

End Notes

WORDS

When we say that we are moved or stirred or shaken by a poem we are describing a kinaesthetic response to fields of verbal energy. . . . It is as though some intrinsic gesture of the soul itself were being expressed through the resonances of language.

—Stanley Kunitz

To the bugle, every color is red.

—Emily Dickinson

Listless is limp and noodly. Huffy puffs out its cheeks and walks fast. Cemetery is a solemn wind rustling leaves forever. Pebble; a brook-icy mouthful.

Back beyond the reach of memory, before I learned to use words as symbols, there was sound. Sound was emotion. When my mother said “I’m angry,” I knew anger was flat, drawn-out and scowly. I could see it in her face and I could hear the emotion in the word. When she said, “I’m so happy,” I knew the feeling was higher-pitched, peppy, and saying it made her mouth turn up. Sounds were sensations too: swing was what my stomach felt like at the moment I arced so high the chain went slack, and for that instant I just hung there, in air. Kick, hit, and stomp could be nothing other; a perfect compatibility of sound and outraged motion. Sounds could also be the things in my life: school was oily, long and sneaky. Candy constricted the back of my throat. Tooth made me push my tongue to wiggle the loose one. It was as if all words became onomatopoeic for me, and learning language was utterly sensate.

I don’t remember exactly when or how I learned to read. I have wispy memories of starting to sound words out from familiar logos: Ipana, Hot Point, Kenmore, Cheerios; and from my favorite TV shows: Lassie, Zorro, Roy Rogers, and the Mickey Mouse Club. Then, (suddenly, it seems now), I was off and reading everything. I discovered that through reading not only could I *think*, I could also imagine things I had never experienced. I read our voluminous *Childrens’ Literature* cover to cover, rummaging around in the

worlds of myth, fairy tale, and fable. Words let me try on different identities—one day I would *be* Sir Lancelot, the next Hiawatha. I became obsessed with reading; words were a currency of knowledge, and I wanted to gather all I could. When I was curled off somewhere, reading, the noisy life of my family vaporized into an ether of forgetfulness. I didn't hear them. They did not exist. There were only black marks on a white page, beaming images, characters, worlds, life itself, straight into my open, waiting head. My childhood's secret hideout.

Our house had a small library, and I made my way randomly through the shelves. I read Ogden Nash and Robert Benchley, Richard Wright, Willa Cather, and Thomas Wolfe. Much of what I read I couldn't fully understand, but love of the sound and rhythm of the language kept me enthralled. I learned about life, too; about abstractions made real. In fifth grade I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and innocently asked my mother what rape meant. She told me, exactly and graphically, and I was jarred into a new understanding. Words could evoke more than pleasure—they could be malign, make pain real. When I was around eleven I read *Swann's Way*, and though I don't remember what it was about I can still recall the dreamy, word-besotted state it induced in me. I *felt* the brilliance and sheen of the prose in a way that satisfied me. I discovered Shakespeare one summer and read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* over and over during those damp insomniac nights. Later, moony with the melodrama of adolescence, I slogged with gleeful anguish through the Russians: Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. I needed emotion on a grand scale at that age.

But reading wasn't the whole of my infatuation. Reading was a passive state in which I let the words control and guide me. Fairly early I discovered that I could control words. I could write. I could imagine and create. I had power.

One summer when I was twelve or so, my parents enrolled me in a creative writing class at a high school. Though I don't remember much about the course I do remember the title of the story I wrote: "The Horse in the Gray Flannel Suit," and I know I stole it from a movie, unaware that it was also a book. But mainly what I learned that summer was that writers were special, were valued, and garnered attention. I was praised for an activity that seemed easy at the time: to allow my imagination to flow from my head down my arm and spill out onto a cheap sheet of lined paper. This wasn't like baseball, ice-skating, or the trumpet, activities I loved but had to

practice at to be any good. I felt guilty. Yet I know I let the first, hesitant puffings of my own ego take over and fill me with a sense of pride, even superiority. I would be a writer.

During my passionate and angst-ridden college years I discovered poetry. I loved it—that consummate merging of sound and sense, intellect and emotion. Cynthia Ozick says books are the riverbanks of language, but for me, listening to poetry is to hear the music in the river of language itself. Even now, although I read poetry for sense, I listen to it for the rhythm of pre-literate emotion, where language and experience blend into the smile on my mother's face as she says "I'm happy."

