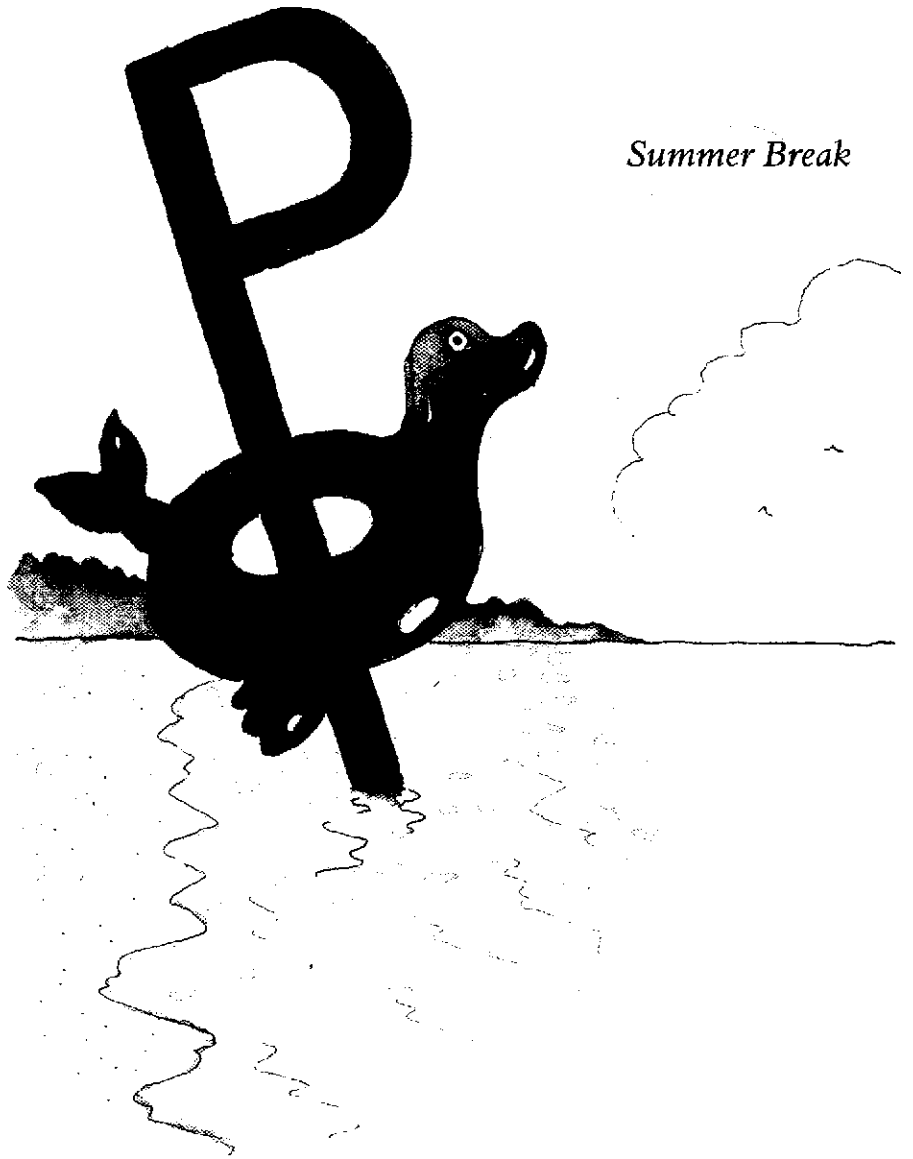


JULY/AUGUST 2007

# OETRY

*Summer Break*



\$3.75 USA  
\$5.00 CAN

*My Poet*

I live with a poet. Her boyfriend before me was also a poet, and published a book called *Crane*, in which all the poems are about her. She looks like a crane — the bird kind. I often find her standing on one leg, leaning against our bookshelves, very still, staring into a book as if for a fish to snatch out. *Crane* upset her. I remember her tearing up one of the poems, shouting, “Want to publish a book: write poems about your goddamn miserable sex life!” The poem, titled “Interdiction,” was about him having a real hankering for all those things in the Bible you’re not allowed to eat — particularly bivalves. What this has to do with *The Colonel* and Mrs. Whatsit, I can’t imagine.

But then I’ve never understood poetry. You see, I’m a fiction writer. If my Poet ever appears in one of my books, she shall do so as a once-beautiful, but now tragically disfigured nun. We fiction writers are a different breed from poets — alert, happy, optimistic. If you want to find the fiction writer in a crowd, just pretend to throw a stick. He’ll be the one who looks around.

