poet, the “genius in America,” that Emerson had called for in his
essay “The Poet” (Perkins 908). Here are the first four lines of that poem:

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years. (Perkins 88)

And the closing line:

These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day. (Perkins 89)

In between these lines, Whitman catalogues details of observation--grand and minute all on an
equal plane. For the past 100 years, we have built our poetry upon the foundation Whitman gave
us, but at the end of the nineteenth century, Whitman’s vision of what poetry should become--of
what we should become--had lost out to a genteel status quo. The major magazines of that time--
Century, Harper’s, Atlantic, McClure’s and The Nation-- were not, by and large, interested in
innovation. By 1897, such currently esteemed poets as Edgar Allen Poe and Walt Whitman
seemed doomed to obscurity.

Emily Dickinson, the other poet who led us into the twentieth century, was just beginning to be
known, and not all critics were favorable, nor even kind, to her first published book of poems.
Where Whitman gave us the expansive, outward-looking, all-embracing, seemingly never-ending
Leaves of Grass, Dickinson gave us the introspective, isolated, ironic, psychological foundation
upon which we have built entire poetic careers in the twentieth century. I think here of Robert
Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. No other poet at the end of the nineteenth century was
writing anything like this poem of Dickinson’s:

The Soul selects her own Society--
Then--shuts the Door--
To her divine Majority--
Present no more--
Unmoved--she notes the Chariots--pausing
At her low Gate--
Unmoved--an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat--

I’ve known her--from an ample nation--
Choose One--
Then--close the Valves of her attention--
Like Stone-- (Perkins 136)

According to critic Larzer Ziff, “The most popular poet in America in the 1890s was James Whitcomb Riley” (306). Ironically, you won’t find Riley’s poetry in current anthologies even though he was significant enough during his lifetime to have been elected to membership in both the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Perhaps his only “crime” as a poet is that he wrote happy, upbeat poems, which doesn’t seem to gain any respect among scholars or critics of any era. In a letter to another well-known poet at the end of the nineteenth century, the Kentucky poet Madison Cawein, Riley’s advice on writing poems was to “keep ‘em all sunny and sweet and wholesome clean to the core . . .” (Ziff306). That’s what Riley did. In all the 830 pages of The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley, I did not find a single poem that addressed the Civil War, for example.

Most of our poetry in the 1890s maintained the Genteel tradition, that poetry of polite society written by the “little sonnet men,” as E. A. Robinson called them, or the “tea-pot poets,” so named by Whitman (Ziff 306). These genteel poets somehow missed the Civil War and kept writing as if “good taste” and “polite manners” could hide us from the horrors and slaughter that characterized America only thirty years earlier. In Indiana, Riley’s home state as well as my own, over 200,000 soldiers and sailors died in the Civil War; yet the best-known Hoosier poet never published a single poem about that. He wrote, instead, poetry that imitated traditional forms and used the midwestern dialect to give us light-hearted, humorous, often witty, occasionally sentimental sketches of everyday life. To his credit, he wrote some memorable poems for children, and he always kept a keen eye for Nature, which he could describe with sharp images.

I visited Riley’s home in Indianapolis on a school fieldtrip when I was about twelve years old. Inside the grand two-story Victorian house on Lockerbie Street, we walked single file past the thick red-velvet cord that protected his study, the room where he probably wrote “Knee-Deep in June,” one of my favorites. I’ll quote here only stanzas IV and VIII:
Knee-Deep in June

IV

Ketch a shadder down below,
And look up to find the crow--
Er a hawk,--away up there,
‘Pearantly froze in the air!--
Hear the old hen squawk, and squat
Over ever’ chick she’s got,
Suddent-like!--and she knows where
That-air hawk is, well as you!--
You jes’ bet yer life she do!--
Eyes a-glitterin’ like glass,
‘Waitin’ till he makes a pass!

