

On Being Useful

Climbing the hill within the deafening wind
The blood unfurled itself, was proudly borne
High over meadows where white horses stood;
Up the steep woods it echoed like a horn
Till at the summit under shining trees
It cried: Submission is the only good;
Let me become an instrument sharply stringed
For all things to strike music as they please.

How to recall such music, when the street
Darkens? Among the rain and stone places
I find only an ancient sadness falling,
Only hurrying and troubled faces,
The walking of girls' vulnerable feet,
The heart in its own endless silence kneeling.

'A poem,' says Don Paterson, 'is just a little machine for remembering itself; a poem makes a fetish of its memorability. It does this because the one unique thing about our art is that it can be carried in your head in its original state, intact and perfect.' I've always been struck by that, the idea that you carry a poem around with you in your head – not a memory of a poem, but the thing itself. The word 'stanza', those collections of lines which group together to make up the poem, itself means 'room, chamber, stopping place'. Sometimes I think of my memory as a space made up of many poems, many rooms. It's not really like the collection of little machines that Don Paterson describes, though. I don't think poetry is orderly or tidy, like a machine, and I don't think that thought or memory are either. If the mind is a series of little rooms, then the rooms are untidy ones, filled with half-finished cups of coffee, half-read paperbacks left face down on the desk. Rather, I think that poems are things that we carry with us, that we inhabit, that make up the fabric, the untidiness of life. Poems are things that we think through, and think with. They remind us of who we are, and they tell us how to be.

The poem I just read you, an untitled sonnet by Philip Larkin, is one which I've carried around with me for a long time – actually, half my lifetime, just about. It's not one of Larkin's better-known poems, coming as it does from his first collection, *The North Ship*, poems written when Larkin was a young man, poems showing flashes of the brilliance which would become more secure, more carefully wrought in later works like 'The Whitsun Weddings', or 'Aubade'. But I've always liked it, and I've often found myself coming back to it – found fragments of it coming back to my mind in a quiet moment, or just walking dully along. What's it about? 'Climbing the hill within the deafening wind' – we're going up, we're pushing or being pushed towards some kind of summit. We're driven up and up, not only by our own desires or motions, but by 'the blood'; some kind of internal, animating spirit which we carry proudly like a banner or a thread, 'unfurled itself, was proudly borne'. That animating spirit doesn't come quietly, but it sounds, rings around, announces itself: 'Up the steep woods it echoed like a horn', till at last we find ourselves drawn to the top of the hill, the wind suddenly dropping away to nothing, and we hear what the blood has compelled us up here to say:

It cried: Submission is the only good.
Let me become an instrument, sharply stringed
For all things to strike music as they please.

What the blood cries is a cry of intent. What kind of submission is it talking about? To my mind anyway, what the blood cries out for is poetry. The figure climbing the hill is doing so in search of something, some kind of answer, and at the top of the hill, the place closest to the skies, to the heavens, it cries out for inspiration. I am ready, says the figure; let poetry, let insight conduct through me like electricity. 'Let me become an instrument, sharply stringed/For all things to strike music as they please.'

What does it mean, though, to become an instrument? It's not comfortable or easy. The speaker's strings are sharp – pointed to the ear, but painful to the instrument; when music is made, it's not played but struck, and not at the speaker's volition. The image reminds me of the story of the flaying of Marsyas from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Marsyas was a satyr who foolishly challenged Apollo to a musical contest. When Apollo defeated him, he took terrible punishment by flaying Marsyas alive – here's a description from Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*:

When one of Lyce (I wote not who) had spoken in this sort,
Another of a Satyr streight began to make report,
Whome Phebus overcomming on a pipe (made late ago
By Pallas) put to punishment. Why flayest thou me so, ...
Alas, he cride, it irketh me. Alas a sorie pipe
Deserveth not so cruelly my skin from me to stripe.
For all his crying ore his eares quight pulled was his skin.
Nought else he was than one whole wounde. The griesly bloud did spin
From every part, the sinewes lay discovered to the eye,
The quivering veynes without a skin lay beating nakedly.
The panting bowels in his bulke ye might have numbred well,
And in his brest the shere small strings a man might easly tell.

Marsyas is humbled by the god by being made into an instrument, 'the shere small strings a man might easly tell'. Yet the speaker of this poem does not go as far as to challenge the gods. Instead, after the ecstatic climb of the sonnet's first octave, we find ourselves somewhere lower, more earthly 'among the rain and stone places'. Here, instead of the blood rising, there is 'only an ancient sadness falling'. There's an awkwardness, an embarrassment. The verse itself become clumsy and uninspired – there's something deliberately a little coy and naïve with the apparently dismembered 'walking of girls' vulnerable feet'. The heart itself endlessly kneels – not crying out, but in 'endless silence'. Will it be answered, will it be inspired? Will the poet's submission be rewarded not with punishment, but with music?

