PETERSON:
POEM / POEMA

POEM

Katie Peterson
Deep Springs College

I

I didn't get a tattoo, join a cult, or divorce a starter husband. I went to Harvard University and wrote a dissertation on Emily Dickinson. At some point my mother flew from California to Boston to make sure I wasn't wasting into scholarship. I took her to Dickinson's house, which she smoked through on the sly, alternating her ash with questions to the tour guide: «Did Emily Dickinson have friends in high school?» In the driveway to the Homestead, with the American directness of one who wishes for the bottom line, she asked, «Kate,» taking a drag, «what did she really do with her life?» Later that night, I arranged a party for her in the suite of rooms occupied by John F. Kennedy his senior year at Harvard (I was a resident tutor in Winthrop House, JFK's collegiate crib) with some of my friends from the English department. Comfortable, happy, and gorgeous, achieving that occasional foreign glamour a lucky Californian can muster on the opposite American coast simply by being out of place, my mother said to one of my friends, a young woman studying the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser, «You don't want to be Emily Dickinson, do you?»

After my mother died, my aunt, a high school teacher, took this up, mainly at Christmas and at family weddings. My brother's wedding one particular Christmas made her seize her responsibility doubly as we both hunched over the smoked fish, «did Emily Dickinson ever try to publish anything?» I explained (again) the extent of the historical evidence for her ambition, the few whip-smart and luminous poems she published in local papers, her correspondence with *Atlantic Monthly* editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson. I mentioned, again, the coy but legible statement in Dickinson's third letter to Higginson, «I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish' that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin» (Emily Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas Johnson, Cambridge: Belknap, 1958, p. 143 L265, written 7 June 1862). «But wasn't her life a failure?» my aunt said. Exasperated, I fell from moral high ground to mud like a shot bird, protesting, «She's in the Norton Anthology!» «But she never knew it,» my aunt said so quickly I could tell I'd lost before I'd even started, lost before I'd even begin, «she hid her light under a bushel,» and this, a student of Dickinson must literally concede, since she did stack her manuscript books in a trunk at the foot of her bed intentionally away from light and they were not only tied, but tied tightly with string. My aunt delivered the final blow: «She had no audience.»

My words on the staircase for her, and I suppose, for my mother, come years later: the poem

wants a reader, not an audience. The difference between these is neither negotiable nor in the eye of the beholder. What the maker of the poem may want is another question, but the poem wishes to get closer. A reader does not only mean a person with a physical book, any more than an audience only means a group of people seated in a theater, but the poem has, embedded within it, the possibility of encounter that reminds a person that they are, indeed, a person after all, and the poem's desire to get closer holds this and articulates it.

The poem's wish for a reader is the poem's wish for closeness to a person — a wish to bring a person inside of it. The work of «finding an audience» may curate this process — though it may also conceal or hinder it — but it is not the primary work of the poem, at least any poem I've ever wished to remember. The distinction I choose to make between the desire for a reader and the work of «finding an audience» has less to do with the difference between silent contemplation and vocal performance than it does between an imagination of a private world and the conviction of the importance of a public one. Audientia, the Latin word that gives English its «audience» means «to hear,» and the first meaning listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, «hearing; attention to what is spoken,» is followed by another, sterner one: «juridical hearing.» Part of the possibility a poem, and a reader, holds out is that it might be heard without a public hearing. A poem wishes to get closer than public performance of itself even if it agrees to be in public.

II. POETRY AND CLOSENESS

All that I might venture to say that a poem might say about closeness comes from a native truth about the priorities of a poem's composition and the separate experience of its reception: a poem comes forth, and it encounters, so it must come forth from something towards something else. There are audiences for poetry (in a media-saturated age there are audiences for everything), but the imagined «audience» for the poem still has something to do with a reader, with the individual voice encountering an individual person. It doesn't really matter if the book as we believed we knew it has fled, or finds its way out (though much evidence shows that neither of these are the case, and mathematicians still use chalk in addition to computers). If anything, the Internet has reinforced the way in which poetry compels us to seek it out as poems, rather than as persons, or books, or careers, or movements. A poem is not unlike a frame, like a screen, like a site, and the «reader» I speak of is less a well-dressed woman in a high-ceilinged room at earned leisure than a person on the outside looking for something on the inside, that lonely person on the Internet we all pity and are.

