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Don Nelson Sings Elvis

I write fiction, but poetry was my first love. It seduced me into the word. That and a daffy, hippieish secondary-school teacher called Mrs. Fowles. This woman dismissed all the so-called great writers, warned us that reading too much would impair our originality, and had us write a poem for each class.

“A poem is anything,” she told us. “This is a poem.” She would point to a few scrawls left on the blackboard by a prior class, repeating them with mysterious inflections. Opening a metallurgy textbook, she would recite the process of smelting, her mouth doing something vaguely obscene with the word *ingot*. At thirteen, a bus ride was an erotic experience: a woman uttering the phrase *sloughing the slag* was all it took to begin the grafting of intellect and desire.

Like most adolescents, I felt ill-defined. I made a stab at being something by hanging over my bed a poster of a woman who had sensually crucified herself upon the bonnet of a Ferrari and by buying myself a record. That is what teenage boys did: they looked at half-naked women and listened to records. Truth is I didn’t look at this poster any more than I looked at the framed black-and-white photograph of my long-dead father, which sat on the mantelpiece in my bedroom. And the record: Elvis. I hadn’t noticed the microscopic “Don Nelson sings” just above the “ELVIS.”

It confused me: why would anyone make a record in which you more or less badly imitated someone else? But I listened to Don Nelson sing Elvis. One should listen to such things. Perhaps more essential than the “this is it,” for one who is attempting to negotiate some kind of original becoming, is the “this is *not* it.”

I worked on my poems for class as if I were defusing little bombs. Mrs. Fowles responded ecstatically, as ever. Then it was announced: a schoolwide poetry competition. A cash prize, and the winning poem would be displayed at the entrance to the school for the remainder of the year.

I had won already, I knew that. And knew which poem I would submit. My shark poem, which I had titled, “Death De Profundis”—“Death out of the Depths.” It had numerous verses, leading up to a Great White exacting the life of a hapless swimmer. I still remember, even after more than twenty years, its refrain:

Glide, glide the silver bullet
Swiftly through the swirling mass.

Pure Elvis.

My Lebanese father died in the Libyan desert. He was in a car late one night, racing to bring identification papers to a fellow civil engineer who had been arrested for alcohol possession. The car, according to one uncle, hit a large pothole in the dark desert road; according to another it hit a stray camel. At the time, my English mother was living with my brother and me, both infants, in a house in the mountains that surrounded Beirut. After my father's death, we returned to my grandmother's tiny council flat in London.

As a child and teenager, I didn't know how my father had died, was never told and never asked. Nor did I feel any curiosity. But I have a sense that his absence was at the root of my acute sensitivity to things that were inexplicably right. "The child is father of the man" takes on another dimension when you are so clearly fatherless. For you have then, as best you can, to father yourself—to fashion a father, however fragmentary, from what you intuit to be the essence of masculine power, grace, skill, will, and sexuality: in a pub I watched a one-armed man rolling his own cigarette; in Covent Garden a flamenco dancer, burning and unregenerate; at the movies Bruce Lee's homicidal calligraphy of the body. All were images in a kind of compound eye, to be merged and reconfigured into the perfected father.

As these examples make clear, before I "segued" (Mrs. Fowles's favorite word) into language, I was almost morbidly attuned to how people physically articulated themselves. Even as a young boy, I was aware that many of the men who pursued my elusive and beautiful mother were profoundly not *it*. It was in their bodies: they winked and made pistols of their fingers; jangled their hefty, loose watches on their wrists; danced as if they were being machine-gunned in slow motion. Nor did I envy my friends in those flats their fathers, who were like the Seven Deadly Sins come home to roost, reading the newspaper in their dirty smalls. Those fathers should have been put in cages, fed and mucked out once a day, teased into amusing frenzies with long sticks. How much cleaner a signed photograph. Every boy should have one. *Here I am, your father, with love.*

Anyway, what need had I at thirteen of a father? My poems made it clear that I was *sui generis*, a genius:

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Glide, glide the silver bullet
Swiftly through the swirling mass.

