

“On Hearing That My Poems Were Being Studied in a Distant Place”:
Thoughts on Distance, Difficulty, and Secret Addressees

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So-called “public intellectuals” tend not to have exceptionally long afterlives. We have heard their names—the likes of H.L. Mencken, Margaret Mead, Mary McCarthy, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson—but all have become footnotes in our cultural history. Also on the verge of cultural oblivion is the most telegenic and popular public intellectual of the late twentieth century, astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan. His many books were bestsellers; he was a regular guest on Johnny Carson; *Cosmos*, the PBS series which he developed, coproduced, and moderated, was an immense success when first broadcast in 1980. And, last but not least, his highly idiosyncratic speaking voice—haunting but oddly nasal and prone to doing downright weird things with vowels—was as unmistakable as it was widely lampooned. As with Bob Dylan, once you heard that voice you would never get it out of your head. But Sagan’s voice has outlasted his reputation. Since his death in 1996, a foundation has been named after him, and many of his books remain in print, but Sagan seems, even to those who know him, a relic of the 1970s and early ’80s—he’s down in the cultural junk drawer with the Walkman, the shoulder pads, the big hair, Cyndi Lauper, and the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Yet one of Sagan’s projects has a certain loopy relevance to the topic I will discuss tonight. It’s described in a Sagan-edited volume entitled *Murmurs of Earth*—not one of his titles that remains in print, nor even one that my university library has deemed worthy of keeping on its shelves. I had to request the volume from “storage,” the library’s equivalent of an assisted living or memory care facility. I sought the book out because one of its chapters describes the creation of what has come to be known as “The Pioneer Plaque,” an illustrated, gold anodized aluminum plate that was a last-minute addition to the payloads of the Pioneer 10 and 11 space probes. Launched in 1972 and 1973, the Pioneer probes were the first objects designed to be sent into deep space and, in the process, made close passes of both Jupiter and Saturn, sending back some photos of the planets that at the time were exceptionally striking. But neither spacecraft is currently getting its communications homeward: they’re too far away, having each traveled some twelve billion miles from Earth. They long ago left our solar system and are hurtling, at 82,020 miles per hour, through an area of interstellar nothingness, empty save for the occasional comet. They have no destination, but there is speculation that Pioneer 10 will eventually reach the vicinity of the star Aldebaran, although this journey will take about two million years.

The Pioneer Plaque has a highly specific and quixotic function. Here’s how *Murmurs of Earth* tells it. During a meeting of the American Astronomical Society just prior to the launch of the first Pioneer probes, it was “suggested that since this would be the first object to leave the solar

system, it might well carry on it some message to any intelligent civilization that might someday happen to intercept the spacecraft.” The intrepid Carl “enthusiastically volunteered to construct such a message for NASA. The plan was to engrave something on a metal plate, the idea being that such a metal engraving in a space environment would remain recognizable for perhaps billions of years.” A message on a golden plate, housed in a place of incomparable mystery. The very notion conjures all sorts of highly unscientific flights of fantasy—buried pirate treasure, Heinrich Schliemann on his knees in the waterlogged tombs of Mycenae as he discovers the famous golden “Mask of Agamemnon,” Joseph Smith—with the coaching of the angel Moroni—lifting up those 24 karat gold slabs inscribed in “reformed Egyptian” that he will claim to finesse into that staple of bedside motel room drawers in the American West, the Book of Mormon.

Let’s examine the illustrations on the plaque, which NASA made the subject of an intense PR campaign in the months prior to the probes’ launch. Much of the left side is taken up by an irregular-shaped starburst, rendered by astrophysicist R.D. Drake; this is a “pulsar map” that, if the aliens find a way of interpreting correctly, will indicate the time and place of Pioneer’s launch, give or take about 10,000 years in respect to the timing, and twenty to thirty light years in respect to the location. There’s also a diagram of our solar system and a graphic meant to suggest that Pioneer originated on the third planet from its sun. All well and good, but no one at NASA, and certainly not Carl Sagan, was prepared for the firestorm elicited by the appearance of two human figures etched on the right side of the plaque.

This drawing, rendered by Sagan’s then-wife Linda, was the element of the plaque which required the most forethought. The Sagans originally set out to include images of clothed people, then realized that the aliens of the future might regard the man’s leisure suit and the woman’s minidress and go-go boots as body parts. So off came the clothes. The couple were also initially depicted holding hands, but the Sagans then realized that joining the couple’s hands in this way might cause the aliens to regard the pair as a single creature. So the end product became a pair of nudists, with the woman standing deferentially behind the man, who is offering the space people a big high five.

