

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

December 15, 2006

Friday Poem

Filed under: [poetry, the sentence](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:27 am

After putting the kids to bed I considered writing an essay on the different ways photography resembles poetry. Too much work. Besides, I'd just end up whining about how both so desperately fail at storytelling. I watched TV instead. But while I brushed my teeth I remembered that I needed to come up with a [Friday Poem](#). I decided to use one of my favorites by Lynn Emanuel. While searching for the poem online I came across [an interesting interview](#) with Emanuel.

Q: Is there a question I haven't asked that you would like to be asked?

Emanuel: Yes, I'd like to be asked why I am wary of interviews.

Q: Why are you?

Emanuel: Because interviews can be used like the sentence, "This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself." Interviews can caption poetry and make poems illustrations of the facts in interviews.

Q: So why did you agree to this interview?

Emanuel: Well, I suppose I console myself with the belief that, even in an interview, a fact can be an act of invention.

It is late. I need to go to bed. I really don't have time to write an essay on photography and poetry. But if were to write it, I'd probably say that a fact can be an act of invention. I'd say that photography, like poetry, doesn't provide the pool of narrative, just the diving board. And I'd end my essay with this poem:

The Politics of Narrative: Why I Am A Poet

by Lynn Emanuel

Jill's a good kid who's had some tough luck. But that's another story. It's a day when the smell of fish from Tib's hash house is so strong you could build a garage on it. We are sitting in Izzy's where Carl has just built us a couple of solid highballs. He's okay, Carl is, if you don't count his Roamin' Hands and Rushin' Fingers. Then again, that should be the

only trouble we have in this life. Anyway, Jill says, "Why don't you tell about it? Nobody ever gets the poet's point of view." I don't know, maybe she's right. Jill's just a kid, but she's been around; she knows what's what.

So, I tell Jill, we are at Izzy's just like now when he comes in. And the first thing I notice is his hair, which has been Vitalis-ed into submission. But, honey, it won't work, and it gives him a kind of rumpled your-boudoir-or-mine look. I don't know why I noticed that before I noticed his face. Maybe it was just the highballs doing the looking. Anyway, then I see his face, and I'm telling you—I'm telling Jill—this is a masterpiece of a face.

But—and this is the god's own truth—I'm tired of beauty. Really. I know, given all that happened, this must sound kind of funny, but it made me tired just to look at him. That's how beautiful he was, and how much he spelled T-R-O-U-B-L-E. So I threw him back. I mean, I didn't say it, I say to Jill, with my mouth. But I said it with my eyes and my shoulders. I said it with my heart. I said, Honey, I'm throwing you back. And looking back, that was the worst, I mean, the worst thing—bar none—that I could have done, because it drew him like horseshit draws flies. I mean, he didn't walk over and say, "Hello, girls; hey, you with the dark hair, your indifference draws me like horseshit draws flies."

But he said it with his eyes. And then he smiled. And that smile was a gas station on a dark night. And as wearying as all the rest of it. I am many things, but dumb isn't one of them. And here is where I say to Jill, "I just can't go on." I mean, how we get from the smile into the bedroom, how it all happens, and what all happens, just bores me. I am a conceptual storyteller. In fact, I'm a conceptual liver. I prefer the cookbook to the actual meal. Feeling bores me. That's why I write poetry. In poetry you just give the instructions to the reader and say, "Reader, you go on from here." And what I like

about poetry is its readers, because those are giving people. I mean, those are people you can trust to get the job done. They pull their own weight. If I had to have someone at my back in a dark alley, I'd want it to be a poetry reader. They're not like some people, who maybe do it right if you tell them, "Put this foot down, and now put that one in front of the other, button your coat, wipe your nose."

So, really, I do it for the readers who work hard and, I feel, deserve something better than they're used to getting. I do it for the working stiff. And I write for people, like myself, who are just tired of the trickle-down theory where somebody spends pages and pages on some fat book where everything including the draperies, which happen to be burnt orange, are described, and, further, are some metaphor for something. And this whole boggy waste trickles down to the reader in the form of a little burp of feeling. God, I hate prose. I think the average reader likes ideas.