As an undergraduate minoring in creative writing, and writing poetry like crazy myself, I became enamored with the idea of The Writer. As a person. As a possible persona for my future self. A semi-famous writer taught my poetry workshop one semester and I was curious and intrigued. I wanted to know what it was that *made* a writer. I needed to understand how he worked, on every level. So I set out to have an affair with him, succeeded, and learned that real, living, breathing writers are precisely that. Real. Usually with big egos and bad habits—qualities I also possessed in abundance.

I graduated from college and the affair around the same time and set out to paddle around in what I didn't yet realize was my life. I had some poetry published in a national magazine that summer, and even as my ego and confidence and certainty about writing blossomed, something dark and debilitating was digging its way toward the surface of my understanding. It was fear. What if I admitted to others, to myself, that despite the smug cynicism I'd practiced in college, I truly wanted to be a writer. What if, and this thought shocked me into paralysis, I tried my very hardest and failed. Like a body buried in a flood plain I couldn't keep down my own secret shame that I had never, ever really tried my hardest—at anything. Yet I got good grades, athletics came easily, and I'd always been praised for my writing. I'd developed a strange psychological rationalization—that if I failed at something it wasn't ego-shattering since I also knew I hadn't *really* tried. Suddenly I felt I hadn't earned my life. I didn't deserve to be a writer. I felt hollow.

For over ten years I didn't write at all. I started and quit grad school several times. I drove a bus. I drank a lot. I worked as a printer. I did many drugs. I was tragically hip: a literary, female James Dean. I finally got sick

of myself. Now I have a job co-editing a literary magazine and I'm writing poetry and essays. And though I work with writers every day, witness their foibles, the chaos their egos can wreak, I forgive them anything when I'm under the spell of their words. Somewhere inside me I've retained a trace of wishfulness, a vague hope that writers are different, set apart in some lofty realm where language is beautiful and pure and so are the people. Then I went to a writing conference.

I'm sitting at an exhibition booth at an annual conference. Writers, teachers, and publishers are milling everywhere. I sniff the tang of desperation, competitiveness, greed.

An emerging writer walks up to a semi-established writer and says, "I loved your last book. It was *superb*. Say, do you think we could have dinner tonight? Or a drink? I'd love to catch up."

Semi-established writer looks uneasy, looks past emerging writer's shoulder, squints at his watch, and says without looking up, "Sorry, no. Um, I'm having dinner and drinks with (actually famous writer) and some other people. I've *got* to find an espresso. Sorry, nice to see you."

And he walks away. Emerging writer stands for a moment, lets the smile slide off his face. He looks . . . crestfallen, I think, from my anonymous spot behind the display table.

A woman says to me, later to the man next to me, to anyone who will listen, "Although my last book did really well I just got my divorce and I'm totally broke but luckily I just got a Fellowship at (prestigious Eastern college) for next year so things are going to be okay I think. Anyway, I've got a new manuscript which I think is my strongest work yet so I hope my agent can place it. Do you have a cigarette? I'm just *dying* for a smoke."

These scenes are repeated over and over as writers hustle for jobs in the numerous writing programs across the country or hustle their manuscripts with publishers and presses. Most of the people who come to our table are writers we've published before as they pointedly remind me. Or they are writers who ask if we'd be interested in seeing their work. Few people buy a copy of the magazine though the free flyers are grabbed up. This is the vast middle class of the writing world. This is the business of writing and it makes me feel sick.

Yet I understand it. I understand that most people who write also teach, that teaching is preferable to being a clerical worker like Melville, or a

blue-collar worker like Phil Levine used to be, that few writers make a living writing, especially since the big publishing houses now operate on the profit margin, not on talent potential. I know that a writer usually has to have at least one book published to land a teaching job, and to get a book a writer needs an agent, and to get an agent a writer has to publish frequently in respectable literary magazines. And this all requires networking. Was it ever enough to simply sit at one's desk and flood page after page with imagination and insight? When did the writing turn into part of a package and the writer into publicist, marketing strategist, and middle man? Perhaps I'm nostalgic for a time that never existed.