When NASA released the image to be etched on the plaque to the public, certain segments of the population were not pleased. *Naked people?* Newspapers depicting the plaque were prone to airbrushing out the couple’s genitalia, and more than a few letters to their editors bemoaned the fact that NASA was using taxpayer dollars to rocket pornography into deep space. And so in the final rendering of the plate, NASA removed the vertical slash representing the woman’s vulva. To feminists, it was bad enough that the woman depicted appeared to be in a subservient position in respect to the man—but now she was also the subject of genital mutilation. And although it was Linda Sagan’s intention to depict the couple as having multiracial features, it was justly observed that the pair looked pretty damn Caucasian. To its credit, NASA ignored a good many of the more addle-headed suggestions regarding the Sagans’ design. But the fact remains that the aliens may well be left with the impression that Earth is populated by pairs of photogenic white people, mid-1970s variety. We hail from a planet where everyone is the spitting image of Lee or Farrah Fawcett-Majors.

Yet there is something about the plaque that transcends all the absurdity. As Matthew Battle suggests in *Palimpsest*, his wry and graceful history of writing, the plaque is a kind of paradigm for the intricate and mysterious interactions between author and audience, between messenger and message, that take place when we read a literary work such as a poem. The existence of the plaque is predicated upon the notion that the message it communicates must travel considerable—even incalculable—distances to reach its audience. It is similarly predicated on the notion that whoever “reads” the plaque will do so with a sense of awe and astonishment: it has, after all, made a kind of miraculous journey. The would-be reader of the plaque will also be keenly aware that its content will be immensely hard to decipher.

But this sort of bafflement is in fact bewitching and seductive. Witness the fascination which has greeted archaeological objects that contain as-yet-undecipherable writing. For over a hundred years attempts have been made, many of them hugely far-fetched, to translate the hieroglyphics that festoon the famous Phaistos Disk, a clay object the size of a dinner plate, fashioned about 1,700 BC, and discovered in ruins of the Cretan palace of Phaistos; the figuration bears no resemblance to any other hieroglyphic system, nor to the known Minoan scripts, Linear A and Linear B. Also consider Rongorongo, the “talking boards” inscribed by the inhabitants of Easter Island. Of course, our future alien reader of the Pioneer Plaque will have a lot less to go on than those who try to unravel the mysteries of the Phaistos Disc or Rongorongo—after all, we know their provenance, know the cultures from which these objects emerged. But I don’t think it is far-fetched to surmise that the befuddled extraterrestrials—wrapping their feelers around the Pioneer Plaque at some point many hundreds of thousands of years hence—will fail to understand that they, and only they, were the intended audience for the plaque, however accidental its discovery will be. They will be the recipients of what the poet-critic James Longenbach calls the most abiding quality of poetry—that it is “composed wonder.”

Yes, the Pioneer Plaque may be a kind of kitsch poetry, but it is poetry nevertheless. The intended function of the plaque is almost identical to the function of poetry as it is defined by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in his 1913 essay “On the Addressee.” In its most famous passage, Mandelstam likens the reading of a poem to someone perusing a message in a bottle that has washed up on a beach:

At a critical moment, a seafarer tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. Wandering along the dunes many years later, I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. I have the right to do so. I have not opened someone else’s mail. The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I’ve found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee.

Mandelstam then proceeds to quote a poem by the nineteenth century Russian poet Yevgeny Baratynsky—its merits, unfortunately, seem to be lost in translation. But the poem ends with a resonant contention: “I will find a reader in posterity.” Mandelstam continues,

Reading this poem of Baratynsky, I experience the same feeling I would if such a bottle came into my possession. The ocean in all its vastness has come to its aid, has helped it fulfill its destiny. And that feeling of providence overwhelms the finder. Two equally lucid facts emerge from the tossing of the seafarer’s bottle to the waves and from the dispatching of Baratynsky’s

poem. The message, just like the poem, was addressed to no one in particular. And yet both have addresses: the message is addressed to the person who happened upon the bottle in the sand; the poem is addressed to “the reader in posterity.” What reader of Baratynsky’s poem would not shiver with joy or feel the twinge of excitement experienced sometimes when you are unexpectedly hailed by name.

Herein lies the exquisite paradox. The poem is addressed “to no one in particular,” yet the measure of the poem’s success is its ability to cause the reader to feel the thrill of being “unexpectedly hailed by name.” Toward the conclusion of his essay, after a brief discussion of a poem by the Russian symbolist Fyodor Sologub, Mandelstam offers up some additional metaphors to characterize the writer/reader transaction. I suspect that Carl Sagan would approve of them, for they are drawn from astrophysics: “That these lines may reach their destination, perhaps hundreds of years are necessary, as many as a planet needs to send its light to another planet. Consequently, Sologub’s lines continue to live long after they were written as events, not merely as tokens of an experience which has passed.” (I’ve often wondered if Robert Lowell had the end of this passage in mind when he famously remarked that a poem is not *about* an event; it *is* an event.) I’ve also wondered if Paul Celan—who alluded to Mandelstam’s essay in his great Bremen Prize speech, and later translated his poetry into German—is nodding to this passage in these characteristically searching lines from one of his early poems (“So Many Constellations”):

I know,
I know and you know, we knew,
we did not know, we
were there, after all, and not there
and at times when
only the void stood between us we got
all the way to each other.