We sometimes ascribe our failures to understand poems to the poem, which is only fair, but we mostly articulate our failures to understand poems as a failure of the author, which makes a bit less sense. Poems seem distinctly to fail to bring us close to the author of the poem even as they bring us close to something.

Poems teach us that closeness, more method than goal, leaves less a trace of its presence than a hunger for its recurrence. When Robert Frost imagines a test to determine whether a student can know poetry, it has little to do with fact: «The closeness — everything depends on the closeness with which you come, and you ought to be marked for the closeness, for nothing else. And that will have to be estimated by chance remarks, not by question and answer. It is only by accident that you know someday how near a person has come» (Robert Frost, «Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue,» in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark

Richardson, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 101-11). Facts about a poet provide a certain proximity but they cannot bring us close enough, and in not bringing us close enough, they whet our appetite more than they satisfy it. Tibetan Buddhists have a notion of the «near enemy» to a virtue, and it might be right to say that «proximity» is the near enemy of closeness. We get «proximate» to the author of the poem, but close to the poem. Though Frost gets wrong what a person might understand within the poem, he's right about how that understanding takes place — by approach, rather than arrival — and how you might experience having understood — by the marriage between memory and experience, rather than mere memory of data alone.

Poetic knowledge teaches us that closeness, if it is to feel real within the poem, nearly always feels like an accident — it can be prepared for but not controlled. In human terms, it is like bumping into a stranger on the street. And so, it can school us in all that can be prepared for but not controlled, like technology, love, war, the future. In a poem, we are brought to speech by unfinished business — and a good poem brings us closer to that, leaving it unfinished, the work of the reader.

Strangely, poems often try to accomplish closeness not by being recognizable, or being legible, but by getting farther away. They don't always want to use the traditional channels; they look for intimacy outside of its acknowledged paths. It is a fact universally acknowledged that Emily Dickinson loved talking about death. But less universally acknowledged is that Dickinson used death to make life vivid. In poems in which she dies, Dickinson often makes a last grab:

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.
He questioned softly why I failed?
«For Beauty,» I replied
«And I for truth,— the two are one;
We brethren are,» he said.

And so, as kinsmen, met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

Emily Dickinson #448, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2nd Edition, 1999), p. 207.

The two are close, and they are almost more alive than us, for a moment. And as I will explain in greater detail later, a poem relishes those moments in human experience in which two people, with a sense of the accidental, make each other's unpredicted acquaintance. Here, they do not meet on an ordinary street, or in a front yard, or on public transportation, but they speak in the kind of tone they might use while involved in one of those common endeavors, though the stakes of their conversation are elevated above matters we might recognize as everyday. The poem can become a site for this kind of closeness, and this kind of closeness can show us an essential meaning about closeness — its ability to incite, and imagine new experiences of communication and relation, even from the most ossified social roles.

III. ORIGIN MYTH II

The person may be an accident as well. None of us asked to be born, and we enter the world as surprised creatures, surprising in turn even those who knew we were coming. I have begun to speculate on how «closeness» is at stake for the poem, and what the poem can teach us about

it, but I am (like many poets) easily troubled by statements that make a pretense towards conviction past a single experience or instance. The poem, single-voiced contraption that it is, determined on entering the reader's ear rather than merely being witnessed, keeps insisting on specificity, and insisting on bringing us close to what might educate us through particulars of experience and speech. I have to turn back towards particulars now, in order to enact, rather than describe, how the desire to be close motivates the poem, and how the necessity of getting close determines the path of the reader.