Loving my Poet as I do, though, I try hard to understand what a poet is. The first clue lies in the fact that my Poet — *every* poet — is an insomniac. My own reads or wanders about our apartment for the best part of most nights. She told me she often feels she would give up every poem she’s ever written for one good night’s sleep. A friend of mine, who’s a literature professor, is very enamored of my Poet, whom he describes, tremblingly, as “the real thing.” (I once asked if I was “the real thing,” but it unfortunately triggered a grand mal seizure in him.) Anyway, he tells me he finds it profoundly reassuring that while we ordinary mortals are asleep, there exist lit rooms containing anxious, vigilant souls. A terrible responsibility, he says, devolves upon the poet, that requires her never to be fully awake or asleep: at night, wakeful poets buoy humanity to the surface, to consciousness, preventing our slumbering bulk from sinking too far; during the day, these same poets anchor the madding masses to the depths. The world will end, he once told me, when the final poet awake closes her eyes. Last night I woke up sweating, having dreamed of sinking with the rest of humanity into cold oblivion. Sure enough my Poet was fast asleep beside me — the first deep sleep she’d entered

in more than a week. So I knocked a pile of books to the floor, and returned to my blissful slumbers, much comforted by the thought that at least one poet would wander the midnight battlements, keep watch, and preserve us all for one more day.

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As any true fiction writer knows, fiction writers don't have time to read, since we're always writing. Poets, on the other hand, read constantly. My Poet leaves books all over the apartment: in the kitchen, Emmanuel Lévinas (more like Icantunderstandasinglewordovinas); in the bathroom, *A History of Bees* (what is it with poets and bees?); in the bedroom, *A Compendium of Shipping Terms* ("fo'c'sle" slant rhymes with "asshole"); in the sitting room, the biography of some naturalist who was in Darwin's shadow (poets love peripheral historic figures, without understanding that the person no one's talking to at the party is dying to tell you all about his collection of Victorian hat pins). The reason poets are able to read so much is because they spend more time "waiting" than writing. Waiting! What a bizarre concept. Reading, taking walks, debating whether an autumnal oak leaf is really red ochre or more a perinone orange, all the time twisting the miserable wire coat hanger of their souls this way and that in the hope of becoming receptive.

Having written three dozen pages or so this morning, I take a break and seek out my Poet. She's in the sitting room, leaning her forehead hopelessly against the window pane, staring into the street.

"Finished any poems?" I ask.

"Not today."

"What, no signal again?" I make the "call me" gesture and wander around the sitting room saying, "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?"

She tells me quietly that if I don't leave her alone she's going to disembowel me with her pencil.

I lay low for a bit and then very quietly carry my chair into the sitting room. She's still staring out of the window, unmoved. I get up onto the chair with my manuscript, which I lift as high as I can before dropping. The loud thump causes her to cry out and wheel around.

"Oh, I didn't mean to disturb you," I say. "Just wanted to get a sense of the heft of this new novel. It's a *whopper*."

My Poet actually did start to get the signal this morning, and spent almost six hours scribbling in her notebook. The result: ten lines on a single page. That page is now impaled upon her corkboard, trapped in a terrible limbo with her other poems-in-progress, some of them years old and countless drafts thick.

I find her reading in her office, and ask what her new poem is about.

"That starling we saw," she says, "the one trapped in the Amtrak station."

"And?"

"And that's what it's about."

"So a tale of triumph," I say. "Little guy against the corporate machine?"

"No," she says. "*Via negativa*. Apophasis. I'm thinking of what it is not. That's the best way sometimes."

"What *what* is not?" I ask.

"What the starling is not." She points at her corkboard. "Why don't you just read it?"

I do, and for a moment I feel as if the top of my head has come off; immediately followed by the rather unpleasant sensation that someone is rattling a stick around in there.

"Whoa!" I say. "*Deep*." I pretend to stagger for a while under the weight of its profundity.

Feeling I've done my duty, I ask if I can tell her the plot of my new novel.

"If you must," she says, with that expression of desperate eagerness very particular to her, and strangely reminiscent of most people's expressions when they're not very eager at all.

"A woman has two children, a boy and a girl." I start to cry, but hold off. "And she dies from the cancer."

"What kind of cancer?"

"Cancer of the left ventricle." (The key to good fiction is being specific.) "And they all keen and grieve, and her son becomes a boxer because he's full of anger at God, and her daughter becomes a nun, chaste, but under her cassock —"

"Habit."