In the pages that follow, I want to discuss some poems that express an awareness of their status as well-travelled messages in bottles—and as such offer the reader a sense of haunted intimacy. Such poems need not adhere to a particular aesthetic, but they all might be labeled as “difficult” poems. And, for various reasons which I will also discuss, in their difficulty lies not only their memorability but also a subversive power that is highly important to honor during an era in which digital overstimulation affects not only our reading habits but the very nature of our consciousness—culturally, of course, but if you believe the claims of neuroscientists who have studied the impact of the web on human perception, also *physiologically*. No, poems will not save your frontal lobes from being rewired, but their function has become timely in a way that no one would have predicted even a few short decades ago.

It is especially fitting that my Exhibit A is written by an estimable poet who is for the most part totally forgotten, Hyam Plutzik, who died in 1962. His posthumously published *Collected Poems* has long been out of print, and his terse and astringent poems—the best of them sound like Richard Wilbur without his haughtiness—were greatly admired by figures such as Ted Hughes and Anthony Hecht (who wrote the introduction to Plutzik’s *Collected* and pronounced him a figure of “remarkable accomplishment”). But you won’t find Plutzik in major anthologies or

surveys of contemporary poetry, and it is entirely possible (though by no means surprising) that we are the only people on this planet at this moment who are encountering Plutzik's work. Yet if Plutzik suspected that this would be the fate of his literary reputation, you'd never know it from the following poem, which is at once both modest and cheeky:

"On Hearing that My Poems Were Being Studied in a Distant Place"

What are they mumbling about me there?

"Here," they say, "he suffered; here was glad."

Are words clothes or the putting off of clothes?

The scene is as follows: my book is open

On thirty desks; the teacher expounds my life.

Outside the window the Pacific roars like a lion,

Beside which my small words rise and fall.

"In this alliteration a tower crashed."

Are words clothes or the putting off of clothes?

"Here, in the fisherman casting on the water,

He saw the end of the dreamer.

And in that image, death, naked."

Out of my life I fashioned a fistful of words.

When I opened my hands, they flew away.

It is easy to interpret the poem's narrative in comic terms. Don't all of us who write poetry secretly or overtly crave, above all, literary immortality? Well, Plutzik has conjured a scene, a classic example of wish fulfillment, in which his poetry has—in a somewhat droll and fraught fashion—achieved that goal. But it is decidedly not the immortality of Sappho or of Yeats (and you'll notice the allusion to Yeats's "A Coat" in the third line and its subsequent repetition in line nine), nor the sort of immortality that allows you to dwell among the greats on Mount Parnassus. No, Plutzik "finds a reader in posterity" via a *textbook adoption*. Not a terrible fate, by any means, but as anyone who has taught a college literature course knows all too well, no one reads literature in a lit class—you *study* it, and at least half of your students are apt to be doing so in a fashion that is at best semi-voluntary. Plutzik's "secret addressees" are likely a group of bored undergraduates, focusing more on the clock above the blackboard as its hands crawl toward the end-of-period bell than on Plutzik's "small words" as they "rise and fall." They are not discussing the poem with any sort of animation; they're "mumbling" and characterizing the poet in vague platitudes. "Here he suffered; here was glad." The teacher, sad to say, does little to enliven things; he or she seems to be rattling off some details about the speaker's life, no doubt cribbed from Wikipedia or the Academy of American Poets' website. And this whole shaky and desultory enterprise threatens to be drowned out by the much more awe-inspiring "roar" of the Pacific outside the classroom window.

And things get worse. The discussion devolves into the sort of New Critical symbol-hunt that undergrads still seem to assume their teachers want—that tower, it has to symbolize something important, right? Like those towers in Yeats and Hart Crane. And the fisherman: he's got to be a

symbol of death, no? Yet the students may not exactly be wrong here. Throughout the poem Plutzik implies, insistently though not overtly, that this scene is taking place after the speaker's death. There will be no opportunity for the students and Plutzik to have a chat on Skype so that the poet can set the record straight. Everything is misunderstanding and misalliance, something underscored by the very form of the poem; it is ostensibly a sonnet, but a decidedly gangly and unrhymed one. And the repeated line, certainly the most rhetorical utterance in the poem—"Are words clothes, or the putting off of clothes?"—might lead readers more sophisticated than the mumbling students to suspect that Plutzik was aiming to write a villanelle—but then for some reason gave up. What a glorious refrain the line would make! A better villanelle refrain, I would submit, than "Do not go gentle into that good night" or "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow." For all its posturing of disinterested whimsy, many of the elements of the poem are downright nihilistic: what if there are no secret addressees? What if posterity for a poet is at best a few notes scribbled in a margin by some bored undergraduates, none of whom will even remotely feel that the poem makes them shudder as they were "unexpectedly hailed by name"? My poem has travelled twelve billion miles for *this*?