A few years ago, on the eve of a significant birthday, I realized I had been reading, rather compulsively, poems written around the year I was born. I wonder now what I had been after. One speculation lingers: I wished to turn the accident of my birth into something more real, especially since none of the traditional milestones, like marriage or children, had appeared to mark my arrival at the imagined middle of life's progress. Now, it seems an appealing prospect to think of the poems born the year a person is born, that significant but accidental year, as much like persons we might run into on the street, acquaintances given us by circumstances and culture, co-residents in the cultural womb, conceived and born alongside us. Somehow seduced by those poems, I wonder if I wished to remember that initial meeting, and my own birth into language, by intentionally staging it again. At some point, I started running into a poem by choice: «To a Blossoming Pear Tree,» written by the American poet James Wright in 1974.

Before this, I had remembered Ohio-born Wright because of the single poem rather than the book. This might be because his work loves the moment, and loves to try to freeze moments in time while still telling a story: in a sense, he writes narrative poems in order to find the lyric moment inside. Within the single poem, I remember Wright's work for his endings, single lines and images, threads back in to the labyrinth of the writing, deceptively pithy moments of conviction that at their best tremble a little, feel a little fragile, and find an intimacy with the reader that seems to close a distance:

> The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,
> And I lean toward mine
>
> «Beginning»[1]

> Suddenly I realize
> That if I stepped out of my body I would break
> Into blossom.
>
> «A Blessing»[2]

The single collection from which these endings come, 1963's *The Branch Will Not Break*, full of image-rich poems about working-class life in pre-World-War-II Martin's Ferry, Ohio, the coal-mining town where Wright was raised by a miner and a laundress, possesses the few poems for which Wright remains well known (mainly among writers) — «Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,» which follows a list of images with a sudden last line, «I have wasted my life,» (Wright, 122) and «Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio,» which, at the last, torques its description of a high school football game with a tone from Latin rhetoric: «Therefore, / Their sons grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October, / And gallop terribly against each others' bodies» (Wright, 121). An academic version of a fulfilled American dream, Wright ended up a kind of success story after his GI Bill-funded college education ensured that his prodigy would find opportunity. Possessed of an eidetic memory and a pitch-perfect ear for verse, he wrote in traditional metrics, akin to Thomas Hardy, until he came across the poems of image-driven Pablo Neruda. Intoxicated by the free verse line and the image, breaking with his earlier style, he wrote

The Branch Will Not Break. The Branch Will Not Break is, in some sense, a book of endings, false and true epiphanies, comprised of portraits of people who are either locked in or locked out somehow generating poems with conclusions that are either fluorescently closed, or open: «I look about wildly.» («Fear is What Quickens Me», Wright, 123). The book's poems either target childhood or seek a consciousness we might associate with childhood, where persons can become flowers and communicate with wheat. Memory stains the senses; the reader ends the poem stranded somewhere on purpose. Wright has the sensibility of an American drifter but no hunger for a drifter's life — in fact, it seems he's looking for home.

But it wasn't these poems, the ones that have made his reputation, that Wright wrote the year I was born. By 1974, Wright had won the Pulitzer, divorced and married again, and quit drinking, and his poems started to hold their images more roughly, with a voice that interfered more with description, and left less to the imagination. *Two Citizens*, the book Wright published the year before I was born, alternates between nightmare narratives of American existence in familiar Ohio and wandering dreams on European soil told as a traveler, the two kinds different in tone but similar in straightforward, colloquial strategy. The first poem in the volume ends by addressing his academic critics, «Hell, I ain't got nothing / Ah you bastards, / How I hate you,» and the language of the book seems excessive in its directness, like a person trying to feel again by trying to get aggressively closer (Wright, 225). The love poems start to resemble the philippics, brutally romantic:

> The trouble with you is
> You think all I want to do
> Is get into bed
> And make love with you
>
> «Love in a Warm Room in Winter», Wright, 229.

> *I had a pretty good idea*
> It was hell.
> What else are you going to get
> when you ain't got nothing?
>
> «Paul», Wright, 237.