"What?"

"Nuns wear habits."

"Why are you saying things I can't understand? Anyway, her loveliness is wasted because her cassock catches fire and she becomes horribly disfigured!"

"Stop," she shouts.

"Mildly disfigured?"

"Just stop please," she says.

"A small scar that's actually quite becoming?"

"This is *exactly* the same as your other novel."

"No. In my other novel it's the father who dies."

I can see she's in pain; my plots always move her. I don't get why poems can't have such stirring plots. Her poem is about what a starling is not. It seems to me that in a way all poems are about what a starling is not. Where's the passion!? The triumph! Human will overcoming tragedy and breaching the indifferent! Where disfigured nuns cast off their cassocks to bare their beauty, where boxers beat men to a bloody pulp and cry up to heaven, *Here! Here, damn you, is the work of my hands!*

"A starling?" I say.

"A starling," she says.

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My Poet loves words in a way that I feel is quite unhealthy and unnatural. She owns a dictionary decades old and so large she uses a small buffet cart to wheel it around our apartment like some invalid relative. For true fiction writers, words are just a kind of filling for the plot. A novel is like one of those mock apple pies made with Ritz crackers and cinnamon — and anyone who claims he can tell the difference is a damn liar!

Today she's suspending her crane-like attention above this dictionary.

"You need to get rid of that old thing," I say.

"Henry James used this same dictionary." *she says*

"Is he a relation or something?"

"Henry James," she repeats, looking up, as if I might not have heard her properly.

*Am I wrong?* "Henry James?"

Letting out a wounded, whimpering sound, she sinks her face into her hands.

I'm just teasing, of course. I'm fully aware that Henry James is

probably some important poet, or maybe one of our presidents.

While I'm not sure if this is what my professor friend means by "the real thing," one thing I've learned from living with a poet is that a passionate antagonism with language is what defines them. As many alcoholics are said to be those who have a kind of allergy to alcohol, so a poet with language — compelled and ruined by it. The secret to a poet's soul lies somewhere in the little cells of that dungeonish dictionary, in the slow languishing of those old, mad, forgotten words. It's also in the very particular kind of art she — and every poet — seems to love. Joseph Cornell. I guarantee you will not find a single poet who doesn't start rubbing herself against the furniture the minute you mention Cornell and his little boxes full of human residue, the pleasures of the miniature.

One good thing, though, is that after we went to see the Cornell exhibit some years ago, I got the idea to give her, for her birthday, a tobacco box in which I'd glued lots of small objects — secret decoder rings, vintage bottle caps, my grandfather's glass eye.

She gushed.

"Like a Cornell," I pointed out.

"I love it because you made it."

"It's just like a Cornell," I said.

"You usually give me cash."

"Isn't it *exactly* like a Cornell?"

"I love it," she said. "Thank you."

Since then, that's what I've given her for every present, small things glued into boxes — shoe boxes, cereal boxes, bento boxes, Happy Meal boxes. She does seem a little less enthusiastic.

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This evening I leave my Poet with a pile of books sent to her for review while I go to the movies. On returning and entering the sitting room, I just miss being hit by a book flying through the air. My Poet seems to have fallen onto the floor between the couch and the coffee table — on which I notice two empty bottles of wine. I pick up the book. The author's photograph takes up almost the whole back cover. Relentlessly young, with hair all the way down to her coccyx, she has clearly been deeply hurt by her loveliness (like my nun!), and no doubt writes about the agonies of being a brainy beauty with ever-surging submarinal urgings, one of a new legion of mermaidish

poet-girls with kelp-like hair, ribs opening like gills, salt in their mouths! Another book hits the wall and bounces against my shoulder. It's by a very grave-looking man-child. His book consists entirely of famous poems deconstructing themselves into the noise of pop culture. One called "The Archaic Torso of Apollo" ends, "You must swap your wife." He won some big prize for this and seriousness has settled upon his brow like crows in the furrows of fields. Or might have if his brow wasn't completely smooth. In fact there isn't a single line on his face, so his seriousness is more like the vagrant seriousness one sees in the faces of infants just before they empty their little bowels.

These books have clearly very much upset my Poet, who lies sputtering, raging, and roiling about on the floor, shouting, "The agony! The agony!" (I should warn you that she's not a very happy drunk.)