The kinds of poems I like best are poems which seem to poke at their own poem-ness, which seem in some way aware of their own creation, and created nature. The word 'poetry' itself means 'making' – although as Simon tells me, it's something perhaps instead closer to 'actualisation', taking the potential for something and turning it into being. It seems to me that the poem I've just read you is a kind of poem about writing poetry, or any kind of making art; about the struggle both to be inspired and then to realise that inspiration. Within the narrative of the poem, the attempt to create or realise something seems to fail. The speaker can't seem to recall the music he once so nearly heard, his heart maintaining an 'endless silence'. The very poem itself, however, is the realised music that the speaker reaches for. In endlessly restaging the tension between rise and fall, reaching for and shrinking away, the poem achieves something more than either of its halves, more than the sum of its parts. It is the song.

Just like the poems I most admire, I think a lot of writing about poetry requires you to think about what it is you're doing, and why. Uncharitably but truthfully, some of this might be the kind of introspection, of navel-gazing, that academia is ideally suited to. But more than this, I think you have to ask yourself why what you're doing is important, or else why do it? Important can mean different things. Poems might be like 'little machines', in Don Paterson's words, but they aren't actual machines for making food and clothes and shelter. We can arm ourselves with poetry, but it won't keep us warm. W.H. Auden is often selectively quoted in saying, 'Poetry makes nothing happen, it survives/In the valley of its making.' What we often miss is that these lines are taken from a longer, three-part poem in memory of W.B. Yeats. Poetry can't bring Yeats back from the dead; it can't necessarily perform the social or political change that Yeats might have wanted it to, but it *survives*, and that surviving keeps happening. Poetry survives in 'the valley of its making', in the mouths and on the lips of those who read and speak it, and in that surviving, in being spoken, it is made, actualised into being. It can't bring Yeats back, but it keeps him sounding and resounding. We breathe in, and we speak it, and we turn it into being.

When Larkin's speaker reaches the top of the hill, he cries out for inspiration. Inspiration at its root just means to breathe into, to be animated. What Larkin imagines, what he cries out for, is a process in which inspiration is breathed in, and music is struck out. He imagines being animated by something divine, something above, so that he can make transcendent music - a music that will rise above the ordinary, earthly rain and stone places. I used to like very much this idea of poetry as something that had to strike and hurt in order to produce something greater than its maker. The job of poetry, I thought, was to elevate us to achieve a kind of transcendence, whatever the cost. I think there's still value in that, for some kinds of poetry. But I find that in all those years I've been carrying Larkin's poem around with me, I've come to think something new. I find now that I want a kind of poetry which doesn't destroy but creates: a poetry which breathes in and then breathes out, and in that breathing out creates and sustains the common and ordinary work of our lives. I want a poetry which is as much a pair of bellows as it is a musical instrument. I want a kind of poetry which is a kind of making, like all creation. And so, back in those nested rooms of the mind, I place next to Larkin's sonnet another poem. Its title is 'Fanfare for the Makers' by Louis MacNeice, and I will leave it with you now.

A cloud of witnesses. To whom? To what?

To the small fire that never leaves the sky.

To the great fire that boils the daily pot.

To all the things we are not remembered by,

Which we remember and bless. To all the things

That will not notice when we die,

Yet lend the passing moment words and wings.

So fanfare for the Makers: who compose
A book of words or deeds who runs may write
As many who do run, as a family grows

At times like sunflowers turning towards the light.
As sometimes in the blackout and the raids
One joke composed an island in the night.

As sometimes one man's kindness pervades
A room or house or village, as sometimes
Merely to tighten screws or sharpen blades

Can catch a meaning, as to hear the chimes
At midnight means to share them, as one man
In old age plants an avenue of limes

And before they bloom can smell them, before they span
The road can walk beneath the perfected arch,
The merest green print when the lives began

Of those who walk there with him, as in default
Of coffee men grind acorns, as in despite
Of all assaults conscripts counter assault,

As mothers sit up late night after night
Moulding a life, as miners day by day
Descend blind shafts, as a boy may flaunt his kite

In an empty nonchalant sky, as anglers play
Their fish, as workers work and can take pride
In spending sweat before they draw their pay.

As horsemen fashion horses while they ride,
As climbers climb a peak because it is there,
As life can be confirmed even in suicide:

To make is such. Let us make. And set the weather fair.