

Poetry East
#43 (1996)

Quiet

I was not disciplined enough
to rise at dawn, but when
I rose I left behind
rooms of furious thinking
so that I could watch,
atop this former mountain,
now a tumbled-down
small hill, the sun
reach into the lowest
least bush: it was
a last path that I climbed
to get to this ancient summit
hidden out in the grass-and-granite
open from the closed
customary places of thought.

So:
Wind pushing the grass
in flowing waves. Slow
brown wingbeats of a hawk.
And the lake below empties
itself of darkness like a mind
quieting.

There is no sound
of sound.

Only an echo
of what was not heard,
echo of that which
bells or chimes were long ago
invented to imitate.

Some Origins of "Quiet"

A few years ago, I was in southwestern Oklahoma to teach a writing workshop for several days, in a somewhat barren landscape that was new to me—mountains so old they have been eroded away and are now only hills of tumbled granite. I could see the man-made lake, shrunken within its high-water boundaries because of drought, only as an antithesis to what is "natural," because it was so evidently in a place in which it could not have come into being through natural processes. There was a contrast, too, between that life-water and its death-shores—brown, scrubby, nearly treeless. (However much life there was, both in the water and on the land, it was sparse compared to the richness of a well-watered forest or a lake with well-watered shores; there was that harsh economy of life which is sobering, and within which each instance of life seems more significant.) The landscape of that place is of sharp contrasts, and strong contrasts are like water and wind for the sail of thought: the stronger the wind, the faster thought speeds between the force of that wind on the sail and the water's resistance to the keel.

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Especially from an elevation, the unobstructed views in this corner of Oklahoma are long, even if neither vegetative, animal nor human form animates much of the landscape. It is a good place for walking and hiking. One morning when I still had time before my class was to meet, I hastened outside after breakfast and hiked in five minutes up the small hill behind the lodge where everyone was staying. At the summit I sat down on a granite outcrop to look, to watch, and to think for a little while. Such rushing and then stopping probably characterizes a lot of my behavior.

When I drafted this poem I was following the movement of a T'ang dynasty poem that I had with me in English translation—that is, following its progress from the action in the first stanza to the contemplation in the second. I am a magpie, sometimes, in the way I write. I don't think my identifying the Chinese poem is important, now, for there's nothing left in my poem that outwardly resembles that other poem, except the bells at the end. But I think the Chinese poem meant to call to mind real bells, while my poem turned out to be about the idea of bells. I also steadied my poem in lines of three speech stresses, although here and there I departed from that self-imposed norm.

I think I was struck by the emptiness of that landscape not only because the vegetation was so sparse and the few presiding animals were rock-dwellers (like rattlesnakes) and sky-dwellers (like marsh hawks), but also because someone there had told me that the tiny protected valley behind the lodge had once been a camping place of the nomadic Kiowa people. Was that true? Was there, in the emptiness I scanned from the hilltop, some echo (I'm using a metaphor) of a gone presence? The little former mountain itself seemed unseen, somehow, because it was in plain view: a mountain that had grown so small it was now hidden.

There are the spiritually disciplined versus those who are not; there is the hiddenness (not the gone-ness) of the past, simply because its action is over and we cannot see it, versus the hiddenness of so much that is in fact with us in the present, such as the calm, meditative spell of time that must be stolen from the hastening, the rushing, of our lives. Sometimes there are markers of such hiddenness to make it visible—a word from someone else (“This was a Kiowa camping place”; “these mountains are extremely old”), an image, a written text; but how *does* the known point to the unknown? There could even be a musical instrument to signal, evoke, even represent, that which is not the practical moment in the

demanding world, with all its waiting tasks and entanglements. (Bells, gongs, chimes—which after they are struck make sounds that linger. Sounds which first are acts and then a kind of brief presence?)

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The metaphors of my poem came into consciousness only as I wrote them; then I seized and sharpened them as well as I could, especially the lake as a mind, and those bells. Regarding them, in that “empty” place in Oklahoma where for a few days I lived and where I wrote the poem, I had the idea not of what certain sounds of the civilized world are but of what they are for. Elsewhere, in a church or an orchestra, the bell is perhaps not so much an original sound—an origin—as it is a referent. To what?—in being distinct from all other sound it is almost a negation of other sounds, in the name of a silence to which it refers. (I was thinking not of triumphal bells, as for a wedding, but of a meditative one, struck in a slow rhythm, almost like a gong.) I was listening to that for which “silence” was not the adequate name—to that which, if it could be heard, would call the mind compellingly to an idea that could not have been grasped (another metaphor) in “the closed customary place of thought.” But now I am insisting too much on an idea, although the poem began, too, I *think*, with an elusive feeling hard to describe.

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Then after writing this prose, I rewrote the poem. To catch more fully—or so I imagine—of what it tells. And then I rewrote this prose, to chase after the changed poem. They are running off together somewhere, grieving over their destroyed earlier identities, bewildered by their own metamorphoses, hoping to get away from me before I disrupt them again.