I can't say anything for a moment because, in truth, I'm deeply moved by how beautiful and young these writers are, and because I realize, all at once, that both will be characters in my next novel. The girl's mother — no, her father — no, *both* her parents die, and she turns to writing poetry, her beauty wasted in brainy pursuits until her hair catches fire on the candle by which she writes at night and she's horribly disfigured! And then she writes about her lost loveliness in a way that's so touching that her old high school boyfriend, who is now blind, marries her and reads her scarred skin like Braille! Oh, why would anyone be a poet and roil around on the floor at bad poetry by troubled, sensual, pre-Raphaelite infant theorist prodigies when one can write such stories! I want to tell my Poet this. I want to tell all poets this, but in truth I find it quite sexy when she roils about on the floor wearing nothing but a T-shirt and a pair of boxers.

"There, there," I say, "it's not all that bad is it? You've got to let young people have their ideas. Young people *love* their ideas."

"Idiots!" she shouts.

"Well, hardly," I say, and to prove it I read out the author bio for the beautiful young girl: "Masters from Princeton, Ph.D. from Yale. She was awarded an NEA, as well as Stegner, Fulbright, Bunting, Guggenheim, Lannan, and MacArthur fellowships. She's spent the last two years modeling in Milan, and has a rare blood disorder that means she will never visibly age or feel pain."

"They're idiots!" she screams.

I feel suddenly wistful. "Youth! I had an idea once. It was so lovely. Wish I could remember it. But I have my fiction now."

She pushes the coffee table aside so she can see me, and with a little struggle, props herself up on her elbows. "Don't you understand?" she cries out with slurred despair. "They're coming for you, too. Fiction is the new poetry. They're going to start writing essays like, 'Can Fiction Matter?'"

"Who's coming for me?"

"The great monobrow! All those goddamn fundamentalists, hungry for the literal truth." She points at me. "To sell any books you're going to have to pretend you're a homeless male prostitute, or a drug addict, or in your case a boxer with a sister who's a hideously deformed nun with the body of a porn star! 'Give me fact or give me fantasy and punish real imagination with obscurity' — thus spake the monobrow!"

"That rhymes," I say.

She flings another book. "Goddamn theorists, breeding lions with gazelles."

"A Lizelle!" I say. "A Gazlion!" I try to imagine it. "Wouldn't it eat its own arse?"

She crumples once more onto her back.

"Hope you don't mind my asking, but are you drunk again?"

She levers herself briefly up. "I hope you don't mind *my* asking, but are you stupid again?"

"If it's stupid to be upright and sober, mea culpa."

"You can't help but be upright. You've got a brain full of helium. I'm surprised you're not stuck to the damn ceiling. How can you live when your mind is such a vacuum?"

"My dear, there wouldn't be much helium in a vacuum," I point out. "And don't forget," I add, "nature adores a vacuum."

"Abhors, you idiot."

"What?"

"Abhors. Abhors. *Abhors.*"

"Are you even speaking English? You have got to stop drinking." I make to leave, but turn back. "And I have to say you are not looking much like an unacknowledged legislator of the world lying on the floor like that."

Slowly, ceremoniously, she raises her right arm rigidly perpendicular to her supine body. Turning the knuckles of her closed fist toward me, she says, "I hereby unofficially and without sentient acknowledgement legislate the following." And with this she levers up the middle finger of her fisted hand in an obscene gesture.



I can tell it's going to be one of those nights, so I just leave her there moaning, "The agony! The agony!"

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My Poet is in the sitting room with her forehead pressed to the window again. She apologized for her behavior that night, almost a week ago now, and I too have something about which to be contrite, since I forgot our anniversary. But it's been a good week for us. I sold my new novel, after a bidding war, for \$11 million, and my Poet had a poem taken by a well-known literary journal, which gave payment in the form of an origami swan made out of her recycled submission.

Quietly I approach my Poet, who is lost in thought. In truth, health, riches, and a vast readership are as nothing compared to this moment — my Poet turning to me, her face dilating beautifully as she murmurs, like an approaching revelation, "glaucomous." But her face soon clouds. Whatever it was didn't take hold, and the abortive flush of it leaves her sad and drawn.

This seems a good time to hand her my anniversary gift. "I'm sorry it's late."

As she unwraps it, I walk away. (I still have another fifty pages of my new novel to get done before lunch.)

"What's this?" she calls after me.

"A Cornell."

"Did you make it?" she asks dubiously.

"Oh no, that," I say, pointing back at her, at my genuine and indisputable Poet, "*that* is the real thing."