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Here's to Viagra!
or
Why I Choose to Memorize Poems

Ting, ting, ting. Scott Spencer stood in the center of the ballroom, clinking a knife on his champagne glass. His father, Peter, had just married for the third time. About a tenth of the town's population had shown up for the reception—Telluride, Colorado, is not very big, after all, and Peter was known for throwing a great party. Plus, there was much to celebrate. Peter and Becky were wildly in love. It had taken them six decades to find each other, but at last, they had found their soul mates. It was as if their late-in-life love gave everyone else permission to believe in happily ever after.

Ting, ting, ting. Scott raised his crystal flute and the lilting murmur of the crowd hushed. "Here's to Viagra," he said, with an overly broad smile and a guffaw lurking beneath his words.

No one laughed. The bride's face lost its glow. The rest of us froze, our glasses still raised, unsure whether or not to bring the champagne to our lips.

Then Peter raised his glass higher and took a step nearer to Becky. Not taking his eyes off of her he said, "My luve for you is like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June, My luve is like a melody that's sweetly played in tune ..." He recited the first three stanzas of Robert Burns' famous poem, and when he was done, at least half the room had tears in our eyes. It felt like a joining of spirits again. We tipped back our glasses and drank to the love-giddy pair.

That day was the day poetry leapt off the page for me—it leapt off the page and into my ear. Poems went from things to be studied to things to be lived. I began memorizing poems immediately so that I, like Peter, might be able to pull them out of the mind's back pocket whenever necessary or desired.

While walking in spring, I might recall from Robert Frost how "Nature's first green is gold," appreciating it all the more for his warning: "Nothing gold can stay." Watching a roach scuttle to the back of an opening drawer I might announce to the air, "Don't talk to me about Cruelty and what I am capable of," drawing on Lucille Clifton's lines. One day strolling through cherry blossoms with my husband and son, A. E. Houseman came trippingly to the tongue: "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now is hung with snow upon the bough ..."

The poems I have memorized, both my own and poems of others, have become lenses through which I better engage with the moment. They are frames for seeing and re-seeing the world. They offer opportunities to find the aesthetic promise in any situation, no matter how mundane or distasteful.

The pleasurable side-effect of memorizing poems is that the other author's voice becomes embedded in my own, and I find that it has greatly strengthened my own writing. The lexicons, cadences, tools, insights and rhymes of my literary heroes steep into my own lines. I have also found that when I memorize a poem, I come to appreciate its myriad layers in new ways. I never understood "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" until I repeated it enough times to learn it by heart. By heart. That's what poetry's about: Feeling it more than dissecting it into its parts.

Peter's wedding day was also the day I realized how a few spoken words have the power to change the mood—of an individual or of a whole room. It could be for the worse: "Here's to Viagra," or for the better, "and I will love you still my dear till all the seas gang dry."

Peter died a few months after the wedding, and I was asked to recite the Burns poem at his memorial. I could do the first three stanzas as he did, but then knew I would never make it through the last stanza, the one he had left off for his wedding day. I knew I would cry too hard to be intelligible. So we had the poem printed and passed copies around the giant circle that had gathered at Peter's grave to say goodbye. When I came to the fourth stanza, we read the farewell in unison.

"Then fare thee well, my Bonnie lass, and fare thee well a while, and I will love you still my dear, though it were ten thousand mile."

I know Peter would have loved to have his life framed by his wedding poem. Poetry was one of his favorite lenses. (Gin, I am sure he would add, was another.)

Poetry, for me, is a practice. It's a daily beckoning to let words help shape the way we see the world. To wrestle with what it means to be alive. To grapple with what it means to die. To make this moment one we fully inhabit. And the next moment, too. And the next. It's an invitation to join our small voices in the big conversation.

The Blank Lover

Let my love be the least of things.

—Sam Hamill

Perhaps the iridescent wing of bugs—
even the much-loathed cockroach will unfold
its fragile sheen. Or bind weed, perhaps—pink,
fluttering petals that thrive beside the road
untended, lush where nothing else will grow.
Said Burns, *my love is like a red, red rose*,
but let my love be like dark soil that feeds
the fragile bloom, cool rain that soaks its roots.

Or better yet, let my love be no thing—

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Word Woman

thin gaps between the rain drops. Not a song
itself, but breath that swells below long notes.
The faithful emptiness connecting stars
in stable constellations. Reckless wind.
Sure space between your words each time you speak.

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Poet and presenter Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer lives near Telluride, Colorado. Visit her at www.word-woman.com.