VIII

March ain’t never nothin’ new!--
Aprile’s altogether too
Brash fer me! And May--I jes’
‘Bominate its promises,--
Little hints o’ sunshine and
Green around the timber-land--
A few blossoms, and a few
Chip-birds, and a sprout er two,--
Drap asleep, and it turns in
‘Fore daylight and snows ag’in!--
But when June comes--Clear my th’oat
With wild honey!--Rench my hair
In the dew! And hold my coat!
Whoop out loud! And th’ow my hat!--
June wants me, and I’m to spare!
Spread them shadders anywhere,
I’ll get down and waller there,
And obleeged to you at that! (353-355)

Along with other poems, such as “When the Frost Is On the Punkin’,” “The Old Swimmin’-Hole” and “Little Orphant Annie” (“An’ the Gobble-uns ’ll git you// Ef you// Don’t//Watch// Out!”), perhaps Riley’s idea was to heal the nation. Perhaps he thoughtfully avoided the brutal irony of poems such as Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” or the bleak vision of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” “All sunny and sweet,” as Riley advised, would save the nation from having to think of its recent past; would nudge us into the next century like travellers on H. G. Wells’ rocket to the moon.
Over a hundred years ago, New York poet and critic E. C. Stedman, one of the champions of poets Whitman and Poe, wrote this:

If, then, the people care little for current poetry, is it not because that poetry cares little for the people and fails to assume its vantage-ground? Busying itself with intricacies of form and sound and imagery, it scarcely deigns to reach the human heart. (465)

I could say that about some of the poetry being written at the end of this century, too. Stedman gave us the phrase the “twilight period” to describe the state of poetry in America at the end of the nineteenth century. Prose fiction, especially the novel, was supplanting poetry as the major literary genre. Today, poets have far more competition than the novel; yet, we publish hundreds of books of poetry every year in this country and we attend thousands of poetry readings. Granted, we do not fill football stadiums or basketball fieldhouses or baseball parks, but we do have poets who deserve such immense audiences.

For the last half of this century, the “poetry workshop”—the standard academic model developed at the University of Iowa—has been the foundry where most of our poets have learned their craft. Although many of us complain about “workshop” poetry—that it seems cold and pointless; that it merely achieves craft and not spirit—most of what I read and hear of today’s poetry is skillful and moving. I believe we know our roots and I believe we have a mature body of poetry to match that of any nation.

In the past hundred years, the major change I see in American poetry is diversity. If you look at the most recent anthologies, you find such poets as Gary Soto, Garrett Hongo, Joy Harjo (all these poets whose name ends in “o”), Rita Dove, Cathy Song and Simon Ortiz. You find Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wilbur and Robert Creeley all in a row. Here’s where we are and here’s where we’re going. Listen to this poem by Gary Soto:

Mexicans Begin Jogging

At the factory I worked
In the fleck of rubber, under the press
Of an oven yellow with flame,
Until the border patrol opened
Their vans and my boss waved for us to run.
“Over the fence, Soto,” he shouted,
And I shouted that I was American.
“No time for lies,” he said, and pressed
A dollar in my palm, hurrying me
Through the back door.
Since I was on his time, I ran
And became the wag to a short tail of Mexicans--
Ran past the amazed crowds that lined
The street and blurred like photographs, in rain.
I ran from that industrial road to the soft
Houses where people paled at the turn of an autumn sky.
What could I do but yell \textit{vivas}
To baseball, milkshakes, and those sociologists
Who would clock me
As I jog into the next century
On the power of a great, silly grin. (Lauter 3047)

At a dinner party a few years ago, I was introduced by my host as “a poet.” One of the people I had just met marvelled that I would waste my time on such a dead art form. I have never felt that I have wasted my life on poetry, nor that poetry is dead. On the contrary, poetry in America has survived hot wars and cold ones, novels and movies, teachers and critics, Hallmark cards and Madison Avenue ads, television and the world wide web.

