Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Doubt and Redoubt

Risa · Saturday, June 26th, 2021

I woke up this morning thinking about the word redoubtable. It's the only word I remember from an article in the New Yorker that I was reading just before falling asleep. I have no idea what the article was about. I remembered this one word because to me it seemed misplaced in the sentence. I don't think I've ever used the word myself and I wasn't sure of its meaning. It would seem to mean "doubtful, yet again." But its dictionary definition is "formidable, especially as an opponent." Why not just use "formidable," an earthier sounding word?

The meaning and usage of so many words do not live up to their sounds. "Redoubtable" is a bunch of squishy syllables crashing against a glottal "t." "Formidable" has the same number of syllables but with the choice of stressing either the first or second. Formidable has "form" in it, echoing its meaning and altogether more pleasing in the mouth. This insight emanates from my editor brain, always trying to analyze and improve others' sentences. Sometimes to their peril.

This week, I've spent many moments pondering: lyric or lyrical? My poet brain prefers how "lyric essay" scans. And isn't adding "al" to lyric redundant and unnecessary? The editor notes, "you don't need both redundant and unnecessary." But what if that was intentionally ironic, to be caught by the reader intent on removing all unneeded words? That thought stems from a poet's brain.

The thing is, my poet ego is fragile. The rejections pile up and I think my poems are not good enough. So I read more poetry and read it more closely. Read it aloud. Read the lines again. I'm trying to learn how it's done, how to engage with it. A few years ago, I started writing poetry book reviews—something I've come to think of as my own private MFA program—and lately my reviews are being solicited. Naturally, this is quite an ego boost. I wonder if the nonacademic poetry review (the kind I write) has only recently become a thing? It's a good thing, grittier and more personal.

This morning, I turned in my stats to my virtual poetry gang: submissions, acceptances, rejections. *Why, why do we do this?* It can be so painful to have to admit to myself that I feel jealous of others (friends, I might add) who are succeeding on a week that I am so abjectly failing at succeeding. And how to gauge if my jealous feelings are greater or lesser than others; are they simply ordinary or wildly aberrant, in need of a therapist? And is it jealousy or envy? I've spend decades pondering the difference between those two.

I have dreams. Daydreams of publications and prizes, of course; but I mean the sleep dreams that I wake up to, that often mark how my day is going to go. Of late, my dreams are chaotic; they behave like blended families in dispute over the matriarch's will. See how words—for example,

"will"—are difficult to interpret in dreams. As in conversations. As in poems. In dreams, I do and say embarrassing things. Mostly I remember a dream for a few moments, and then it falls into the pile of dregs that clog up my unconscious brain.

I regularly listen to *The Hidden Brain*, a Saturday morning NPR show, hosted by Shankar Vedantam. Some days it seems that I have too many brains scurrying about, seeking my attention. Is my hidden brain the reason that my memory is so sluggish? Drowned out by constant noises belching from the depths of me? What we say to one another, as our minds become unreliable with age, is, "There is just too much in there after so many years of living." You know, the "old slow computer" analogy.

The Hidden Brain's program was about forgiveness. I stopped what I was doing to listen to it because I'm having some difficulty—I guess I've always had difficulty—in this area. More than 45 years ago, my son's father drove from Miami to Tallahassee with his then-girlfriend to kidnap our 4 year old son. And then she lied for him at the hearing where I lost custody. I've long ago forgiven him, but I've never forgiven her, even after her death. I don't talk about this much. It hangs out in my hidden brain. It blurts out once in a while totally without my permission or even awareness. I'll forget that I've even mentioned it.

When it's not possible to forgive, why not just forget? So much else is forgotten, but I find that I can't always repress my own blemishes or others' insults. And why are names suddenly so difficult for me to remember? Now that's embarrassing. And medical terms I've used for decades. Many times I've realized that without Google, I wouldn't still be able to work. See me googling on the computer like crazy while talking to a patient, and you've got the picture.

I've been blogging since it was a thing. The way I'm writing down thoughts here. Can someone tell me when a blog becomes an essay? Is it just a fancy name for a journal entry that makes some connection with a reader? Is it a lyric essay? Or is it creative nonfiction if it lacks poetic elements? I've noticed that the trick with blogging is getting the words down quickly, shutting up the editor in order to produce thought after layered thought, while bouncing around a central image that is never fully exposed because the writer herself isn't sure there is a center. And yet, writing a poem is also associative, layered, and full of thoughts. (See how "full of thoughts" differs from thoughtful?) With a poem, however, the writing is painfully slow and deliberate; word after word is subjected to the strictest sort of scrutiny and doubt. Doubt and Redoubt, you might say.

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