Yet I find the ending of the poem quietly triumphant, for embedded within all the equivocation and doubt is a lovely and subtly modulated epiphany. As we reach the poem's conclusion, we leave with the assumption that even our bored undergraduates have gotten at least one part of the message right—poems are indeed the putting off of clothes. And yet in bringing the reader to this conclusion, Plutzik also tells us that this metaphor, true though it may be, is more than a little grand and highfalutin. He instead offers closure that is homelier but more resonant: "Out of my life I fashioned a fistful of words. / When I opened my hand, they flew away." Diligently the poet has labored to create his small body of work, his fistful of words. But they are also his life's work, and when they are set loose upon the world, they are his no more. The conflating of the act of writing with the madly circuitous patterns of flocking birds is a venerable one: it's there in the opening stanza of Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They Flee From Me," for example. As I was preparing this talk and trying to recall the closing of Plutzik's poem, I found myself misremembering the penultimate line, thinking its end to be "a fistful of birds." I suspect that Plutzik consciously strove to invite such a misreading, and the pathos of the closure derives from its willingness to embrace those contraries and paradoxes that Keats called negative capability. Do we read the image as one of triumph or as a lament? The poet's words have flown out, but he has no agency over them. They are more like Noah's raven than like Noah's dove. And we can't help but read the lines as a kind of self-epitaph, much in the way we read the closing of one of Robert Lowell's final poems, "Thanks-Offering for Recovery": "This winter, I thought / I was created to be given away."

Plutzik's limpid and unfussy poem hardly seems an example of the sort of "difficult" and "subversive" text I had earlier promised to discuss. So perhaps I need to better define what I mean by difficulty, for slowly but inexorably it is a term that is being reconfigured. For the modernists, difficulty lay in writing that was, above all, richly allusive, and which as often as not eschewed linearity for fragmentation and collage. Think of *Ulysses*, *The Cantos*, and *The Waste Land*. You had to know a lot of *stuff* to read *The Cantos*—not just the European poetic tradition but Confucianism, the crank economics of Social Credit Theory, the biographies of figures as

diverse as John Adams, the medieval Italian despot Sigismundo Malatesta, (and of course *Il Duce*), as well as a host of other references Pound did not have any inclination to explain. Over and over again, *The Cantos* try the reader's patience, and Pound is always proud of himself for demanding this. (It's no wonder Gertrude Stein labeled him "the village explainer.") Above all, you needed to return to *The Cantos* more than once to get past its manifold authorial roadblocks and fully appreciate the poem's majesty—and it can't be denied that in places the poem is truly majestic. The poem was difficult, above all, because it required rereading, just as any literary classic does. But the key works of high modernism required rereading of an intensity and stamina that made other classics, even the likes of Dante and Vergil, seem like *Goodnight Moon*. As Joyce so famously said of *Ulysses*, his intention for the book was not to win a million readers, but to have one reader read it a million times.

Difficulty as it manifests itself in the poetry of our time is very different from the sort that characterized the writings of many of the modernists. It is not an oversimplification to say that what is difficult for us is simply the act of reading a text, any text, with a sustained attentiveness. The social critic Nicholas Carr received considerable attention for his 2010 book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*; the book garnered glowing reviews and was a named finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Although one reviewer deemed the volume "*Silent Spring* for the literary mind," Carr's book is hardly a Luddite screed. But Carr's rationale for writing the volume expresses all too succinctly how many of us feel about our new existence in the information age:

I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going—as far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

Carr's book is about many things, but its lament for the loss of what he so simply and elegantly terms "deep reading"—a kind of reading that is endangered in our era of endless superficial reading and distractibility—is one of its core preoccupations. Poetry has traditionally been one of the great bastions of deep reading: Mandelstam's message-in-a-bottle trope is, among other things, a metaphor for such deep attentiveness. But for at least the past fifty years, far before the creation of the Internet, some of our most significant poets have sought to eschew deep reading in favor of work that seeks immediacy rather than depth. This trend is in many ways a reaction to the loftiness of high modernism, but it might be argued that the pendulum has swung too far. The work of Ashbery and many of the language poets, much as I admire their experimentation, is in many respects a paean to distractibility. A typical Ashbery poem will, within the space of only a few lines, make radical shifts in subject matter, person, and diction: he's the perfect writer for our age of cultural ADHD, and reading his poems often seems like conducting a series of rapidly executed Google searches. Last year, as I was discussing the poems of Ashbery's fellow New

