ARTS IN SOCIETY

What Poetry Are We Going to Write

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Criticism, Memoir, Poetry

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Photograph:Steven Pisano

> What can I say to you, darling,
> When you ask me for help?
> I do not even know the future
> Or even what poetry
> We are going to write.
>
> —Jack Spicer, "A Poem Without A Single Bird In It"

It wasn't quite prayer but the more I recited its words the more incantatory power they assumed. *What can I say to you, darling*, I said to myself, over and over, with hushed focus, *When you ask me for help?* It was early on an otherwise ordinary weekend morning, seven or eight years ago. The Long Island Rail Road car speeding me out east, not fast enough, grooved a quiet rumble into the day. The uncluttered spring sky looked like itself, only crisper, and Spicer's poem was a tender bruise I kept pressing on to see how it would feel.

Even earlier that morning, the phone had rung me awake and I unexpectedly got that old sense of dread I used to get whenever my mother would call. *She's calling to tell me that Emily is not okay*, I thought, MOM CELL aglow on the rattling nightstand. The thought was less a bolt of clairvoyance than a groggy intuition that a call this early in the morning could only mean something was wrong. That I correctly assumed the call was about my twenty-something sister, rather than an elderly relative, was also a piece of subconscious logic. For a good part of the decade prior, phone calls from my mother, whatever the time of day, typically meant yet more bad news about my sister.

But something seemed different this time. My sense of foreboding may have been logical but it felt like divination when my mother confirmed it. *Emily on her way to the hospital, coughing up blood, unable to breathe.* Immediately I knew, with ramrod certainty, that today was the day she was going to die. The knowledge seized me physically. Every occurrence, urgent yet deliberate, tingled at the thought of itself: the warm shower [on the day my sister died]; the cool spring breeze [on the day my sister died]; the fetid air in Penn Station [on the day my sister died]. Outside the train window, cornrows of homely suburban lawn whooshed by, whispering, *I loved you once but / I do not know the future.*

The poet takes an otherwise ordinary object and focuses language upon it until it flames.

When I entered the hospital bedroom, crowded with relatives and balloons, my family reacted as though the Pope had arrived to deliver a benediction. *You didn't have to come*, my father said with extreme deference, *We really appreciate it.* My family's disproportionate gratitude was a splash of ice water on the eyes. I hadn't realized how much of a stranger I'd become to them, how much of a stranger I'd become to my own powerful feelings about Emily. For years, her premature death had felt so imminent, so inevitable, one way or another, it had unknowingly become proleptic reality to me. The only question in my mind was when and how it would happen, not if it would. The blood clots in her lungs that morning—life-threatening but not, in the end, fatal—seemed confirmation of a "fact" about which I long ago became dogmatically convinced.

You can imagine my bewilderment—disappointment, even—at having to confront my own cognitive dissonance. It was like seeing a ghost in reverse: what spooked me was catching sight of the live person, sitting there before me, not dead or dying but laughing and smiling in the circle of family warmth. *Of course I came*, taking my father by the sides of both shoulders as though he was the one who needed to be centered, *Did you really think I wouldn't?* But that "of course" was only convincing, to the extent it was, because I had believed I was coming to confront, once and for all, the loss of my sister. Instead, I was forced to confront the loss of a peculiar narrative of loss to which I had become attached.

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We often act as though poetry exists to consecrate moments of heightened significance. Like a child holding a magnifying glass to a dried out leaf, the poet takes an otherwise ordinary object and focuses language upon it until it flames. Civilians, too sensible for petty arson, outsource the work of kindling on those rare occasions—weddings, funerals, graduations, bar mitzvahs—whose preposterous grandeur demands poetry's awkward, baffling grace. In both cases, creation and invocation, poetry's function is to endow the occasion with satisfactory poetic intensity. You become utterly convinced that your sister is dying, so you reach for a poem about serenity in the face of despair.

But that's not how poetry actually works, not even how Spicer's poem was working that unexpected morning on the train. Or, if that *is* how poetry sometimes works, it constitutes its least interesting and least important function. Our most recognizably lyric occasions, those moments of intense crisis and beauty, already contain enough power to spin us dizzy for the rest of our days. We may write poems about and for those occasions, deeply moving ones even, but we were going to have to reckon with the occasions anyway. No, we most need poetry, readers and writers alike, at precisely those moments we think we least need it, those pedestrian occasions, making up the majority of our days, in which we muddle along, contented or disgruntled, looking the other way.

