

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

August 31, 2007

Friday Poem

Filed under: poetry — alecsothblog @ 12:12 am

In A Motel Parking Lot, Thinking Of Dr. Williams

By Wendell Berry

I.

The poem is important, but
not more than the people
whose survival it serves,

one of the necessities, so they may
speak what is true, and have
the patience for beauty: the weighted

grainfield, the shady street,
the well-laid stone and the changing tree
whose branches spread above.

For want of songs and stories
they have dug away the soil,
paved over what is left,

set up their perfunctory walls
in tribute to no god,
for the love of no man or woman,

so that the good that was here
cannot be called back
except by long waiting, by great

sorrows remembered and to come
by invoking the thunderstones
of the world, and the vivid air.

II.

The poem is important,
as the want of it
proves. It is the stewardship

of its own possibility,
the past remembering itself
in the presence of

the present, the power learned
and handed down to see
what is present

and what is not: the pavement
laid down and walked over
regardlessly—by exiles, here

only because they are passing.
Oh, remember the oaks that were
here, the leaves, purple and brown,

falling, the nuthatches walking
headfirst down the trunks,
crying “onc! onc!” in the brightness

as they are doing now
in the cemetery across the street
where the past and the dead

keep each other. To remember,
to hear and remember, is to stop
and walk on again

to a livelier, surer measure.

It is dangerous

to remember the past only

for its own sake, dangerous

to deliver a message

you did not get.

6 Comments

1. These Friday poems have become a highlight of my week — many thanks. Your taste in elegiac, elliptical, slightly formal poetry (the words “brooding, complex and reclusive” spring to mind) is a fascinating sidelight on your photographic work.

Poetry readers are an endangered species — if only 1 in 100 readers of this blog engage with one poem a week, you may have done more than you realise to pass on “the power learned and handed down to see what is present and what is not” (there might be a definition of photography lurking in there, too). All this, and sandwich jumping, too!

Comment by Mike C. — August 31, 2007 @ 3:26 am

2. Dr. Williams, would agree with Mr. Berry and with us on the importance of lifting poems up. He famously said:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

It may have been discussed here before but Dr. Williams would have loved the “soth-blog” blending of pictures and poems . See this article for more –

<http://www.bostonreview.net/BR04.6/costello.html>

“Williams thought about the creative process in painters’ terms, and he asks us to experience the work as we might experience a modern painting: “There is no subject; it’s what you put on the canvas and how you put it on that makes the difference. Poems aren’t made of thoughts — they’re made of words, pigments put on ... (The comment was addressed to a Harvard audience in 1951; he undoubtedly thought the group needed deprogramming.) Williams disliked the secondary intensity of language used as a symbol system. Modern painting was unmediated, sensuous. His great achievement was to bring some of its qualities into poetry. In an interview with Walter Sutton, Williams said explicitly “I’ve attempted to fuse the poetry and painting. to make it the same thing.”

Comment by William Boling — August 31, 2007 @ 8:33 am

3. Hello Mr. Soth,
As you have probably already seen, there is a discussion on the Magnum blog about the emotionless portraits of fine art photography, that is subjects with no facial expressions, no smiles. As you seem to be part of this group, I was wondering what is your position on this matter? Why nobody smiles in Art photography?
Thank you
(please excuse my english)

Comment by Martin B. — August 31, 2007 @ 8:39 am

4. Have you ever photographed with a poem in mind? Considering that photography can be a poem itself, can you suggest a written poetry with images? Which poem or author would you like to photograph? (sorry for so many disturbing questions... I couldn’t avoid). I myself would like to make something with Seamus Heaney’s “Death of a naturalist”.

Comment by Rodrigo — August 31, 2007 @ 2:38 pm

5. Alec, thank you for poems shared, connections made and questions asked.
Happy Anniversary to your blog!
I enjoy returning and don't take it for granted.

Comment by christoph — September 3, 2007 @ 5:51 am

6. Thanks so much for the enthusiastic feedback. It means a great deal. And Christoph, thanks for noticing the anniversary.

Rodrigo, I have photographed with a poem in mind once. Long story. I'll share the image when I get a chance.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 3, 2007 @ 10:22 pm