Welcome to the
Poetry Forum

by

A. V. Christie – is Writer-in-Residence at Penn State Abington. She majored in English at Vassar and has a MFA from the University of Maryland. Her first book of poems Nine Skies appeared in The National Poetry Series in 1996. She has also been for ten years a Poet-in-the-Schools working mostly in city schools. Her poems, essays and reviews have been published in Ploughshares, Boulevard, The Iowa Review, Verse, and The American Scholar, among other magazines. She has one husband, one 5-year-old daughter, two cats—and meets regularly at the Paoli Starbucks to discuss poetry with Dick Gibboney.

Dick Gibboney – Poetry has always been with me. I am now struggling with writing it. Not capital-P poetry as if I were an English teacher or something like that. I realized this when A. V. (she is my teacher) and I were first thinking about this piece: I quickly found about 20 poetry books (in my uniquely organized library where one finds books with a new kind of finger-eye radar) some with faded comments on poems I had forgotten. Poetry is like that: It filters through your eyes and emotions like snow infiltrating an old barn. Some of the snow never blows away. That white stuff is poetry. This is why poetry must be approached with caution. It becomes a way of seeing Everything. This has great survival value for the soul and the Real, but as students of Darwin know, it can be maladaptive when talking with deans, Bush Republicans and Gore Democrats, and in meetings about scientific education research, grants, and tenure review.

Reaching into my shopping bag I pulled out three poetry books (I’m a poetry bag lady). I waved them in front of Ricardo. His old dog looked up as if the eight-foot-1930-airplane propeller was about to fall off the wall. “Here,” I said almost fiendishly, “here’s one you’ll like by Billy Collins, Sailing Alone Around the Room. The title makes me laugh.”

True. The whimsical quality of the title invited me to read this poet guy. And I found my current favorite. (Some of Collins’s poems are coming up. Don’t miss his “The History Teacher.”)

Ricardo pushed his chair back; his eyes widened as if the chair had a string tied to his eyelids and the backward movement of the chair opened his eyes like a child playing with a doll.

Encouraged, I whipped out The Soul of Rumi. Rumi was a thirteenth-century Persian mystic who wrote in couplets about love and fury, sadness and joy, longing for the beloved and sexual adventures and loss; Nature and emotions. Rumi’s book is two inches thick and plastered with multicolored postems. My book looks like a garden with paper flowers—rooting in words—popping out all over.

How’s this for elegance and beauty? Rumi writes:

I want to be where
your bare foot walks
because maybe before you step
you’ll look at the ground.
I want that blessing.

Try this next Valentine’s day.

“That beats the hell out of Hallmark,” Ricardo said, “but most people have the idea that poetry is difficult or something. That you have to be smart or educated for it.”

Ricardo (who owns the airport where I hang out) spoke for 249,000,000 Americans when he said that. In two years we have never talked about poetry. He admitted that he has thought about writing-up some of his experiences in running the airport. This deep human desire to talk and be heard, to listen and enjoy, drives poetry. It’s as human to like poetry as it is to like music or conversation or myths or rhythm. Our fast commercial Enron culture vaporizes our human desire to express, to understand, to appreciate.

With a vice president, as one example, who voted against Head Start as a congressman, our commercial culture may be so soulless—in a moral void—that even poetry and education must struggle to overcome.
Now let's go to the right stuff. How about something from Billy Collins, Poet Laureate of the United States?

This one is for all of you beat-up history teachers.

The History Teacher

Trying to protect his students' innocence he told them the Ice Age was really just the Chilly Age, a period of a million years when everyone had to wear sweaters.

And the Stone Age became the Gravel Age, named after the long driveways of the time.

The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more than an outbreak of questions such as "How far is it from here to Madrid?" "What do you call the matador's hat?"

The War of the Roses took place in a garden, and the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom on Japan.

The children would leave his classroom for the playground to torment the weak and the smart, mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,

while he gathered up his notes and walked home past flower beds and white picket fences, wondering if they would believe that soldiers in the Boer War told long, rambling stories designed to make the enemy nod off.

