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4-13-2015

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Recommended Citation

Shechter, Gabriel, "Paul's Wife: Messages from the Past" (2015). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 48.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/48>

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Gabriel Shechter

Paul's Wife: Messages from the Past

I started writing poetry before I was interested in reading it. It was fall 2001, and my first poems were predictably full of adolescent angst. They were poems that asked big questions and expressed big feelings, with just as much melodrama as you'd expect from a fourteen year old. While it's a little embarrassing to read them now, I like to flatter myself by thinking that they made up in sincerity what they lacked in maturity.

But more than merely expressing angst, poetry was also a method for me to cope with losing my grandfather, who had died in November of that year. When I was little I'd slept over at my grandparents' house every Saturday, and I have clear memories of him eating a breakfast of salami and eggs on their porch every Sunday morning. Sometimes he would take me on hikes through the local forest preserve, and afterward we would go to the ice cream store, where all we would have to ask for was "the usual." When I got older I learned that he'd been an extremely well-read man with an intense love for the arts. His poetry books became the first ones in my collection, and his handwriting can still be found in the margins. This is another role that poetry plays in my life: it connects me to my grandfather.

It was two years later that I found the first poem that truly resonated with me. In my sophomore English class, we were reading Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, which depicts a dystopian future in which books are outlawed. At one point in the book, the protagonist commits the taboo of reading poetry, reciting Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach". I will always remember the first time I read that poem, which I quickly committed to memory. Matthew Arnold captures the spirit of loneliness and longing

through images of the waves on the English Channel. He evokes the haunting sound of waves repeating, like a hollow echo that brings him into awareness of his own deep solitude. Arnold builds these images one atop the other, until he finally breaks his pattern with a sudden plea:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.¹

Today my favorite poems are still the ones that sound as though they were written with desperation, that capture the poet's deepest needs and barest honesty. I savor the work of poets who were searching, who offered songs in place of answers, and who achieved self-expression as a placeholder for self-fulfillment. Their thoughts are memorialized on the page, like a moment in time frozen in amber. Soon I discovered W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and W.H. Auden. Each was preoccupied with his own favored topic, but they were all hungry for understanding. Yeats was looking for his country and faith, Thomas sought to know himself, and Auden meditated on the nature of art. Just this week I opened my grandfather's 1945 edition of *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* and saw a note inside the front cover which read, "From Miriam -- 57." Miriam is my grandmother, who is still alive and well. I'd never noticed the inscription before. I hold the book now knowing that she gave it to him 58 years ago.

¹ Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*, lines 29-37.

I cherish these unexpected connections with the past. Most of my grandfather's poetry books are mine now, and I've added to his collection over the years. A favorite pastime of mine is to open one of the books, flip through the pages, and stop at random, hoping to find something good. Often I stop on pages that have his handwriting in the margins. There are little notes of what he thought and felt, years ago when he was reading the poem about which I am now thinking and feeling. Sometimes his notes are an attempt to explain the poem to himself. Sometimes they reference other poems he apparently thought would go nicely together. In summer 2006, around the time I graduated from high school, I flipped through a book of Wallace Stevens, and stopped at his poem "The Idea of Order at Key West," a contemplative poem about a woman's singing voice against the backdrop of the ocean. My grandfather had made a note in the margin of the Stevens book referring to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, "Frost at Midnight," in which Coleridge focused on his sleeping child, and how he wanted the child's upbringing to be more peaceful and content than his own. It is a mystery to me what connection my grandfather made between the poems, which from my perspective have almost nothing in common. Maybe that's to be expected. Like so much great art, what they say to me might be different than what they said to him so many years ago.

I tend to prefer older poems. While many great poets and poems arose out of twentieth century modernism, I sometimes fear that it turned poetry into a purely academic exercise. Many people my age tend to see poetry as something that is meant to be examined only in a classroom setting, rather than something that can enrich their lives like any other art form. Many contemporary poets employ novel experimental forms, and embrace writing poetry free from any formal constraints. These poets often challenge

traditional notions of what can be considered poetry. While this is a worthy exercise, I sometimes fear that it takes the art out of poetry. For me, rhythm and feeling are still the engines that drive great poems. That's why one of my favorite contemporary poets is Robert Pinsky, whose verse is full of astonishment at merely being alive. His poems marvel at the little hurts and challenges, and focus on relationships, memories, and the ability to communicate. Another contemporary poet I enjoy is Seamus Heaney, whose poetry is so often a tender reminiscence of the past, and how that past still lives within us.

One last story about my grandfather. His name was Paul, and his marriage was a very happy one. I still remember how he used to call my grandma from work just to hear her voice, and how he would still kiss her when he got home, even after over forty years of marriage. A few years back I was going through some of his books and I came upon *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost*. I opened it up and flipped through the pages. His scribbled thoughts were in the margins, his sentiments preserved like fossils. I stopped on a poem called "Paul's Wife." He had marked the page with a flower years or decades earlier. The flower had been perfectly preserved between the airtight pages. It was like a message from the past. I don't know how many years the flower had been there, but I closed the pages again, putting it back to rest.

The flower still marks the page. I don't open that book very often, for fear of disturbing it. But it's still on my shelf, hiding a flower that's dry and brittle but still beautiful. Against the flower are his thoughts in dried ink, pressed between pages. These books of poetry are about continuity. His library runs into mine, and once in a while he still speaks to me in scrawled sentence fragments between the stanzas.

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