York School poet Frank O'Hara in an undergraduate poetry survey, I displayed an iconic picture of O'Hara, taken circa 1960, during the period in which he was composing his most enduring book, *Lunch Poems*. O'Hara's got his head cradled against an old fashioned cordless rotary phone, and if you've read Brad Gooch's exhaustive biography of O'Hara, you know that he did a lot of talking on that phone—he did a lot of talking, period. And that sense of a speaking voice, of showing off his capacity for brilliant conversation, is what he sought to capture in *Lunch Poems*. Here's the opening of one of the book's better-known efforts, "Personal Poem":

Now when I walk around at lunchtime
I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
when I was in Madrid the others never
brought me too much luck though they did
help keep me in New York against coercion
but now I'm happy for a time and interested

Yet as I looked at that picture of O'Hara during my class, and watched as a student in the back of the room was surreptitiously texting on her iPhone, it occurred to me that this passage is in several respects the kind of writing you'd find in a text message—the breakneck pacing of someone writing rapidly, the absence of punctuation, the quirky enjambments that are intentional here, but which might just as well have been rendered because of the skinny right margins that are required by a text balloon. Had O'Hara been in possession of a smartphone, he would have written far fewer poems. I love O'Hara's work, and I am not surprised that he remains one of the most influential figures among younger American poets. But when you combine O'Hara's legacy with the experience of someone who grew up texting on a smartphone, you are apt to get something that doesn't simply recall a text, it *is* a text. Here is a poem by a widely admired younger poet, Dorthea Lasky. It appears in her 2014 collection, *Rome*, issued under the classy imprint of W.W. Norton:

"There Is Nothing"

I remember how he looked when I ran to meet him
I remember sitting with our heads touching and the night trees
I remember how I went and walked
It meant nothing
It means nothing
There is nothing
But this
But this

I like many of Lasky's poems, and I suppose one could see it as a starkly minimalist description of grieving over lost love. But, as a little experiment, I sent "There Is Nothing," *sans* its title, and without any additional explanation, as a text to my wife. Her reply came in the form of half a dozen question marks followed by six emoticons showing a hand in the thumbs-down position. She is clearly a more incisive and inventive literary critic than I am. Later, when I added an

additional text explaining my intentions, she allowed that she “suspected that it was a poem. Just not a very good or interesting one.” (She also noted that she was quite relieved to find out that I wasn’t the author.) There surely is a place in poetry for an angst-ridden fortune cookie message such as “There Is Nothing.” But is it wrong to want the poems we read to be less disposable, to ask that they require deep reading, and similarly require us to recognize that they have made a long and sometimes arduous journey to reach us? The fact that Hyam Plutzik’s admirable body of work has been unjustly neglected does not increase its literary merit. But its status as a quintessential example of Mandelstam’s concept of poetry as a message in a bottle gives the work an additional poignancy and urgency and brings up questions about the fickleness of literary reputation that we would do well to explore.

These questions are never far from my mind when I read the work of another noteworthy poet whose work has, until recently, teetered on the edge of oblivion. Born in 1920 and dying in 2011, Eleanor Ross Taylor published only sporadically during her lifetime. This surely had something to do with the rarefied southern milieu she inhabited. As the wife of the renowned southern novelist and short story writer Peter Taylor, she was on close terms with almost the whole pantheon of Fugitive and significant Middle-Generation writers; in a 2002 interview with Susan Settlemire Williams, Taylor talks of her friendships with the likes of Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Caroline Gordon, and especially Randall Jarrell, who wrote the introduction to her first collection, 1960’s *A Wilderness of Ladies*. But her intimacy with these figures seems not to have primarily been of a literary nature. It may well be that while the Great Men of Letters argued over the contents of the latest *Partisan Review* and engaged in their catty literary gossip, Taylor was in the kitchen making canapés, pausing only to refresh their drinks. When Williams questions Taylor about the place of women poets during her formative years, she receives a strikingly ambivalent answer:

I never felt any discrimination at all. I never suffered from that in any way that I know of. Of course I didn’t send poems out. I really did not. Because my productive [period], when I began printing, was after I was married and after I had a baby; and my husband’s career really came first. And I didn’t press my career at all, so it was not something that I worried about or thought about, whether I was being discriminated against or whether I was having a hard time.

