

“A Lost Eloquence”

by Carol Muske-Dukes

The poem in my head goes something like this: Sunset and evening star /
And one clear call for me! / O Captain my Captain! / Getting and spending,
we lay waste our powers / I'm nobody! Who are you?

These fragments were put there by my mother, who can recite, by heart, pages and pages of verse by Tennyson, Milton, Wordsworth, Longfellow and Dickinson. On occasion, I can manage to recite the poems that contribute to my voice-over poem in their entirety. My mother—whose voice (like the sound of waves, a kind of sea of words) is one of my earliest memories, my first sense of consciousness and language—gave me this gift.

She is 85, a member of perhaps the last generation of Americans who learned poems and orations by rote in classes dedicated to the art of elocution. This long-ago discredited pedagogical tradition generated a commonplace eloquence among ordinary Americans who knew how to (as they put it) “quote.” Poems are still memorized in some classrooms but not “put to heart” in a way that would prompt this more quotidian public expression.

Thus my mother, who grew up on the prairie of North Dakota during the Great Depression, spent time in high school memorizing the great thoughts and music of the ages. She never forgot these poems and managed to regale all who would listen (mostly her husband and children), and by virtue of this word-hoard was able to effortlessly (almost eerily) produce a precise appropriate quote for any occasion. Often social or familial failings inspired her. For example (to me, frowning at my spinach): “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child.” Or an aside to a sibling whining in line at the bank: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

For those who love poetry, the recent announcement that Ruth Lilly had donated about \$100 million to Poetry magazine was a welcome boost. But to me the most illuminating aspect of this extraordinary news was not the size of the gift, but rather a subsequent revelation that the journal gets roughly 90,000 submissions a year—yet its circulation peaks at just 10,000. Literary magazine editors have pondered this kind of awkward imbalance for some time. It seems there are a lot of would-be poets out there. But it seems that many are writers who write without reading. And the power of reciting in order to share a poem or to comfort oneself with its words, seems almost unknown.

Years ago, when I taught in the graduate program in writing at Columbia, the late Russian poet Joseph Brodsky was also on the faculty. Brodsky famously infuriated the students in his workshop on the first day of class, when he would announce that each student would be expected to memorize several poems (some lengthy) and recite them aloud. The students—even if they had known that Brodsky had learned English in dissenter’s exile in Russia by putting to heart the poems of Auden, among others—were outraged at first.

There was talk among students of refusing to comply with this requirement. Then they began to recite the poems learned by heart in class—and out of class. By the end of the term, students were “speaking” the poems of Auden and Bishop and Keats and Wyatt with dramatic authority and real enjoyment. Something had happened to change their minds. The poems they’d learned were now in their blood, beating with their hearts.

In the workshops I teach I continue to ask students to choose poems to memorize. Recently, a young woman loudly resisted what she called a boring exercise. But after memorizing Emily Dickinson, Countee Cullen, Sylvia Plath and several haiku by Issa, she was still going strong—delighted with how the words rolled trippingly off her tongue. “I own these poems now,” she said. (When I ask students early in the semester if they know a poem by heart, I usually hear the names Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss and occasionally Robert Frost. They often say that they can’t memorize long poems, but then I ask them if they know the lyrics of “Gilligan’s Island” or “The Brady Bunch,” and the point is made.)

Lately I’ve been dropping in at a local preschool and have been reminded how much even little children love to memorize poems. They absorbed rather effortlessly Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Swing” (How do you like to go up in a swing? / Up in the air so blue?), accompanied by gliding hand and body movements. They loved the repetition, the chiming of the words and images.

My mother taught me this poem as she pushed me on a swing in our backyard in St. Paul, Minn. when I was about their age. She would push me out and away from her on the “question” line (How do you like); then I would fly back on the “comment” line (Up in the air so blue). Like my young students, I was swinging within the shape of the words; I was learning words with my body as well as my brain; I was swinging, like them, within what would last forever—within the body of the poem itself.

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