

THREE: In some ways, you are my teacher

A shift in time.

S:

The semester ended, but Max and I still saw each other from time to time.

How was your poetry reading?

M:

The reading went fabulously. (Some of the other poems were a little deliberately and finicky opaque...) But I have connected with some other poets and they say they want me to come to Brooklyn to do a reading. Maybe you could come!

S:

On the school of poets who surround you, I say: *resist opacity*. I think at the heart of opacity is fear.

M:

Opacity is fear. I'll edit with that in mind. Opacity is fear.

S:

Then he asked:

M:

Can I read your poems?

S:

Max somehow divined that I had secret poems stashed away in my desk, poems I almost never shared.

Emily Dickinson's envelope poems are to me the height of beauty—unshared, unfinished, written on envelopes—as hidden as they are revealed. But Max asked to see my poetry, and he could be persuasive.

M:

Please?

S:

Fine. Here is one little sonnet, unpublished, and largely unread but by my husband, Tony, who I wrote it for.

Music.

SUMMER RHODE ISLAND

You know what a lee is; I don't.
Behind a stone. No wind. Stop boat. A place.

Behind your back. My body. Stop the air.
Travel by stopping, full stop, just there.

As lee is a small word. Sail easy.
Lee and unlee, light is hot.
Rest here, a while longer on my
belly. A lee, a dry derry, a drought.

Words for clarity, words for light and heat,
words for charity—words for sleep.

Maybe a little paper sailboat floats by.

M:
Sarah,

S:
Yes?

M:
I know I'm poetry biased, but this made me shimmer inside. I want to write with this kind of glow one day.

The first stanza... makes me want to play peekaboo. I can't even. It's moving--I want to move. I want this miracle in my life... The elisions. The life!

S:
Thank you. Maybe you will give me the courage to send them out one day. Or, God forbid, read them aloud in public.

You know, in some ways, you are my teacher, not the other way around.

A breath.

M:
Your recommendation letters for graduate school arrived. I nearly cried. You complimented my ear. Nobody ever compliments my ear. Secretly, I am very proud of my ear.

I'm terrified of going back into chemo-land. Everything in my life, the fabric of my life itself, is dissolving. You are not. Maybe I am not? That's what your letter meant to me.

S:
That time is a blur. I was barely sleeping. I was teaching, and checking my three children's temperatures often, as they always seemed to have a cold.

I don't know if my friendship with Max felt like an extension of my mothering, a release from it, or both.

M:

My romantic life is falling apart again. I sense a wall from D. And I can't blame her, I haven't spoken to her in years, and all of a sudden I'm barging very suddenly and cancerily into her presence. We had a meal where she seemed to be obliging me. She called me "dude" at one point. Sarah, can you imagine anyone referring to me as dude?

S:

Maybe it was a compliment?

M:

I don't really know how to talk to people about my illness in a nondestructive way, or how they're supposed to listen.

S:

Always, always, Max wanted to know what was the best way to listen.

M:

You write really wonderful listeners.

Also, a big chunk of our conversing today ended up in a very strange poem-thing. Wanted to share with you, since you are a prime mover in the poem. I would love your input.

Max goes to the microphone and reads:

LISTENING, SPEAKING, AND BREATHING

Pianos are told to repeat
the grieving tones of a bird.

How does the bird focus?
How does the piano focus, in turn?...

I have never listened, alone...

Even the unlistening God
listens more than your own life...

In case of silence, could I cope?
The slender rod of my sense
white and pocked and feathered,
draws a triangle of fire in pure salt...

If I am still an object,
then we'll know that, won't we?

I hope then, you'll talk to me,
and I promise I'll make sense of you.

S:

It is gorgeous and sublime.

That is my input.

My other input is that the answer to the question posed in your poem is always yes—the yes of the poet's immortality.

A shift.

S:

That Spring, a group missive from Max:

M:

Bleak news, though no immediate death sentence impending. My tumors remain unchanged, despite the new chemo. My lungs have been too irradiated due to my first cancer for a second attempt. Surgery also doesn't seem to be a likely option given the sub centimeter size of my tumors, their deep enjambment in my lungs, and the slipperiness of Ewing's cells.

It's more likely that I will embark upon a clinical trial. These trials are trials because they are promising, and they are trials because they are not proven science. I will be on the periphery of medicine. Empiricists (like Dad) love the sentiment that man's reach should always exceed his grasp. My body is being fanned and fumbled by the gloved fingertips. I hope they can get a grip on me, but I can't say the odds are very good.