That the essence of twentieth-century poetry in America thrives on the dark side of human experience is no surprise to me. I would rather live in a world that did not have an arsenal of nuclear or biological weapons; I would rather live among people who respected each other and the planet they call home. Some of the changes in the past hundred years have been so terrifying that they could have left us speechless. Still, we found words to speak and we found audiences to hear them. I believe we always will.
PART TWO. A SKY FULL OF X’s AND O’s

(Opening shot) In his book *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday writes about a pivotal moment in the history and mythology of the Kiowa people.

During the first hours after midnight on the morning of November 13, 1833, it seemed that the world was coming to an end. Suddenly the stillness of the night was broken; there were brilliant flashes of light in the sky, light of such intensity that people were awakened by it. With the speed and density of a driving rain, stars were falling in the universe. Some were brighter than Venus; one was said to be as large as the moon. (Momaday 85)

(Cut to:) On the morning of December 7, 1941, the sky over Pearl Harbor filled with hundreds of bright red-orange suns in dozens of formations, like fiery constellations of daylight stars. Suddenly the suns dove as if they would all set, one by one, into the glistening harbor. Instead, they burned themselves into American history and mythology. Those Japanese “suns,” or “zeroes,” as they were named by American pilots, became part of my personal mythology as well on that “day of infamy.”

Another part of my mythology, the stylized X’s on the tail section of German stukas, had exploded as a symbol years earlier in the skies over Guernica, Spain—captured forever in Picasso’s painting. And my language grew with words like banzai, blitzkrieg, harikari, holocaust, samurai, storm trooper, Nip and Nazi. And one of my tribe’s poets, Randall Jarrell, wrote “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner:”

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose. (Perkins 1539)

At nine days old on Dec. 7, 1941, my history, my mythology and my future were already shaped as if some astrological chart had suddenly been etched in my psyche—“This Sagittarian will also be a poet.” (Note the “o” sound in “poet”—you think that’s an accident?)

(Cut to:) I grew up in a city designed as a wheel with spokes going off in four directions. At the center is Monument Circle, where the Soldier’s and Sailor’s War Memorial rises ten stories in the middle of a circular, three-lane-wide street, with vehicles moving counter-clockwise past the four spokes. Two streets make an X through Monument Circle: Meridian runs north and south; Market runs east and west. All the other intersecting streets and avenues form a giant spiderweb of traffic that crawls from strand to strand day and night, incessantly, till Sunday morning. The farther one travels from Monument Circle, the more confused one becomes as the design disintegrates into a chaos of unplanned suburbs with their cul de sacs and dead ends.
All my 18 years in Indianapolis I never could distinguish compass directions. This part of the midwest flattens like a hallway carpet laid from east to west, with nothing to climb but outdoor steps and indoor stairs.

(Cut to:) My entire life has been cluttered with X’s and O’s. My favorite game in my youth was tic tac toe. I begged everyone I knew to play it with me till nobody would, so I played against myself--always to a draw. Through high school and part of college, I played football--nose guard. (Note the “o” sound in “nose”--you think that’s an accident--you think I could ever have been a quarterback?) Of course, I learned all the plays by memorizing X-and-O diagrams, copied on carbon paper with black, easily-smudged ink. Football kept me in high school (note all those “o’s” in “football” and “school”) and lured me to Western New Mexico to play for the Mustangs till my knees were crippled by taking too many blind-side trap blocks and by submarining too many centers and lifting them over my back.

So I ended the third season early, which is why I remember crutching down the steps of the English department building on the morning of November 22, 1963. A young man I didn’t know, but whose face is still a very sharp image in my mind, stopped me to say that President Kennedy had been shot to death in Dallas. It was six days before my 22nd birthday.