Wright himself disavowed the book virulently after he wrote it: «I've never written any book I've detested so much. No matter what anybody thinks about it, I know this book is final. God damn me if I ever write another.»* Did he sense his own myopia, a closeness gone bad, in his re-encounter with plain American speech?

After the publication of *Two Citizens* (1973), James Wright lost his father, returned to the United States, and got sober. In the year that I was born, 1974, he wrote the poem «To A Blossoming Pear Tree,» which gives his next book (published in 1978) its name. It tells the whole story of an actual accidental meeting on the street and its consequences and frames it as a random encounter converted into an experience with shape. In its story, in its content, the poem comes as close to a poem about closeness as poems can come:

> TO A BLOSSOMING PEAR TREE
>
> Beautiful natural blossoms,
> Pure delicate body,
> You stand without trembling.
> Little mist of fallen starlight,
> Perfect, beyond my reach,
> How I envy you.
> For if you could only listen,
> I would tell you something,
> Something human.
> An old man
> Appeared to me once
> In the unendurable snow.
> He had a singe of white
> Beard on his face.
> He paused on a street in Minneapolis
> And stroked my face.

Give it to me, he begged.
I'll pay you anything.
I flinched. Both terrified,
We slunk away,
Each in his own way dodging
The cruel darts of the cold.
Beautiful natural blossoms,
How could you possibly
Worry or bother or care
About the ashamed, hopeless
Old man? He was so near death
He was willing to take
Any love he could get,
Even at the risk
Of some mocking policeman
Or some cute young wiseacre
Smashing his dentures,
Perhaps leading him on
To a dark place and there
Kicking him in his dead groin
Just for the fun of it.
Young tree, unburdened
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms
And dew, the dark
Blood in my body drags me
Down with my brother.

Wright, 316

One-on-one encounters, Wright's bread and butter, preoccupy the poet even more in these last years of his work (he died in 1980). It irrationally delights me that this poem was written during the year of my birth (and indeed, the first draft was composed, according to the poet's widow, close to the approximate date of my conception) (The Free Library. S.v. The love song of James Arlington Wright: an essay and interview with Annie Wright, accessed July 19, 2015). I imagine that as I entered the world, «To a Blossoming Pear Tree,» coincident with me in the world's great body, entered the world as well, and so, we came somehow together, as if on a cold night on a street in a city (the day of Wright's birth also happens to be three days before mine, in the middle of December). These connections needn't be literally true: I believe that the poem and the reader, as a matter of habit, have a closeness that feels much like this one, begun in chance but manifest in intimacy. One attribute of that closeness, one description of its nature, might be the transformation of chance into shape, a seizing of the moment that turns it into something you can actually see and remember. My closeness to the poem possesses some attribute of chance, but it begins in my own invisibility, as surely James Wright had no thought of me.

But the poem cannot stop thinking about me, and by me, I mean, anyone who might listen. It places the cold world of the Midwestern winter inside an imagined springtime in which a tree might listen if it could. And in telling its story, it keeps re-orienting who it's speaking to, as if to find a person who might listen, or a place where listening might begin: the speaker addresses the tree, the speaker tells a story about being addressed by an old man, the speaker addresses the tree again and in doing so addresses not just the old man but all those who might harm him, including the speaker himself. The old man who reaches out to him with a longing that's sexual and desperate, and rather unappealing, but we might rightly identify the speaker's response as resembling «homosexual panic,» a fear of the man's desire that resembles a fear of being attacked (Wikipedia contributors, «Homosexual Panic,» *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed Jul 19, 2015).