I had written about a shark because I liked sharks. The fact that they ate people deeply appealed to me—as I am sure it did to many boys. I suppose they were fathers of a kind too, those sharks—big, dangerous, mindless, isolated creatures, like the fathers of my friends. I fashioned the structure of my poem very closely after that of Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” which now seems fitting. I would later learn that Tennyson’s father was a black hole at the heart of his family, an alcoholic and depressive maniac against whom, in one way or another, Tennyson would struggle for the rest of his life. I knew Tennyson’s father. I knew him because I knew my friend Rob’s stepfather, who called Rob *his mother’s little bastard*; and Scott’s father, who brought women home from the pub so Scott’s mum would sometimes have to sleep in Scott’s bed; or Greg’s father, who I once watched beat a man with the steel lid of a garbage can. And I felt I knew Tennyson also, regarding him a colleague, though I doubted he had ever managed anything quite as subtle or implacable as “Death De Profundis,” which was a shark itself in language.

I had already spent the cash prize, had already stood up before the assembled school a half dozen times to humbly accept the congratulations of the headmaster and the applause of my peers.

And then, of course, I didn’t win. The winning poem was titled “The Black Lung.” It was written by a new boy from somewhere up north, from the black stuff, the dark hills, those satanic mills. Yes, up there, where they barely spoke at all, slurred words as they munched on blood pudding in their hovels and enjoyed a good punch-up during the wakes of their superfluous siblings. His mother had remarried and moved to London after the sudden death of the boy’s father from a heart attack. The boy’s name was Devon Wilde.

Even his name was better than my poem.

He was a tall, slender, pale, quiet boy, effortlessly handsome and indigenious, his hair curly and dirty blonde. He had the habit of gently touching his lips as if he were afraid that someone might make off with them; his only flaw was a small rash of eczema across the knuckles of one hand. Even the troglodytes who flung apple cores at your head while you were reading during recess left him alone.

Despite his victory, Devon and I became friends. He was, in pretty much every way, better than I, which made our relationship more filial than fraternal. I

remember one particular day when I hadn't been selected by the captains for a game of playground soccer—an inconsolable humiliation and grief for a boy that age. He knew that I obscurely blamed him for this because he was my friend, and I was that kind of person, so he came out of the game for me. It seems so insignificant, but I have never forgotten it. By doing this he made me aware—as one can only become deeply aware as a child when one observes it in one's peer—of what it means to be good.

Then he fell, as they say, into the wrong crowd, was expelled, and we lost touch. Seven years later I would get onto the tube going toward Vauxhall Bridge Road early one morning and sit opposite a man in filthy overalls drinking a jumbo can of Tenants Extra. He looked like a punctured carnival balloon of a man, his face collapsed, his eyes rheumy and loose in their sockets. Our gazes met, and for both him and me a flicker of recognition—mercifully unacknowledged. Some years after this he became a skinhead, covering his neck and the side of his face with obscene tattoos. My mother, who is a receptionist in the clinic where Devon got his methadone, told me she saw him often, wandering the streets of the part of London where I grew up, rooting his head inside his green bomber jacket to sniff at a bag of glue. Last August he was found in a derelict brewery by the Thames, dead from a bad combination of drugs and alcohol.

It occurs to me now that what I felt when I first read his poem was the same as what I felt when he came out of the game for me: *This is what it means to be good*. The “good” would be different for me now in these two cases, the former aesthetic, the latter moral, but *then* I was fashioning myself as earnestly as I was fashioning poems. My notion of what was “good” had not so clearly subdivided and hardened. I was looking for Elvis, for some right thing to shore against the profound wrongness of the child I was—anybody is.

Standing at the entrance to the school reading Devon's poem, I knew that this was not Naeem Murr sings Tennyson; this was “The Black Lung” by Devon Wilde, whose father had been a miner, whose father had died.

If one read it now, “The Black Lung” would seem, I am sure, awful, even laughable, a thirteen-year-old writing about the predicament of coal miners coughing up their rotting lungs. But reading it then, this work by my peer, I became aware that “Death De Profundis” was not Elvis. I realized that I was a child, that there was another thing to be, and that to get there one had to do more than put up a poster, buy a record, or spend a few evenings writing something that merely imitated something else.

And it was as I walked away from “The Black Lung” and from Devon Wilde himself standing shyly beside his poem that the obvious connection between the two of us occurred to me for the first time: we *both* had no fathers. But Devon had known his, had possibly loved him, while mine had always been merely a photograph in my room. Then another, more obscure connection surfaced: not between me and Devon, but between our poems. I recalled that I had described the eyes of my shark as being like coals: dead and the stuff of fire.