(Cut to:) First there were books (Gunther Grass’s The Tin Drum); then there were movies (Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal); then there were books into movies (Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s Slaughterhouse Five); then there were movies into books into television series (Mash). Like Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, I am “unstuck in time.” Like Picasso’s paintings, I am “the sum of destructions.” Like Eliot’s Prufrock, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”

(Cut to:) One October evening, Bobbie and I were driving back from Boise where we had spent two days with Rick and Rosemary Ardinger and their Labrador retriever Molly in the mountains toward Idaho City and beside Mores Creek. As we crested the hills above Petersboro, we saw the full moon over Cache Valley, bright, vivid and seemingly touchable. Nothing can so take my breath like the full moon on a clear autumn night, that giant “O” in the sky, that mouth of darkness.

The moon has been a symbol in my poetry all my literary life. I’ve hung it in my Hoosier poems, in my New Mexico poems, in my Utah poems, in my rural poems and in my urban poems, in my light poems and in my dark poems. I’ve described the red-orange harvest moon along the Tippecano River in northern Indiana; the pale-yellow moon above the Chihuahuan desert around Silver City, New Mexico; and the white-bone hunter’s moon reflected in the dark water of Utah’s Bear Lake.
NEW MEXICO, BY MOONLIGHT


Darkness is the time of life. Across water and sand alike, gentle, ruthless, everything’s shadow moves at night. Surfaces fall away in the cool, wet moon.

(Cut to:) In most mythologies the moon is a feminine symbol and that is mostly true for my mythology, too; but not always. Sometimes it is masculine and harsh as death. Mostly, it is mysterious, soft, nurturing like a lover’s breast that I tickle with my eyelash, nuzzle with my beard, cup in the palm of my hand.

I know the moon is 250,000 miles from here. I know Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin have walked on it. I know we have some of its surface on earth now, scattered among laboratories and museums; we have probably even fashioned ashtrays from some of its rocks by now. And, of course, we have littered where we have walked in the name of science. Wrappers, graffiti and feces are the true business cards of our species. Someday, I suppose, we’ll rocket our radioactive leftovers, our used tires, our dead batteries (maybe even our dead bodies) to the moon since our leaders believe that, like our own deserts, nothing’s there. Remember what the Atomic Energy Commission said about the desert dwellers downwind of the Nevada Test Site: “a low-use segment of the population” (Gallagher xxiii).

(Cut to:) William Stafford, arguably the best known poet in this country during the last half of the twentieth century, wrote this poem:

AT THE BOMB TESTING SITE

At noon in the desert a panting lizard waited for history, its elbows tense, watching the curve of a particular road as if something might happen.
It was looking at something farther off than people could see, an important scene acted in stone for little selves at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less. Ready for a change, the elbows waited. The hands gripped hard on the desert. (41)

(Cut to:) Our first television set squatted in the small living room like a warthog with one large round eye in the middle of its body where its navel should have been. There was no background scenery in most of the programs, only actors standing alone or very close to each other under glaring, intensely hot lights. Or a newsman standing center screen and holding a script, reading to the camera just as I read to you now. No film at 6:00; no video aids; no computer-enhanced weather forecast. Just this solitary man lecturing to people he could not see. No competition at all for the movietime newsreels with their action film and voice-over narration. No competition for the great radio newsmen either; no one like Winchell or Kronkite or Murrow.

(Cut to:)

THE COMING OF TV

Picture a round screen in the top center of a box as large as a Lazy Boy recliner.

Picture a dozen neighbors standing, arms folded, in a semi-circle on a street corner in Indianapolis.

They watch the TV early evening as it plays in the store window and a statue-man reads the news.

Picture a man in radio days, standing, reading, eyes on the script, mouth to the mic, live.
Picture this on TV,
no video highlights, no background,
just a man in suit and tie reading.

At 6:30, the owner turns off the TV
and the neighbors begin to talk,
walk off in pairs and threes.

Picture the next morning, almost
dawn, in the alley behind the store
where a man yells, a man runs.

