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In Defense of Poetry

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It's not the myth or the reason or the imagination. It's not the history or the timing or the desire. It's not the emotion or the logic or the experiment. It's not the market or the negation or their negotiation. It's not the way you fold your hands or draw a nude or stir the pot. It's not what we say it is, even if it is a flute.

No, the defense of poetry is about the defense of poets.

The defense of poetry is to defend the people who write poems, read poems, speak poems, perform poems, live poetically, and not as a community, not as some imagined body politic, but as individuals with desires, hopes, dreams, visions of the world and what it might become. To defend that is to defend the vain, the envious, the privileged, the oppressed, the jealous, the weak, the depressed, the ugly, the sad. To defend poetry demands that much of us because it asks us to see the poetry in poets, to see beyond poems to the language that makes us who we are in our bodies, minds, spirits.

The poets that I know from the minor to the major, from the weak to the strong, from the unknown to the known, are people beyond. They are beyond the reach of the everyman and the expert even as they can be quite ordinary, even as they are unremarkable, even as they are average when you are in their midst. To be a poet is not only to have a professional identity of being poetic, to make a living from the poetry that one crafts, makes, creates. To be a poet is to have a calling as it is expressed in language. But, if language is the world, then one can be a poet in any field. The plumber is a poet, the nurse, bureaucrat, astrologer too, for they can all say 'that is poetry' about what they do. And, we must defend their right to do so, defend and accept them in their universal right to be a poet, however misplaced, marginal, maligned that is.

To be a poet is something that is held up by a great many people, and there are different expressions of poetry from the lyric to the traditional to the music, but to defend poetry is to defend the poet as a creator. The poet is more than someone who makes poetry but someone who lives, breathes, believes in poetry itself, whose life becomes poetic by virtue of labour, luck, structure, discipline, hope. To defend poetry is to defend this style of life, this language, this way in the world.

I have met poets in every nook and every shadowy corner, on every continent, and in their solemnity, their insight, their humour, one knows that to defend them is to defend the best in one's self. It is not that one must write for them, for the man who sold me flowers in Kerala, for the woman who asked for change on the New York subway, for my neighbour in Canberra when I was

trying so hard to be poetic. They each have texts that are their own, some of which you might have wished to have written, some of which you may have read, some on which you will think of as yours as well. The poet does not need to write to everyone, to tick every box, to cross every t. But rather, I must defend them so they have the right to be poetic for they too have the rights in them, just like me.

To defend poetry is to defend the ones who need us the most, to defend them from the attacks of those who seek to suck the marrow from life, who would punish us when we have sought only happiness, who would deny us our freedom, justice, hope. The defense of poetry then is not a critique of other poetries, but a cause to rally around that suggests who we are and what we might become in our responsibility to others and our truest selves. It calls to us in a voice of desire and liberation. It calls us to be equal under the sun in a republic that allows us to be fun.

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