

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

April 27, 2007

Friday Poem

Filed under: [poetry](#) — alecsothblog @ 8:05 am

I [recently mentioned](#) the emerging *This American Life* backlash. But this is pretty gentle stuff. If you want venom, read what people have said about Garrison Keillor over the years.

One of the most entertaining rants was written in regards to Keillor's daily [Writer's Almanac](#) segments on public radio. In his essay, *No Antonin Artaud with the Flapjacks, Please*, August Kleinzahler writes:

Especially most of what Garrison Keillor reads on his *Writer's Almanac*, which, as a rule, isn't poetry at all but prose arbitrarily broken into lines masquerading as poetry. The typical Keillor selection tends to be anecdotal, wistful: more often than not a middle-aged creative writing instructor catching a whiff of mortality in the countryside—watching the geese head south, getting lost in the woods, this sort of thing.

John Ash, writing of the brilliant, fellow English poet Roy Fisher, speaks of Fisher's "rage, his refusal to be politely depressed." There is a virulent strain of the "politely depressed" in American poetry. There are other, equally obnoxious and resistant strains, but the "politely depressed" is a pertinacious little bugger, and Garrison Keillor is only helping to spread it.

Poetry not only isn't good for you, bad poetry has been shown to cause lymphomas and, in extreme instances, pancreatic cancer, in laboratory experiments. (I'll have to dig around in my notes to find exactly what study that was. . . .) I avoid Keillor's poetry moment at nine a.m. here in San Francisco as I avoid sneezing, choking, rheumy-eyed passengers on the streetcar, lest I catch something. But occasionally, while surfing for the news, I get bit and am nearly always sickened, if not terminally, for several hours.

After reading this essay, I wanted to find the poetry that Kleinzahler appreciates. Along with citing Roy Fisher above, Kleinzahler wrote an essay on Fisher in the [London Review of Books](#):

The eye darts about in Fisher's poetry. It abhors the object at rest, framing of any kind. It's like a camera, jerking and swivelling on an unstable tripod. Early and late, the poetry is about the eye in motion. The shifts may be subtle or vertiginously abrupt. It's best not to get too comfortable as you progress through a poem because you're not going to be where you think you are for long.

As a result, says Kleinzahler, "Roy Fisher's publishing history has been a mess, as it customarily is for those poets consigned to the margins who have managed to persist at their art over many years." Fisher clearly agrees. Take a look at this self deprecating poem, (I think Garrison Keillor might like it too):

Paraphrases

by Roy Fisher

for Peter Ryan

Dear Mr Fisher I am writing

a thesis on your work.

But am unable to obtain

texts. I have articles by Davie, D.,

and Mottram, E.,

But not your Books since booksellers

I have approached refuse to

take my order saying they

can no longer afford to

handle 'this type of business'. It is

too late! for me to change

my subject to the work of a more

popular writer, so please Mr Fisher

you must help me since I face the alternatives

of failing my degree or repaying

the whole of my scholarship money. . .

Dear Mr Fisher although I have been unable

to read much of your work (to get it that is)

I am a great admirer of it and your landscapes

have become so real to me I am convinced I have, in fact,

become you. I have never, however,

seen any photograph of you, and am most curious

to have an idea of your appearance,

beyond what my mirror, of course, tells me.

The cover of your Collected Poems

(reproduced in the Guardian, November 1971)

shows upwards of fifty faces; but which is yours? Are you

the little boy at the front, and if so have you
changed much since then?

Dear Mr Fisher recently while studying
selections from a modern anthology with
one of my GCE groups I came across your interestingly titled
'Starting to Make a Tree'. After the discussion I felt strongly
you were definitely holding something back in this poem
though I can't quite reach it. Are you often in Rugby?
If you are, perhaps we could meet and I could
try at least to explain. Cordially, Avis Tree. PS. Should we
arrange a rendezvous I'm afraid I wouldn't
know who to look out for as I've never unfortunately
seen your photograph. But I notice you were born in 1930
the same year as Ted Hughes. Would I be right
in expecting you to resemble him, more or less?

—Dear Ms Tree,

It's true I'm in Rugby quite often, but the train
goes through without stopping. Could you fancy standing
outside the UP Refreshment Room a few times so that
I could learn to recognize you? If you could
just get hold of my four books, and wave them,
then I'd know it was you. As for my own appearance
I suppose it inclines more to the
Philip Larkin side of Ted Hughes's looks. . .
See if you think so as I go by. . .

Dear Mr Fisher I have been commissioned
to write a short
critical book on your work
but find that although I have a full
dossier of reviews etcetera
I don't have access to your books. Libraries
over here seem just not to have bought them in.
Since the books are quite a few years old now
I imagine they'll all have been remaindered

some while back? Or worse, pulped? So can
you advise me on locating second-hand copies,
not too expensively I hope? Anyway,
yours, with apologies and respect. . .

Dear Mr Fisher I am now
so certain I am you that it is obvious to me
that the collection of poems I am currently working on
must be
your own next book! Can you let me know—
who is to publish it and exactly when
it will be appearing? I shouldn't like there to
be any trouble over contracts, 'plagiarism'
etcetera; besides which it would be a pity
to think one of us was wasting time and effort.
How far have you got? Please help me. I
do think this is urgent. . .

6 Comments

1. That poem made me laugh.

An interesting, wholly unrelated tangent:

In the lede of the Kleinzahler article he talks about using music for torture. Lately there's been discussion in the news of [Fighting Torture with Copyright](#).

Barney's *I Love You* is (thankfully) not something I often think of. Between the copyright discussion and your link to that article, I've had to ponder it twice in one week alone.

Now I have that infernal tinny melody running through my head in a loop. Grr.

I'll take Keillor over Barney any day. (And that's saying a lot considering how I feel about people talking on the radio.)

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — April 27, 2007 @ [10:48 am](#)

2. from August Kleinzahler's "Poetics":

I have loved the air outside Shop-Rite Liquor
on summer evenings
better than the Marin hills at dusk
lavender and gold
stretching miles to the sea.

There's a whole history of photography in that....

Comment by [Alan Thomas](#) — April 27, 2007 @ [11:17 pm](#)

3. Hi Alec. Just found your blog while looking if I could get my hands on Metronome 11 somewhere. (Seems it's not out yet.)

Your work is truly inspiring. Also, thank you for sharing your thoughts on a blog like this. Not many people 'up there' who would actually take the time to share anything to us 'dirty heathen cretins down here' unless we pay for it, right? Ah. I'm just bitter because I pay too much tuition at a "Fine Art" university.

Comment by [Olle Holmberg](#) — April 28, 2007 @ [11:52 am](#)

4. I just discovered your blog this evening & we seem to have much in common. We both make films, create photographs & poetry. I shall come back & explore your blog & site later... now however, I'm going to catch the last dream-time express this evening.

Comment by [Bearz](#) — April 29, 2007 @ [4:16 am](#)

5. this [little girl's](#) parents were traveling to see garrison keillor when i took this, just days ago.

sorry, it just seemed like synchronicity.

Take a look at this self deprecating poem, (I think Garrison Keillor might like it too):

i think he might like it very much. great blog alec. much enjoyment.

Comment by [charley](#) — April 29, 2007 @ [5:11 pm](#)

6. 14 June 2007

Of Fly Catchers and hidden lakes.

Of sleeping lizards and morning dew.

It is of birdsong and misty dawns

and fleeced clouds floating in a still pool.

The waters ripple awake in the gathering morn.

The first water birds head out for the far shore.

Comment by [Poetry](#) — June 15, 2007 @ [7:08 pm](#)