Bet we caught you smiling on some of those lines about the Chilly Age or Boer War.

This one is for tired history teachers who smoke—or once did. Or who may soon begin.

The Best Cigarette

There are many that I miss, having sent my last one out a car window sparking along the road one night, years ago.
The heralded ones, of course:
after sex, the two glowing tips
now the lights of a single ship;
at the end of a long dinner
with more wine to come
and a smoke ring coasting into the chandelier;
or on a white beach,
holding one with fingers still wet from a swim.

How bittersweet these punctuations
of flame and gesture;
but the best were on those mornings
when I would have a little something going
in the typewriter,
the sun bright in the windows,
maybe some Berlioz on in the background.
I would go into the kitchen for coffee
and on the way back to the page,
curled in its roller,
I would light one up and feel
its dry rush mix with the dark taste of coffee.

Then I would be my own locomotive,
trailing behind me as I returned to work
little puffs of smoke,
indicators of progress,
signs of industry and thought,
the signal that told the nineteenth century
it was moving forward.
That was the best cigarette,
when I would steam into the study
full of vaporous hope
and stand there,
the big headlamp of my face
pointed down at all the words in parallel lines.
Notice the just-rightness of the images:

“...How bittersweet these punctuations of flame and gesture....”

or this:

“...Then I would be my own locomotive, trailing behind me as I returned to work little puffs of smoke, indicators of progress, signs of industry and thought....”

Wouldn’t you feel wonderful just saying something like this to yourself? Or hearing it? Given all the swampy prose we read every day without objection, don’t these lines light a wick on your brain? Or has research prose made your mind a pot for oatmeal?

Man in Space

All you have to do is listen to the way a man sometimes talks to his wife at a table of people and notice how intent he is on making his point even though her lower lip is beginning to quiver,

and you will know why the women in science fiction movies who inhabit a planet of their own are not pictured making a salad or reading a magazine when the men from earth arrive in their rocket,

why they are always standing in a semicircle with their arms folded, their bare legs set apart, their breasts protected by hard metal disks.

Now you know why smart guys never became astronauts.

* * * * * *

And so, with this issue we introduce an occasional feature called POETRY FORUM. The word forum is the great gathering word; come to find, it grows out of the Latin words for outside and door. In the spirit of the doorway, POETRY FORUM will be about opening the experience of poetry more widely to readers. It will be about life and idea and feelings. It will be honest: We may soar in the clouds and we may also run through mud if that’s what it takes, and we won’t worry about getting our skirts dirty or about splashing some on you who get too close. We’d like those who have felt on the outside of poetry, have viewed it as an incomprehensible set of elite codes, to come inside.
Pretense, trendiness, political correctness, arid academicism are out. Because poetry is about ordinary life—our lives! We will approach poetry as we approach life: Revel in it, be not (too) afraid, soak it up. And we shall have fun.

*How “Cool Blue” Grew*

One way to appreciate poetry is to write some. We’re going to discuss Gibboney’s “Cool Blue” through some of its revisions in hopes of demystifying the process of drafting and enjoying a poem. There were nine revisions in all.
Cool Blue

by Dick Gibboney

The moon—
Ice light on
Trees,
Pencil lines of
Summer selves,
Lace the sky with
Lifeless limbs and
Dance with stars
In my astronomy.

Black on blue.

Cool blue.

The void
Breathes into me.
Inside its moment
I expand to a
Crazy happiness—
A duet of crow and thrush.
That moon there—
A lover in my sky?
Veiled in icy light?

Or

An oval of precision
Born in laws and
Cold and time?

Tis the latter
I believe.
Else why will
No one
Sleep with
Me?

Cool Blue.
AVC: In an early draft “Cool Blue” starts with a stark image wedded subtly to a feeling:

The moon
Casts a light
Ice
On wood

Moon, icy light, tree, and the lonely observer are gathered sparely together. The poem’s early drafts then sketch out and are preoccupied with varieties of distance:

Trees

Hold up the sky and
Overlap
The stars

The overlap here is not just what’s seen and recorded accurately. Together with the lines “Light years of space—Bathed in silences” it speaks again for the poem’s awareness of vast and perhaps deceptive distances (Draft 3).