Picture me at ten, round and
with a cowlick back center of my head,
as I stand in the alley and watch.

The neighbor cop raises his pistol,
fires at the running man
who screams, stumbles, falls.

Picture blood spraying from
his groin as if from a skunk,
and the morning frozen like a painting.

Picture a TV suspended in mid-air,
a gun suspended at the end of an arm,
a boy suspended in observation.

Picture the neighbors standing
in a circle, listening to a young boy
tell the first story of his life.

Picture him before you now
telling stories, reading from his script
as if TV had never come,

the running man had not died,
the neighbor-cop had not wept,
and the morning had never been painted.
(Cut to:) TV hypnotized us. The bright flashing eye captured our eyes, and has held us spellbound for half a century. We could listen to the radio, let our minds re-envision what we heard, and still do something else: drive the car, type, wash dishes, even sit around the dinner table with the entire family, all of us facing each other, looking into the space at the center of our lives, the space that held us together as the inside of a vase holds all the sides together. But TV demanded our attention, so we left the dinner table, invented rectangular TV trays and matching rectangular TV dinners so we could sit looking at that hypnotic eye which had slowly stretched its circle to also become a rectangle, had changed its symbolism from “unity” to “conformity.” TV became like our houses, which Frank Lloyd Wright called “coffins,” where we live our lives, dead long before we die.

If you watch TV for several hours at a stretch, you will not experience the sort of “unity” and “coherence” we have tried to teach freshman composition students to pursue. No wonder we fail so often. Most dramatic programs on TV are chopped up by a series of commercials leaping from a dramatic car chase through the streets of San Francisco to a box of Cheer held by a woman who is pleasant-looking, motherly, but never sexy; to a shiny black Buick with a very sexy, not motherly-looking, woman sprawled across the hood as if it were a chaise lounge; to a cartoon figure of a stomach complaining about acid indigestion; to a bar full of ex-athletes drinking Budweiser; then just as suddenly we’re back to the red Firebird as it goes airborne down Telegraph Avenue followed by half a dozen police cars also going airborne before they all crash, explode in flames, except the hero’s car--then we hear the first dialogue in five minutes of action: “That was close.” Deadpan. Inane. Language to serve the action. And some writer has been paid handsomely to write “That was close.” Was there a university course for that? Did someone receive graduate credit to learn to write “That was close.” But before we can think about it, we leap again to a well-muscled man naked to the waist with one side of his head foamed with a shampoo that’s white and bubbly, the other side of his head seemingly lacquered with Brand X--and, as we all know, Brand X never wins.

(Cut to:) I became a poet under the influence of books and radio. My granddaughter Katie is becoming a poet under the influence of TV: here’s one of her poems written when she was eight (two years ago):

WHEN I GROW UP

When I grow up I’ll go to the end of the world. Then when the morning sun rises, I’ll throw it lavendar lace and bulging bows and a card from my heart.

At night when the tangerine sun disappears, I’ll go right to sleep and dream of roses, violets, and hermit crabs in the Oregon Sea. (City Art 1)
At age seven, I was just learning to read “Dick and Jane”; I’m not sure I could even read “Spot” till I was eight.

In Bill Watterson’s last cartoon, Hobbes says to Calvin: “Everything familiar has disappeared. The world looks brand-new.” And Calvin has the last bubble: “… let’s go exploring.” That’s my advice to the poets of the 21st century, too. The beautiful changes. The symbols change. The mythology changes. I could not have written like my fellow Hoosier James Whitcomb Riley. Katie will not write like I do. Everything changes. To be a poet means to know that, to change with it, to understand that the moon has changed and to be ready to write about this new moon and all the new moons to come.

(Cut to:) Again, the sky filled with X’s and O’s on the morning of August 6, 1945, when the Enola Gay exploded the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and three days later on August 9, 1945, when the Boxcar exploded another atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Years later, songwriter Utah Phillips would sing this into my mythology:

> Look out, look out from your school room window.  
> Look up young children from your play.  
> Your bright young eyes will turn to ashes  
> In the blinding light of Enola Gay.