And so, the poem also understands distance. «To a Blossoming Pear Tree» begins not by speaking about the encounter with the other person but by talking about a pear tree, one of the most common and hardy American trees, beautiful in springtime, and suddenly, strangely, close to the speaker. This proximity has limits, and they are the limits of language: «For if you could only listen.» The poem's imagination of its reader lies right in this line. The reader can

hear what the tree cannot. The reader is the one who *could* listen, and the «could» is important: there's no guarantee. The poem's privacy goes this deep. The work of the poem has to do with bringing two people face to face, but it cannot be done without the natural intermediary — the blossoming pear tree, whose privacy, because soundless, is the deepest.

A poem like this one stages closeness as unfinished work. It sees closeness as an opening or a route. A poem like this one imagines that it provokes unfinished tasks rather than enforcing established judgments. Looking at the last stanza of this poem, the reader not only observes, but falls into a kind of triangle with Wright's speaker, the old man on the street, and the beautiful deaf (but still addressed) tree. And the affinity that the poem provokes, between poem and person, so tenacious in our minds, that «getting close» that Frost talks about transforms, in the poem, to a nexus of affinity between the poem and a few different persons. The spiritual coordinates of the poem actually become quite confusing. The speaker claims he is *not* like the tree, at first, then *declares* he is not like the man on the street, then finds himself tangled up with both of them, the transcendent and the forlorn, as found as he is lost and vice versa.

A history of poems in the Western tradition about strange encounters with others while traveling might begin with Dante, who, stranded in the middle years of his life, also finds himself stranded in a wood, where he encounters a lion, and then, a guide, Virgil, the great Latin poet of love, who takes him through the underworld, the *Inferno*, celestially navigating him through personal narratives, from perspectives so memorable they've given birth to works of art in every genre for hundreds of years. In the 20th century, American-born British citizen T.S. Eliot converts this story into one about public spaces. Finding himself on a foggy street in London in the middle of the second section of «Little Gidding,» the last poem of his late masterpiece, *Four Quartets,* a book readers love or hate based on whether they use the verb «believe» in earnest (the haters can't), he encounters a figure much like a Virgil «in the uncertain hour before the morning.» Their encounter takes the shape of an emerging closeness:

> I was still the same—
> Knowing myself yet being someone other—
> And he a face still forming, yet the words sufficed
> To compel the recognition they preceded.
>
> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963), p. 203.

This encounter doesn't pretend a complete intimacy. They are «too strange to each other for misunderstanding,» able to converse only because of the moment they have been given. Wright's old man holds out no Virgilian wisdom in speech, but occupies a similar place with his body, which presents a darker challenge: how not to reject, or do violence to what is unknown, or threatening, or needy. In a poem, words can sometimes suffice to compel a recognition past the usual channels, available as (uncertain) hope rather than (obvious) presence. Closeness doesn't simply trigger recognition of what one already is, but what one might become. Closeness — between two persons on a street, or between reader and poem — doesn't indicate a goal met, but the possibility of a recognition compelled into being, a moment when pre-existing coordinates are re-negotiated by another voice, and a reality coming into focus in the present.

IV CLOSENESS NOW

We seem to be having a particular crisis in the American community about how close we get to each other in public spaces. Protests and riots have placed more people into physical proximity to each other in Ferguson, and Baltimore, and Oakland, than in the several proceeding it; these demonstrations have been inspired by a seemingly endless series of individual encounters between armed police officers and African American citizens that have resulted in African American citizens getting shot.

I looked for poems written in the last few years about people encountering each other «on the street,» or really, in any public place. Most of the poems I found — indeed, all of the poems I found — were by women, or people of color, or immigrants. Boston gay poet Jill McDonough's «Accident, Mass Ave,» tells the story of a lost temper after a minor car crash (Jill McDonough, «Accident, Mass Ave,» accessed July 19, 2015). African American poet Jericho Brown's poems about cruising in his first two books never fail to put people face to face (Jericho Brown, *Please* (New Issues, 2008); and Jericho Brown, *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon, 2014).