So I sit at my table and watch the show, aware that I'm privileged to be an onlooker, not a participant. I let myself feel a bit superior, unsullied. Or perhaps that's only because I'm *not* a widely published writer. Perhaps what I feel, underneath it all and masked by the superiority, is the sickening, greenish twinge of jealousy. I'm horrified. Do I *want* to be part of this? The white noise of anxiety buzzing in my head makes me so claustrophobic I retreat to the quiet beigeness of my hotel room, and so depressed I do nothing but lie on my bed and flick through the channels on the TV.

At night it gets worse. The organized "dances," and "socials," and "receptions," are nothing more than euphemisms for drunken intimacies and the sort of back-seat maneuverings I'd thought I'd left behind in high school. I think I may as well be at a pork producers convention. The gray-haired writer I met earlier, whom we've published before and who hopes we publish again, lurches toward where I'm sitting at the bar. "Want to dance?" he says already grabbing at my hand. I take my hand back and set it on the bar as if it were somebody's purse, look him in the eye and say, "I don't dance." Which is a lie as he'll notice later, but I don't care. I've separated into my spectator mode by now and amazedly watch these people clamor for more of the "golden oldies" the DJ keeps playing. I notice that a man can be unattractive, wear any old baggy clothes, have a horrendous haircut, and still be a successful, swarmed-over writer. But if you're a woman you should be pretty, or have chic clothes, or big hair you can toss around petulantly.

On the last day of the conference everyone seems wound even tighter than before and I wonder how I can last. I'm exhausted by the brittle, phony energy I can sense in the air. I feel as if I've fallen into one of Dante's circles of hell, the one where I spend eternity in a beige luxury hotel in a cold,

northern, Lutheran city with all the deacons of the Bible Belt masquerading as writers.

At four P.M. we pack up our books and signs and on a whim I decide to go hear the final event: a tribute to and reading by the poet Stanley Kunitz. I try to remember if I've read any of his work but get side tracked as he is led in, frail and wobbly, on the arm of a rapidly emerging woman poet with more hair than I have ever seen. Stanley Kunitz is immensely old and looks remarkably like a Galapagos Island turtle. Two very famous male poets, one fairly famous younger female poet, and the woman with the voluminous hair are on stage to pay homage to Kunitz. I'm so dispirited that I think a haircut would undo the young woman on stage as much as one undid Samson.

The men get up in turn, tell anecdotes, and verbally backslap Kunitz like the good men friends and colleagues they are. The women talk, in turn, about Kunitz as a teacher, a mentor, how he nurtured their development, how he helped them "get where they are today," in essence, what a father he was to them. In spite of this schmaltz, I wonder, fleetingly, if I'll ever have a mentor, how one would affect me, my work.

Finally Kunitz stands to read. He clears his throat, he fumbles his rheumatic fingers in his pocket for his glasses. He holds the podium with one hand for balance while his other hand flutters with a life of its own. Then he starts to read. At first his voice crackles like radio station static until the clear channel is found and then his voice clears too, and strengthens. This is what I hear:

Dear March, how much I want to sing
your simple deeds;
but the nightingales of my words are dead
and now their gardens are dictionaries.

And this:

What's inspiration but pure breath,
the soul sucking the moment in?
Another breath won't save me
unless I speak the word.

I gasp and puff and falsify,
so that I won't remain in debt
to the beauty of trees in the snow,
which I am dumb to praise.

And this:

Let me ease my swollen pulse,
by accident or any way at all, until
I reel with the bright gush of song,
until I become a poem learned by heart.

And because I was so mute
and loved the names of all the words
and suddenly am tired unto death
please help me, everyone, sing me alive.

His words are like fresh water and I dive in. I'd like to think that everyone in the room let themselves sink, mind and soul, into the gentle rock and sway of his rhythms, and deeper still, into the realm of his vision. I'd like to think that all our petty aspirations, ambitions, and disputes, perhaps even our very egos, became submerged in the power of this moment created and defined by the power of his words. But I really don't know. I walked out the moment it was over. I couldn't face surfacing into the business of words.

—*Mary Hussmann*