(Fade to Part Three.)
PART THREE. THE ARCHITECTONICS OF A WRITER'S VOICE

As a poet, I believe that "voice" is the key to any writer's success or failure, for any particular piece of writing or for one's entire career. When I began to write with some seriousness, something beyond classroom assignments or the occasional need to transfer my most intense emotions to paper, I naturally imitated other writers. Establishing my own voice took many years of experience and creative growth.

But beyond all that, something else was at work. What emerged as my creative voice was a combination of my mother, my maternal grandmother and my first grade teacher, Louise Brennan. These were the women of my earliest memories and the voices I most heard as I began to learn language and develop a personality. In short, the human being I would become was centered on the lives of these three women.

My voice also came from my immediate neighborhood--a two-square block of Indianapolis, the thirteenth largest city in the USA--and from the historical period and cultural fabric of that city during the Second World War. I was born on November 28, 1941, nine days before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States plunged into war against the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. My father re-enlisted in the army and I seldom saw him for the next five years. Indeed, I don't recall any young men in my life at all during those years.

Both grandfathers died before I could know them. In Pikeville, Kentucky, my paternal grandfather was crushed to death when a coal mine caved in; I never even heard his voice. In Indianapolis, my maternal grandfather died of undetermined causes when I was three, though I now suspect he died of liver disease brought on by his heavy drinking. All the memory I have of him is in photographs. In one portrait, I can see my own features, the same nose and eyes, the same round face, the same mouth; I now suspect I would have sounded much like him when I spoke. But that's not what I mean by "voice."

My mother didn't "work" the first five years of my life. By that, I mean she didn't have a job outside the home. She "worked" at raising me and helping my grandmother "keep house," as we say. We lived with my grandparents most of the time my father was in the army during the war. I have vague memories of my mother talking to me and singing to me, but no memories of her reading to me. I was not born into a "reading" family; they read the newspaper, but not much else. I was born into a "radio" family. We listened to radio endlessly; I still prefer radio to television and I believe that, too, has much to do with the voice I developed, and with the sense of rhythm I hear in poetry. I did not hear the rhythm of a small community of people who spoke a particular language all the same way. Neither in my neighborhood--a conglomeration of lower middle class families and literally just across the railroad tracks from one of the largest black neighborhoods of Naptown (or End-a-Noplace, as we often referred to Indianapolis)--nor on the radio did I hear language spoken in the cadence of iambic pentameter or any other regular meter I was eventually taught to accept as "Poetry" (note the capital "P"). I heard, instead, a river of meter, a roar of jumbled sounds like the Passaic Falls of William Carlos Williams' epic poem Paterson.
When I heard jazz and blues music on the radio, I found my own metaphor for the rhythms I hear—a pattern of sounds larger than any mere English metric can embrace, a pattern as large as time and space itself. I came to believe that the English metric was suitable to the builders of empire: it can only embrace what we call the material possessions that come with such an empire. It cannot hope to encompass the spirit, or the greater language of the universe, or even the simpler language of the human heart. To build an empire takes soldiers who all march to the same sound; to understand a universe takes everything one can possibly hear and an ultimate faith in the accidental. So imagine a union of William Carols Williams, Dave Brubeck, Lightin’ Hopkins, Fats Domino, the philosopher Odo Marquard, the three women of my childhood, the neighborhood, Amos and Andy, Walter Winchell, Edward R. Murrow, Fibber McGee and Molly, Ferlin Huskie and WWII and you will begin, perhaps, to understand the origins of my "voice." Clearly, it is the product of a particular cultural history and a particular combination of accidents.