I do not believe white men never accidentally meet up on streets, but it's striking to me that it's those who feel undefended who are writing the memorable poems of such encounters. And I also suspect that all of us run into strangers far less often than we used to as the world of cyberspace has contracted our earthly experiences a bit (would James Wright have just bought his bus ticket online in 2015 or given up trying?) For those who feel powerless, the encounter on the street exposes the vulnerability of a private world, since it comes with the possibility of violence, just as it does for the old man in «To A Blossoming Pear Tree,» whom the speaker of the poem knows could be assaulted because he can himself imagine assaulting him. I am beginning to suspect that in a good poem, poetry constitutes an invasion *by* privacy, not an invasion *of* privacy. It allows an actual person to intrude upon a stereotype. It converts proximity between persons into a real closeness full of potential energy, both showing us the limits of what we can understand *and* proposing that we work on that, but less like a commandment than like a dare. So poetry says: closeness is full of potential energy, and closeness is like a contained explosion, a punch frozen at the last moment.

Blackness, for Americans, may be the site where we haven't yet learned to be as T.S. Eliot's speaker and his updated London-street Virgil were, «too strange to each other for misunderstanding.» We haven't let ourselves get close enough to know that we don't yet know what we're talking about. In 2014, the African American poet Claudia Rankine published a book titled *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which happens to be written mostly in prose. The book's first sections, in a close 2nd person, tenaciously document the daily denials of humanity dealt by white people to people who aren't, like a friend confusing the speaker's name with the name of her black housekeeper. The poem sounds like a regular person talking to oneself: «What did he just say? Did she really say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?» (Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*, Graywolf, 2014, p. 9). Unlike James Wright's lofty first-person apostrophe, Rankine's more conversational closeness, a deceptively easy back and forth, plays with the imagined ease of fitting yourself into her «you.» The book's paragraphs are often short, telling the story of microaggressions by shrinking the scale of what's heard, though reducing the scale of what's seen. In one anecdote, the speaker, presumably an African American woman, goes to see a new therapist who specializes in trauma only to be mistaken for an intruder and chased by the therapist's dog. It does not feel like a

«poem,» except for the way in which it brings the reader so close, closer, probably, than many white readers have been wiling to get, not just to how it feels to be an intruder when you're looking for a therapist, but how it feels to be the therapist.

Rankine's book (which is in its fourth printing already) has spoken to people because of its prescience — the cover is a photo of a black hood, and *Citizen* includes a page to memorialize African American men shot by cops, which grows with each new printing. But I suspect Rankine's book has actually spoken to so many because its method is one of closeness. Poetry will do just about anything to find closeness, and *Citizen* simply uses prose, and, in its last sections, the equivalent of the voiceover for movie scripts, to do so. Said Rankine to an interviewer in 2015, «It is a book of poems because I am a poet.» Her readers have not questioned her. There has been little debate, even in the poetry world, about whether the book qualifies itself as being a book of «poems.» The closeness generated by the book eclipses this. Rankine, as a poet, requires closeness to be embodied, rather than simply imagined. Finally, that closeness itself requires bodies for its enactment and performance — an imagination not just of what you get close to but what you get close with.

In one of the last poems of *Citizen*, Rankine imagines a public space — a train car — where she has found herself in a kind of dreamlike vision. She watches a man, likely a black man, who no one will sit next to:

> The man doesn't acknowledge you as you sit down because the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do. For him, you imagine, it is more like breath than wonder; he has had to think about it so much you wouldn't call it thought
>
> When another passenger leaves his seat and the standing woman sits, you glance over at the man. He is gazing out the window into what looks like darkness.
>
> You sit next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken. You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within.
>
> You don't speak unless you are spoken to and your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you.
>
> Rankine, 131-133.

Closeness mandates that you do anything that feels human in language to find this moment in which these imaginations are possible (even write in prose). Anything, says the poem of the 21st century, will I do, to find this unfinished work.

NOTES

1 James Wright, *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux and the University Press of New England, 1990), p. 135.

2 Wright, 143.

3 James Wright, interview by Peter A. Stitt, *The Paris Review* no. 62, Summer 1975, Retrieved Jul 19 2015.