I don’t think Taylor is being disingenuous here, but she certainly seems to protesteth too much. Taylor saw the literary world from a unique position, witnessing all the grandiosity and self-puffery of the literary insiders, while choosing—partially out of contingency, perhaps, and partially from conscious literary design—to play the role of literary outsider. And she performed that role with exquisite panache, fashioning a poetry of durability and originality; her best work resembles that of no other poet of her time. It is graced with a quirky lyrical precision, with stealthy epiphanies, and—especially as she began to write more prolifically in her later years—a rueful awareness of mortality that came to haunt almost all of her verse. Here is a poem which appears near the end of Taylor’s 1999 collection, *Late Leisure*, published on the eve of the poet’s eightieth birthday:

“The Sky-Watcher”

Prowlers
 have scared the stars away.
 She sets
 her outside light for six;
 her neighbor
 burns his all night every night.
 The city
 sends a van with a lift-basket
 and a man
 to change street bulbs by schedule.
 Some mornings,
 in the so-called dark, she gives up
 searching
 Venus between chimneys and
 massed leaves,
 turns out the lamps, and sits
 with all
 the shades up in the living room.
 Vast frames
 of light hang on the walls.
 Umbrella
 and cane handles rise, gibbous,
 in expanses
 unexplained. She watches the
 fluorescent rays
 from kitchen louvers crosshatch
 bookshelves
 emitting black dimensions, stygian
 and pure.
 A chair projects a symbol,
 malformed
 on the floor, and Berneice's Hair,
 blowing
 somewhere, showers her human arm.

“The Sky-Watcher” is a characteristic lyric from Taylor’s late period. It is a kind of Manichaeian aubade; its preoccupations are at once celestial—Carl Sagan would have doubtless approved its message!—and domestic, otherworldly, and quotidian. Although the poem sets itself firmly within the realm of the everyday—a place of porch lights left on to ward off burglars and Peeping Toms, of bookshelves, umbrellas, and living room chairs—it also enacts an epic struggle between the forces of dark and the forces of light and unhesitatingly acknowledges that the forces of darkness will invariably prevail. But not yet, not at least for another day. In this respect the poem is uncannily similar to Philip Larkin’s magisterial late lyric, “Aubade”; in both poems

the insomnia that so often accompanies old age becomes the occasion for a terrifying reckoning with mortality, a confrontation with what Larkin's poem grimly labels a "special way of being afraid / No trick dispels."

Yet Taylor's treatment of this struggle is altogether stranger and more nuanced than Larkin's gruff recasting of the stiff-upper-lip posturing that so epitomizes British culture in general and Larkin's poetry in particular. Indeed, the ending of "The Sky-Watcher" is oddly bracing. Taylor's protagonist seems to revel in the liminal—and I would go as far as to say *visionary*—moments when darkness and light grow indistinguishable. It is a time of consummate defamiliarization: the "gibbous" cane handles, the "fluorescent rays from kitchen louvers [that] crosshatch / bookshelves / emitting black dimensions, stygian / and pure," the "malformed" symbol of the chair. Taylor's visionary moment is fraught with paradox—"stygian purity" is a term one might find in the work of the metaphysical poets. (Henry Vaughan's "The Dawning," for example, characterizes the end of night in much the same fashion: "Indeed it is the only time / That with Thy glory doth best chime.") In the poem's final lines, the protagonist finds herself rinsed in starlight.

But here too the ecstatic moment comes with a caveat. Few of us could identify the constellation known as Berneice's Hair, and it is the only constellation in the night sky named for an actual historical figure: one of the Ptolemies, an avid astronomer, named a cluster of unusually bright stars within the constellation of Leo after his wife, Berneice. It is thus the only *domestic* constellation: how fitting an allusion to be employed by a poet whose abiding subjects are domesticity and enclosure, and whose central project in the lyrics of *Late Leisure* is to address the intricate factorials of grief.

The poems are suffused with mourning, addressing above all the loss of the poet's husband, Peter Taylor; the title of the book's opening poem makes this subject abundantly clear, "Long-Dreaded Event Takes Place." As Lorie Goldensohn has written of Taylor's later work, "everywhere in these poems the just-dead, long-dead, and soon-to-be dead leave their ringing mark—the days of the living the sometimes dubious gift of all those coming before, and those coming after, well, the tug of their debt to us still to be measured." Yet at the same time, the poems celebrate—sometimes giddily, sometimes guiltily—the ferocious unleashing of creative power that is the consequence of the Long-Dreaded Event. Although I think Taylor sells herself short when she confesses in her interview with Williams that she was never serious about her work until she entered her seventies, the poems of *Late Leisure* and the smattering of new work that is included in her 2008 selected volume, *Captive Voices*, puts Taylor in the company of that small but invaluable group of poets who found their characteristic voices fairly early in their careers, but wrote their work of greatest consequence toward the end of exceptionally long lives—I think of Thomas Hardy, Robert Penn Warren, Czeslaw Milosz and Stanley Kunitz, among others.