We need poetry so badly because it is at once a leading and a lagging indicator of the heart. The poetry that matters to you matters not because it affirms or enlarges feelings you already know you have but because it hints, compass-like, at the feelings you don't yet know you have but that one day you will most assuredly—disarmingly—discover. Few people know how to read a compass well and fewer still, academics especially, know how to read well a poem. Reading well here means not just understanding in what direction

the device points but also understanding that you can't yet understand where or why its arrow moves you. Cassandra-like, the poetry that matters to you is therefore also always a lagging indicator: you can never fully comprehend why it matters until it is too late.

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When you recite poetry by heart, you become a gong shivering at the memory of the mallet, a yogic *Om* strumming the belly with breath. Obliquely, bodily, you iterate your way toward an understanding of the poem more concerned with sound than sense. Like a Communion wafer or a tab of acid, the recited poem, pressed against the unthinking tongue, enters the bloodstream with ritualistic solemnity. You can only ever memorize a poem if you believe in what it augurs, are utterly convinced of its each and every syllable, need its molecules to bind with your own so that it can become an agent of the change you were already about to undergo.

That morning on the train, I swallowed Spicer's poem aloud so as to better live its question. Spicer claims that, because he doesn't know the future, there's nothing of use he can say in response to his darling's plea for help. Yet despite these protestations, including the cruelly mocking suggestions to "commit suicide" or "go mad," the poem itself constitutes an answer to the plea: it represents what Spicer has chosen to "say" in response. The poem's quietism may frustrate the beleaguered darling, but part of Spicer's point seems to be that no help or advice could possibly be adequate to the unnamed predicament. Only poetry, foolish herald of the beyond, impractical *in extremis*, is itself impossible enough to address our earthly impossibilities.

Emily, I don't know what of use I can say, even now, years later. When we were younger, you used to call me on the phone, drug-clenched, desperate for help: a place to crash, money to borrow, urgent advice. I used to think my mistake lay in not trying to get you serious professional help sooner. Then I used to think that my mistake lay in trying so hard to talk through your problems when what you really needed was a witness, a familiar co-conspirator, to your misadventures. But the real mistake—hardly a mistake at all—lay in being unable to recognize that, given the circumstances, there was nothing I could have said or done, including not taking the call, that would not have been a painful mistake. In situations of great complexity and uncertainty—which is to say, in *most* situations—

morality consists less in acting with perfect virtue and more in weighing the costs of the available options so as to minimize the harm your chosen action will inevitably visit upon the world.

Not everything is going to be okay, insists Spicer's poem, *And that's just fine, maybe even a good thing*. In the way only a memorized poem can be, "A Poem Without A Single Bird In It" has been for me a talisman, a penny kept tucked under the tongue. Discolored and abraded, it reminds me, whenever I roll it around my mouth, that you can never be fully insulated from harm. I have needed that reminder, just as I need the near-accidents that occur weekly on my bicycle, not simply because I have spent my professional and personal lives trying to manage risk, fooling myself into believing it can be mastered, but also because the future becomes a little less abstract when it threatens to be revoked.

Emily, I want to write the poem that imperils the future in order to secure it. The poem that wouldn't be a poem at all, but prophecy, conflagration, life. Emily, the future is an improbable chess move we're not yet talented or foolish enough to discern, the future is today's chessboard played to conclusion under a foreign, as-yet uninvented set of rules. Hold your magnifying glass up to the once and future king. The glass is a crystal ball and the chess piece is a totem. Can you see it? It's the crown polished in lyric flame, the game disappeared in smoke.

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Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism*, a work of constraint-based creative criticism named to *Entropy Magazine*'s "Best of 2015: Non-Fiction" list. He is Assistant Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.

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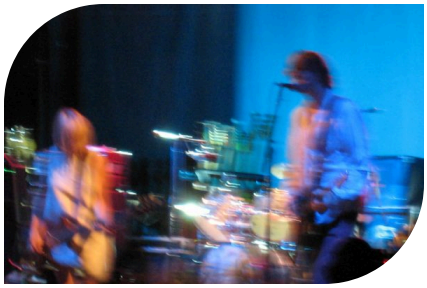

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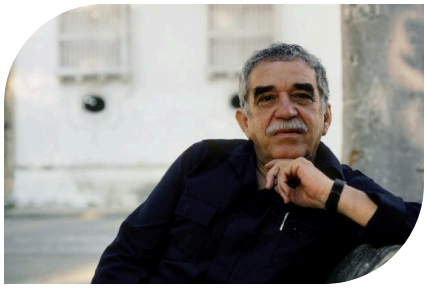

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