Both my grandparents worked. My grandfather was a switchman for the railroad in Indianapolis. My grandmother was a cleaning lady—that's what she called her job—for the big public library building downtown. Later, after my grandfather died and my father returned from the war, we continued to live with my grandmother. By then, she had taken a job as a gift wrapper at the main L. S. Ayers department store in the center of downtown Indianapolis. After I started first grade, my mother also took a job working for the same trucking company where my father worked.

I grew up from then on as what we now call a "latchkey kid." No one was there when I got home from school. My grandmother was the first one home around 6:00 p.m. each night. She would fix dinner for the two of us, listen to my tales of woe about school, then tuck me in for the night long before my parents got home from work, often as late as midnight. I would leave the next morning shortly after my grandmother had fixed me breakfast and caught the bus for work, and long before my parents got up to leave for the trucking business. When I was very young, grandmother taught me how to fix my own breakfast, and I was frying bacon then cooking eggs over easy in the bacon grease, flipping the grease up onto the eggs so I never had to turn them, and listening to the particular rhythms such cooking taught me.

The upshot of all this is that I grew up mostly with my mother's voice during my first six years, then mostly with my grandmother's voice the next twelve years. In my seventh year, I lived many of my waking hours with the voice of Louise Brennan, my first grade teacher at P. S. 62, and the woman who actually taught me to read. By the time I left Indianapolis to go to college in New Mexico, I had within my psyche the voices of these three women, but I had no inkling I would ever be a writer. I wanted to be a football coach. In many ways, I guess, I was resisting those voices, trying, instead, to be a football player or a baseball player. Perhaps I was still trying to impress my father, who had never even seen me play through four years of high school. I wanted something from him, though I never could name precisely what it was I wanted. Love, I suppose; or, if not that, at least some recognition, some attention, beyond the occasional spanking it was his duty to deliver. He never took much time for that, either: a trip to the bathroom, time enough to
remove his belt, and a few licks on the back of my legs, ka-whomp, ka-whomp, ka-whomp, ka-whomp, ka-whomp--that's iambic pentameter, the rhythm of soldiers.

Perhaps I have embraced the voices of women partly because I have also resisted the voice of my father. His voice was never one of nurturing and it was never close to my heart. It could have been, I think, with only the slightest effort on his part.

Vera John-Steiner comments in her book, *Notebooks of the Mind*, that in the youth of most creative people there is a caring adult. This is not a mentor, but a person who listens to the child, nurtures but does not criticize. I was fortunate to have three caring adults, all women, all gentle and patient listeners. Today, I believe, the role of the caring adult has shifted more and more to that public school teacher role Mrs. Brennan played and away from family members. As I recall, Mrs. Brennan had fifteen of us in her first grade class; indeed, I don't remember any of my public school classes in Indianapolis being larger than 15 students, a far cry from the numbers I hear today--30 and sometimes even into the 40s.

If, as I believe, the role of caring adult is now largely that played by public school teachers, how much harder it must be now than it was for Mrs. Brennan in 1948. How do our first grade teachers give that kind of individual attention to each child? How do they find the time to listen long and carefully to those strange and wonderful tales that creative children can weave? With 30 students in the classroom, a teacher would spend 7.5 hours in one day by devoting only 15 minutes to each child.

I could not read when I began first grade, but Mrs. Brennan patiently taught me my first words. She introduced me to books and, eventually, to writing. I learned to read and write with 14 other children under the personal guidance of an excellent teacher in a superb school system. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. Only now do I appreciate the education I received in Indianapolis from 1948 to 1960; I wonder if it is still that good.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Brennan and my other public school teachers did not entirely give me my voice. They set me on the way to use it, to develop it and to appreciate it; but they only gave me those tools and not the thing itself.