All of the figures on this list are primarily elegiac poets, and, perhaps because they are all poets who write their best work in old age, they remind us that no one is an elegist by choice. Many of their most affecting elegiac reckonings occur when grief is reawakened without warning in an everyday event, a moment of heartbreak that helplessly recalls the lost beloved. Here is Hardy, hallucinating the voice of his late wife: "Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then, /

Standing as I drew near to the town / Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then, / Even to the original air-blue gown!" Here is Milosz, in a poem entitled "Gathering Apricots": "Apricots. The whole tree full of them, in the dark leaves, / Glimmer, yellow and red, bringing to mind / The garden of Hesperides and apples of Paradise. / I reach for the fruit and suddenly feel the presence / And put aside the basket and say, 'It's a pity / That you died and cannot see these apricots. / While I celebrate the undeserved life.'" The beloved persists—arriving to startle or to haunt—within the rituals of the everyday. And, as often as not, it is through fetishism that the dead are preserved: Hardy's recollection of the "air-blue gown" is a form of *memento mori*, the verbal equivalent of the strands of hair of dead loved ones that his fellow Victorians would so tenderly (and ghoulishly) preserve in lockets. But such memorials, be they physical or poetic, are themselves ephemeral. Cradling a photo of his dead father, Rilke famously laments, "O quickly disappearing photograph / in my more slowly disappearing hands."

This is a terrifying revelation, and yet for the elderly such events can occur with benumbing regularity. This is the subject of a second Taylor poem I would like to briefly discuss; it is altogether more pitiless than "The Sky-Watcher."

"Where Somebody Died"

The self refuses to appear
in this bare place.

It fears that mute chair
and the still window.

The sunlight scares it.

There might rise up a sound.

The door doesn't like to move,
and the crow out there
hesitates; he knows
a hole flown into by mistake
would make a bite of him.

What was sits standstill in the chair,
hangs, stunned, against the dry-eyed light.

Nobody in sight.

Inanimate things, still lifeless.

This room's so empty
I doubt I'm standing here;
there can't be room for me
and total emptiness.

Only some far-off sounds persist.

The brute truck
over the interstate.

The flames in the incinerator
chewing his old vests.

It is something of an injustice to subject a poem as limpid and brutally abject as this to any sort of analysis. The sheer palpability of grief that informs the poem is quite near overwhelming. This is due in no small measure to the fact that the poem is not about the death of the person who is mourned but the *place* of death, a familiar locale now imbued with a singular unsettling foreignness, a place where the departed is gone but where objects have been eerily personified—a door that doesn't like to move, a mute chair. And the past *itself* is personified: it “sits standstill in a chair”—“standstill” being an oddball Hopkinsian play on words of the sort we often find in Taylor's later work. We are given a description of an interior whose objects are peculiarly animate, but at the same time, it is a place utterly lifeless and desolate. I'm reminded of those lines in Stevens's “The Plain Sense of Things,” another poem about domestic ruination: “It is as if / we had come to an end of the imagination.” It is a locale that is now so alien that the speaker *herself* seems unable to inhabit it, however familiar the terrain: “The self refuses to appear / in this bare place.” Yet is the self that Taylor evokes the speaker of the poem, or is it the “somebody” who died? Clearly—for Taylor is a fastidiously precise writer—this ambiguity is willful. When a first-person speaker does emerge, nothing self-revelatory or consoling accompanies her appearance: “I doubt I'm standing here, / There can't be room for me / and total emptiness.” However—and this seems to me what causes the poem to be quietly triumphant—the closing of the poem shifts focus. We leave the “standstill” place of death for a world that offers no comfort, and yet—as in the case of “The Sky-Watcher”—the closing lines of the poem suggest a guarded epiphany: “Only some far off sounds persist. / The brute truck / over the interstate. / The flames of the incinerator / chewing his old vests.”

Terrifying as these final images may be, they make a stark contrast to the metaphors of oppression, inertia, and delimitation that have characterized previous lines of the poem. The final images are a stunning tour de force—sharply visual but also kinesthetic, even synesthetic. We both see and hear the flames as they “chew” upon the dead beloved's vests. And thus the departed is countenanced, brought forth at last as the memory of a living presence—if only for an instant as the flames do their work. It is Taylor's homespun version of a Viking funeral, with the vests, not the longboat, blazing to ash in their own majestic conflagration. And it is easy to see why it epitomizes my definition of a “difficult” poem—difficult not in its language, but in the sheer intensity of its revelations.