"A sentence, unlike a line, is not a station of the cross." I said this to the poet Mark Strand. I said, "I could not stand to write prose; I could not stand to have to write things like 'the draperies were burnt orange and the carpet was brown.'" And he said, "You could do it if that's all you did, if that was the beginning and the end of your novel." So please, don't ask me for a little trail of bread crumbs to get from the smile to the bedroom, and from the bedroom to the death at the end, although you can ask me a lot about death. That's all I like, the very beginning and the very end. I haven't got the stomach for the rest of it.

I don't think many people do. But, like me, they're either too afraid or too polite to say so. That's why the movies are such a disaster. Now there's a form of popular culture that doesn't have a clue. Movies should be five minutes long. You should go in, see a couple of shots, maybe a room with orange draperies and a rug. A voice-over would say, "I'm having a

hard time getting Raoul from the hotel room into the elevator." And, bang, that's the end. The lights come on, everybody walks out full of sympathy because this is a shared experience. Everybody in that theater knows how hard it is to get Raoul from the hotel room into the elevator. Everyone has had to do boring, dogged work. Everyone has lived a life that seems to inflict every vivid moment the smears, fingerings, and pawings of plot and feeling. Everyone has lived under this oppression. In other words, everyone has had to eat shit—day after day, the endless meals they didn't want, those dark, half-gelatinous lakes of gravy that lay on the plate like an ugly rug and that wrinkled clump of reddish-orange roast beef that looks like it was dropped onto your plate from a great height. God what a horror: getting Raoul into the elevator.

And that's why I write poetry. In poetry, you don't do that kind of work.

5 Comments

1. Wow, I had never heard of Lynn, but what-an-amazing poem..

Comment by [lodewijk](#) — December 15, 2006 @ [4:44 am](#)

2. Her book "Then, Suddenly" is a great place to start, lodewijk.

Comment by [MDM](#) — December 15, 2006 @ [10:19 am](#)

3. Wow, me too (neither)! I think I've finally understood something, though I'm not sure what, yet. Thanks for these Friday Poems.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — December 15, 2006 @ [12:18 pm](#)

4. I actually started to write a long thing in response to this post but I am very, very tired right now. It's past 10 o'clock! PM! That's bedtime!
Anyway, I am making a list instead of a well crafted response.

1. That's the fucking problem with a blog...the desire to communicate thoughts and opinions with a casual, conversational summary sometimes requires writing an actual essay, and who the hell has the time for that? I find myself watching a lot of TV instead of writing and I'm not kidding. Seriously, "Formal Analysis" or "General Hospital?" The answer is obvious.

2. Yes, Alec, you are completely on point in drawing a comparison between photography and poetry. I often think of photography in terms of poetic forms: an idea that's restricted to a form that both restrains and creates the image. ok, I do have a lot more to say about this and I am kind of sound asleep

BUT I just have to say I was going to try to write something all witty about a villanelle and then end it with "I'm going gentle in this, good night" but I'm not that together to rock a good play on words. I know it could have been good!

3. I love Alec Soth.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — December 16, 2006 @ [10:06 pm](#)

5. Poetry and photography both revel in the failure to be entirely understood in order to say something very specific through the use of ambiguity. They are analogs of each other, but they do not replace each other. Instead they share this yin & yang of specificity & ambiguity. I am thinking of the photo of yours of the man standing outside of a small house holding an airplane and wearing a cap with ear flaps – I feel like I totally know who he is – and yet, who is he? Good poetry and good photographs shimmer like that – familiarity and stranger-ness. The challenge would be to create a book of poetry and photography in which the poetry did not explain the photographs, nor did the photographs illustrate the poems. Instead, each functioned on an equal level – as analogs – one page to the next.

Comment by [Jorn Ake](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [12:06 am](#)

