Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Richard Jones: Intro & Three Poems

Richard Jones · Wednesday, February 27th, 2019

Vapor Trails and Hearing Aids

How did I become a poet, the man who wrote *Stranger on Earth*? Where did it all begin? Why did I become a writer obsessed with clarity of speech and the desire to bridge the gulf that surrounds anyone who suffers? The genesis goes far back to my mother and father, our long-ago lives filled with longing, and the inscrutable nature of love.

Looking back over a lifetime, I see my father and my mother had everything to do with my vocation. My father, a World War II pilot and Virginia gentleman, would hold the door open for his son—a small act of kindness for which I am still grateful. But during my childhood, my father was often away on flying missions or stationed somewhere far from the family. So, early on, I pretended to find ways to speak to him. As a small boy, whenever I saw a plane and its white vapor trails written in the sky, I'd climb a tree to the highest branch and whisper my messages to the pilot, reminders to bring a gift from some faraway land.

My mother lost her hearing around the time I was born. From our very beginning we were deprived of the closeness of words. My mother wanted to hear me. I *wanted* her to hear me. Even with early, primitive hearing aids, my mother often lost my voice in the unwelcome noise of static, chaos, and din. The impact of my mother's deafness—the damage of communication *not* heard—resonates painfully. Today, when writing and speaking lines of poetry, I am obsessed with clarity because I don't trust that people will hear me. Yet from this chasm came a childhood blessing of intimacy that also resonates: my mother would take my young face in her hands and read my lips. I recall her eyes searching the poem of her son as I painstakingly articulated each word, leaving out no detail.

Now, as a father with two sons and a daughter, I am my children's trusted listener, seeking to be as tender as my mother, and, like my father, willing to open the door. And I am fortunate to share my first drafts to gain their sage council. As a father or a poet I must use the language of the everyday to explain why a moonrise over the water thrills and enchants, or how even days of grief can be sweet. Our daily family conversations are as clarifying and as edifying as a good poem—explaining the world's contradictions, the heart's failures and triumphs, and the meaning of it all.

How did I become a poet? Out of the longing to love and be loved. To be understood and to gather the wisdom to understand others. To look with compassion on the world in all its brokenness and beauty. I may be a stranger on earth, but the whispers from childhood's high branches to my father

away from home—that *is* a kind of poetry. Speaking to my mother as she held my face in her hands—*that was the beginning of my poetry*.

—Richard Jones

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The Silver Cord

Apparently I was not keen to be born.
Three weeks late,
I refused to come into the world;
my mother could only lie in her hospital bed
and wait. “Meaningless! Meaningless!”
cries the teacher of Ecclesiastes,
and I fancy myself there in my mother’s womb
pondering those words about life and existence.
That year in England my father had flown
to Spain, Germany, Italy, and Egypt.
He flew to other countries, also—
he had a special passport from the Embassy
that allowed him to fly to Portugal,
where he enjoyed secret adventures he never shared,
wild stories lost forever,
now that he’s gone to his grave.
The teacher of Ecclesiastes says
the former generations will not be remembered
by those to come
and says to remember the Creator each day
before the silver cord is severed
and the golden bowl is broken.
That long-ago August,
as I declined the world’s golden invitation,
my father’s father lay dying in Virginia.
My father did not know whether to stay in London
and wait to celebrate my birth
or fly to America and mourn.
After I was born, he went home—too late.
It was the same for me. The day the call came
that my father was near death,
I crossed the country to his home by the ocean,
yet when I arrived
he was already laid in his coffin.
It must have hurt him greatly
not to fly across the vast blue-and-gray nothingness
of the Atlantic; it must have hurt
not to sit by his father and say goodbye,
not to kiss the dying hand.

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Socks

After many long years, I finally
finished the book I was writing.
I wondered what to do next.
My whole day ahead of me,
I decided to tidy the sock drawer,
an impossible jumble of lone
survivors and mismatched pairs.
I pulled the big drawer out
and emptied onto the bed
a small mountain of socks.
I began to arrange by color—
the red ones I bought in Rome
at Gammarelli’s, the pink ones
found in the Paris street market.
I began lining up all my socks,
much as I do with my poems,
and tenderly folding them one
on top of the other in pairs.
I scolded myself for neglecting
just how important socks are
to a poet walking the path, how
necessary to cushion and adorn
the two feet that carry the heart
up and down the ladders of heaven.
Slowly, I lined the waiting drawer
like a rainbow, from yellow to
purple, noting the black socks
ran on and on like an ellipsis…
Then I put the drawer back.
It was only noon. The room
was bright. All morning
I’d worked in my bare feet
and now my feet were cold.
I wanted to lie on the bed
and daydream, but not before
I thought to put on a fresh
pair of soft white socks,
warm white socks with soles
so pristine and unsullied
it was as though they had
never been anywhere.

*

The Sky

It’s not much of an airfield,
just two grass landing strips
that crisscross
a few acres of pasture
as quiet as a country cemetery.
But when I go there and wait
for my deceased father,
before long he lands his plane,
a little white Cessna,
a two-seater he calls *Bird.*
He checks the controls
while I put on my headset—
we’ve done this many times
so I know the routine—
and when the tower says
we’re cleared for takeoff
he gives it the throttle
and we speed down a runway
lined with bluegrass and clover.
Just seeing the clover rushing by
makes a difference,
and when the wheels lift
and *Bird* starts to climb, I feel
a sudden willingness to let everything go,
the terrible need to talk
or the compulsion to carry
all these stones in my heart.
From high in the air, the world below
looks small, which it is, and people
are so tiny they disappear.
Flying with my departed father
I find it very difficult to hold on to troubles,
and suddenly it is right to love everyone
as we burst free from clouds
and fly into the light.

(Author photo by Sarah Jones)

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