

THE NEWS I KNOW

■ Joel Newberger

I.

After a century or half-century in which Poetry lived its dream of “stopping the battle,” a century or half-century in which Poetry dreamed a republic, a place and time, which, if it were not to be transformed by the Word, would at least suffer the ardor and the judgment of the poets, dreamed a republic of readers and lived its dream of an awakening, advancing by an Art toward the incarnation of the coming community—the news I know is that of a dream or lover departing in the morning. There are no readers, no movements, no republic. “No/ One listens to poetry,” and the community, even of the *fedeli d’amore*, the company of love, is dispersed and in hiding or yet to come.

II.

In absolute irrelevance is not absolute freedom. But a freedom relative to our surrender to that irrelevance for which we have no immediate remedy.

III.

That thought wears the character of our time, confused, so confused as it is, lusty for the dominations of Love and Fateful Stars, yet still dreaming the dreams of a half-century ago, of that Magic which might bind together what Custom’s sword cut apart, and by our bodies’ and words’ magic alone untie the knots of sleep.

The fate I know, and that, as poet, I would submit to, is not to be found in the Zodiac, which anyways changes as we change, nor in any precedent determination whatsoever. Our fate is what we bespeak all our lives.

IV.

There is an earthly Woodstock, and a celestial Woodstock, for example. In one of them, no one knows which, in a garden, a poet had been reading, when, in the midst of a poem, from deep in a bush, a catbird cried. The poet stopped reading, fell silent for a long time, and then started again from the beginning. This was misunderstood as annoyance by some of those present, as if the poet wished the bird to be gone.

No one knows why birds interrupt us at the right time, nor words.

V.

Billie Chernicoff was reading in an old house, in Hudson, New York, whaling town, at the end of Warren Street, as if this were the Labyrinth of Knossos. She loves

labyrinths, minotaurs, and Picasso’s Vollard Suite, which shows the human animal in the bewildering, terrifying chamber at the center of Love’s labyrinth. She was reading from a new book, whose name says clearly the re-veiling of Poetry in our time: *Minor Secrets*.

“Letters from the Holy City”: she read this poem, and I was terrified, bewildered, and thrilled. The news I know is this poem that speaks, desires, approaches, enters the unspeakable center of things from every direction. Always ending, always beginning, laying siege to that part of us that wishes for a final word. An end to the world. A consummation.

VI.

“What is it that is truly unspeakable?” Robert Duncan asks. “As a poet I find myself attackt for my being ultimately concerned with the experience of poetry and language. We may have begun to accept that sex is not a mere instrument but a primary ground of experience, but it is still rank heresy to take language, the pleasure and functions of words in their operations as such, as being the ground of primary information. Words are supposed to properly refer and to relate, and all the realm of their actual presence and the powers of language to use every other realm of experience to refer to and relate to its own realities, of the poem to use politics, religion, history, biology, love, autobiography, to illustrate itself, is forbidden as the realm of Narcissus, whom the Neo-Platonists saw as Creator of the World in his self-fascination, is forbidden.”

VII.

from “Despair in Sonata Form,” by Maggie Zavgren:

“...So by total darkness
the order comes undone again:

where shale falls, or mist indistinguishable
from valleys, cloves carpeted in tapestry,
catastrophe, by any other name.”

VIII.

News: in our terrifying, bewildering grammar, “you” has the same form, whether the subject or the object of the sentence, whether in service or in mastery.

IX.

These are not and cannot be suasions, or attempts at persuasion. We once again know so little of what we are, and what we do, and where we have come from, and where we are, and where we are going.

All of the grand designs of Poetry today reek of venery. I know that nouns with the same form in the plural and the singular are what we imagine as prey, deer, sheep, boar, and elk, and the Community or Audience presumed by revolutionary Poetry, so-called, is mere meat for the Poet.

The news I know is that English, now, is still at an impasse in its attempt to call forth a plural *You*, a plurality of beings that is as real and as beloved as Thou art.

X.

I am looking at a postcard, pinned to the wall over my desk. It looks like a blackboard, scuffed, dusty, black. A stack of colored rectangles is drawn in the center of the card, decreasing in size from the lowest to the highest. They are as if tied together, joined, connected by meandering lines and arrows, so each touches all, and all each. Lines that breathe. Breath that circulates through the forms. "Der unsichtbare Mensch in uns," it is called. The invisible Man in us.

Art and Magic always run the risk of knowing their materials and powers so well that causes can be manipulated to produce exact results, even in living beings. I think of this because I think I have hunted this invisible presence, and that I may be Actaeon, devoured by my own words, which all of this bold talk of *no-one, nothing, irrelevance, and mystery* has made very, very hungry.

XI.

Eleven are the stars in Joseph's dream. He disdained his brothers and was cast into a pit and sold as a slave and brought down to Egypt and, knowing that famine was coming, saved that kingdom, ordering that, in times of plenty, some grain be stored up for fallow years.

His faith or certainty in a future we do not have. We imagine—imagine—the world is coming to its end, and so Poetry, like Baseball, has become a pass-time, whereas both properly propose the nature of time in compelling figures.

Mundus transit: the world is crossing over or passing. In this phrase of John's we read an ambiguous omen of our time, as if it were not the world ending but the image of the world, and it was passing out of sight or mind, descending under the sea. Again.

Are we in "the time that remains," as Paul and Agamben have it, in which the poem is the blinding stasis of a polar blankness?

Or can we say with Gerrit Lansing that "Such conditions enhance the Men of the Secret/ who care for the compost in winter,/ waiting to ready the fields"?

XII.

"Men..." Having been born at the north terminal of the San Andreas Fault, the news I know is the crackling uncoiling of the lung mei of language, the faulting and slipping of old alignments.

"Man" and "Mankind," I think I know, used to mean all of us who live in and by the blood. "Were" was the word, at least in English then, for the so called "male" of the species, and a "weregeld" was the ransom paid for his life, and a "werewolf" was him in his lupine power. And wolves are being slaughtered in Wyoming. And Adolf, from Ethenwulf, means Noble Wolf, and the Roman Empire began with twin boys suckled on a she-wolf who came running from the mountains to save them.

The species will or will not survive, but we will not save it, by any means. We who can only speak of our common life as a "species," which is aspect, only appearance, having lost that word "Man" to the predations of the Father and never replaced it.

XIII.

—is not death. But tilling an image beyond species and world, in the absolute freedom of Golgotha morning.

The kingdom of death is passing. At least the image of it passing arises. Offering made.

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