DG: “Cool Blue” was prompted by a winter scene. I got up at 4 a.m., looked out the window that is one wall of our living and dining room, looked through acres of trees to another wooded ridge one mile away, all of which was flooded with moonlight. (The latitude is 40-something north, longitude 75-something west for the objective-minded.) I stood about eight feet back from the window as if to intuitively frame the scene.

AVC: The decisions Gibboney makes for his poem are large ones: Will the moon represent something maternal (Draft 1) or romantic? Romantic or scientific? Will the witnessing of the moment be confined to a night’s geometry: This angle in relation to that one (Drafts 1-7). Or will it expand to more largely speak of the poet’s own wider astronomy: The mapping out of a larger cosmos of feeling?

We see the first draft’s noting down of blatant symbols that the trees might stand for—sentinels or skeletons—all too heavy-handed for the quiet of the poem’s entry into loneliness. That the trees ultimately become

Pencil lines of
Summer selves

is just right for the poem’s thinking. The wording suggests a summer’s passing, a prior flourishing and loss that is tempered by the way the limbs will “Dance with stars” come Draft 5. Gibboney’s revisions work out a process of making more muted and subtle the imagery; they attempt, I think, to make the poem’s language match the quiet of the actual night-moment.
DG: I was aware of the “me” in the picture: In it, yet observing myself observing “it.” I talked *sotto voce*—on the downslope of the experience—to try to fix in my mind what I saw and felt. I had no choice but to write. I went to the opposite side of the house, turned on the light over the kitchen table—washing the scene away—and wrote by hand the first version. I believed I had lived a soulful experience. The first stanza felt choppy and wooden, groping for words in early drafts. The moon as an “oval of precision” was there all along and I like that image. The feeling of silence—solitude was a beautiful part of the real experience, but I did not have the skill to carry it out. Solitude—both energizing and scary—is a creative force largely entrapped in our rat-tat-tat culture. I was trying to capture the exhilaration, something mystical-spiritual within me.

AVC: What the poem is aware of, even in its earliest draft, is that two feelings can coincide: a crazy happiness can be side-by-side with isolation—that mystical incongruity. Such crazy happiness is not a surprise here, it belonged even as Gibboney let the trees and stars dance and even as he hammered out the phrase that would be his eventual title: “cool blue” — such a pleasurable set of sounds, an ease implied in its smoothness, the settledness of its vowels.

The poem’s challenge is what to do with the vastness of that sky (Draft 5 entertains, in the margin, dimensions of soul and universe. Words like God-ful and angel have accompanied the early drafts and Gibboney seems continually to be deciding on how many associations he wants the sky to hold.)

The word “void” troubles the middle drafts once it is introduced. The struggle with it continues from Drafts 5 through 7: “the silence of the void,” “I found another me in the silence of the void,” “a void of space,” “I flew the void of silence and found a universe in me.” The moment has become extremely abstracted, unable to be held and looked at. At this point Gibboney says he felt the poem’s “spine was broken.”

DG: I started reading for inspiration. I was looking, really, for something to pull me out of the mud. I read a lot of Rumi before I found the passage that seemed to be speaking to me: “Seawater/begs the pearl to break its shell.../At night, I open the window and ask/the moon to come and press its/face against mine. Breathe into/me. Close the language-door and/open the love-window....”

The word breathe was it. The spine was again intact.

AVC: A brief prose passage by Coleman Barks in that same Rumi book led Gibboney back to the idea of the moment, back to that word. The focus of being inside a moment again and breathing seemed to give the poem back to itself, canceled out the void’s more harrowing associations and the poem was well underway again. The musical word “cool” was also, I think, helping, by its “ice light,” to move the poem back toward precision and directness.
The fundamental point I would make to close is that this poem succeeds because, through the course of its drafts, it ultimately re-connects with the truth of Gibboney’s own experience at the rich initial moment. This, I understand, is very Deweyan.

We shall chat again next summer.