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I have gone on longer than I'd planned. (I have just looked at the “properties” function on Word, and seen that my “total editing time” for this piece is 2,251 minutes. In that amount of time, Pioneer 10 traveled thirty million, forty-three thousand miles toward its rendezvous with Aldebaran.) But permit me to discuss one final poem, written by one of the previous century's greatest poets, Greece's Yannis Ritsos. He was in many ways a figure comparable to the much better known Pablo Neruda—both adapted the tenants of surrealism in a highly individualistic manner, both were hugely prolific but consistently engaging writers (Ritsos published a staggering ninety-three books of poetry), and both suffered political persecution in their native countries for their memberships in the Communist party. In Ritsos's case, his activism resulted in long periods of imprisonment, first in the aftermath of the rightists' victory in the Greek Civil War of 1944–49, and subsequently after the reactionary junta of the Greek colonels in 1967–74.

Ritsos's imprisonments have a sadly ironic pertinence to my topic—he is the only poet I know of who was compelled to *literally* seal his poems in bottles. One of Ritsos's most able translators, Rae Daelvan, relates the story: Ritsos “was arrested in July 1948 and deported to the prison camp of Kontopouli on the island of Lemnos, then transferred in May 1949 to the infamous ‘Institute for National Reeducation’ on Makronisos. There he suffered both physical and psychological torture for persisting in his refusal to sign the ‘declaration of repentance.’ On Makronisos he placed his poems in bottles to save them from confiscation by the camp authorities and buried them in spots known only to three friends, hoping that at least one would survive and bring the poems to light.” The following poem dates from this period and may in fact be one of those Ritsos interred in the hard Aegean soil:

“The Meaning of Simplicity”

I hide behind simple things so you'll find me;
if you don't find me, you'll find the things,
you'll touch what my hand has touched,
our hand-prints will merge.

The August moon glitters in the kitchen
like a tin-plated pot (it gets that way because of what I'm saying to you),
it lights up the empty house and
the house's kneeling silence-
always the silence remains kneeling.

Every word is a doorway
to a meeting, one often cancelled,
and that's when a word is true: when it insists on the meeting.

Imagine the scene. Upon a sheet of flimsy onionskin Ritsos has hoarded and secreted, and then partitioned into pieces approximately the size of an old 3 x 6 notecard, he handwrites by candlelight, in his rude bunk, three copies of “The Meaning of Simplicity.” A few days later, it joins a group of other poems to reside in an empty green bottle that formerly held retsina or mineral water. Under the shadow of the guard tower and barbed wire, when his friend gives the signal to indicate the guards are distracted, Ritsos finds the designated spot and hurriedly begins to dig with a bent and decrepit spoon. The burial will take several panic-filled minutes. Later that day, the poet will be interrogated again; again he will refuse to sign his declaration of repentance. One would think that under conditions such as this, were one able to write a poem at all, its content would be akin to the chain gang hollers and prison laments that were so formative for the Delta blues; the barbed wire, the guard towers, and the machine-gun-toting guards would appear, and the chorus of every verse would be a cry of lamentation.

But Ritsos instead offers something that is utterly unexpected, given these circumstances. It is an *ars poetica* and a brilliant one. The title is of course decidedly ironic, for the exchange between its writer and “secret addressee” is hardly a simple one. The speaker must conceal himself, much in the way that he must conceal his very words in a bottle. He will reveal himself to his reader

almost forensically—not as a consciousness but as barely tangible evidence of his presence: “you’ll touch what my hand has touched, / our hand-prints will merge.” But in the poem’s second stanza, the speaker takes on more agency. He may be conjuring the features of an empty house, but this seemingly unpromising venue immediately becomes a place of alchemical imaginative transformation: the tin pot that glitters in moonlight “gets that way / because of what I’m saying to you.” And although we may at first resist the cumbersome personification of the “house’s kneeling silence,” when we’re told that the silence is *always* kneeling, we have little choice but to admit this statement is true. Indeed, as Stephen Dobyns has remarked about “The Meaning of Simplicity,” “this is the poet’s endeavor, to make something real with words. The language is the conduit through which . . . mystery is passed on to the reader.”

I have no idea if Ritsos was familiar with the writings of Martin Heidegger, but he offers a quiet but masterly illustration of that mainstay of Heideggerian thought—that the making of art is equivalent to the making of a “dwelling” and a place to dwell. Our words, the building blocks of this construction, the means by which we erect the “doorways / to a meeting” are a source of wonderment, even when we must contend with the distinct possibility that those same words will fail us and that the inhabitants of a planet circling Aldebaran will, on some day in the vastly distant future, hold the Pioneer Plaque for a moment—and then discard it as space junk. And yet Ritsos is adamant: despite all of this, some words *will* reach their destination, and we will greet their arrival with the feeling that we are its exact and inevitable recipients, that we, and only we, are the “ones hailed by name.” ■