My mother loved crossword puzzles and eventually taught me to love them too. Once I could read and write, crosswords became something we shared. We would work them together, one at a time. Often she would start one, then leave it for me to finish when I got home from school. Or I would start one and leave it for her to complete while dad drove them to work. That was my introduction to the dictionary and *Roget's Thesaurus*; it was the true beginning of my love of language.
My mother helped to teach me words and my grandmother told me stories. I loved my grandmother's stories and to this day I still believe every one of them was true. She would often start a story by showing me a photograph of some family member long dead or of some family event, a picnic at Brown County State Park or a camp-out on Brandywine Creek. She told me about the woodworking my grandfather used to do and how he once made a wooden leg for a railroader who had been pinned between two boxcars and had one leg amputated above the knee. She told me about riding the train all the way west to St. Louis and clear up to Chicago and how they hit a cow on each trip and never even stopped. She told me about the stockyards at Chicago and how they hung the hogs by their hind legs on a big conveyor belt and slit their throats, and how the blood gushed into a trench and flowed out of sight beneath the feet of the butchers. And how they served sandwiches at the fine restaurants in St. Louis, open-faced with gravy poured over them and mashed potatoes and green beans. Every night, it seems, I heard some sort of story from my grandmother. Eventually, I started telling stories too, but hardly any of them were true, like hers. I became the best liar in the neighborhood. I made up stories constantly until none of the neighborhood kids would believe them anymore; then I started in on the adults. What else could I do but become a writer?

By learning to read, I could discover the voice of the past and could meet the writers who would become my "distant" teachers, all men: Vachel Lindsay, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley and William Stafford. By learning to write, I could throw my voice, like a ventriloquist, into the future. And though my mother Juanita and my grandmother Mary were not writers, they live in my voice.

I finally met my mentor during my first year of graduate school at New Mexico State University. I was a teaching assistant and was studying British literature for my M.A. Keith Wilson taught poetry and my first knowledge of him came through a reading he gave on campus one night. I had never heard a poet in person, nor had I ever heard poetry like Keith Wilson's. The intensity, the honesty, the emotional and intellectual power of his simple diction and his driving rhythms hooked me. I spent the next three years learning to write poetry by taking my poems to Keith's office; I never took an official class from him. Keith would read the poems, wouldn't say anything at all about them; instead, he would ask if I had read Williams, then Pound, then Creeley, week after week. I hadn't read anyone but Whitman and Lindsay, plus the usual high school poetry assignments on Sandburg and Frost, to name the ones I liked. With each new poet I would imitate the style and rhythm and submit new poems to Keith, always without any response from him.

Eventually, I turned in a poem that wasn't an imitation. It was a poem I wrote while playing with a French surrealist gimmick using words cut out of a newspaper article. I kept the first line: "I sleep within adobe dark." For some reason I abandoned the rest of the "gimmick" and wrote a six-part poem that ended with silence, a section number but no words following it. That was the first poem Keith ever critiqued; he helped me to revise a couple of the middle images, then suggested I
submit it to a magazine called *Potpourri*, edited by Carlos Reyes in Corvallis, Oregon. Reyes published the poem—my first ever publication. By then, Keith was clearly my mentor and quickly becoming the father I never had, the man who paid attention, cared about what I did, and gave me advice. Of course, I was learning more than mere poetic skills from Keith Wilson; he was teaching me to be a decent human being, to pay attention to life, to begin to know who I was on this planet. If I have become any sort of a good person in the second half of my life, I owe it to Keith Wilson; and the only way I know to thank him is to try to emulate him, try to pass on that kind of teaching to others. Like Keith, I hope to help my students to become good people, and if they also become good poets, then so much the better.

I used to say that I write "to save myself." Now I say that I write to "to save us all," because my voice carries in it all these other voices, too. Some say that once the poem is published, the poet is dead. I don’t believe that. If you read my poem, you give life to my voice and all the other voices that have helped make mine. Even if I am truly dead, you can still hear me/hear us; and whatever you become then, we, too, shall become.

Remember Whitman:

These became part of that child who went forth every day,
   And who now goes, and will always go forth every day. (Perkins 89)

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WORKS CITED


