

A Poet's Voice

Henry Beissel

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Author's Statement Poetry invites us to the joy of living by making us know and celebrate the uniqueness, fragility and evanescence of life. Thus poetry reconciles us to the tragic flaw in all conscious existence. It can take us to the edge of knowing and point beyond itself into the mystery that surrounds us.

Today, when commercialization is poisoning the space in which the arts can flourish, poetry also has a political function: to be the conscience of our tribe by bearing witness in truth to the corruption of civil society and challenging our humanity to come into its own.

Country of Origin

Open a map of Germany and locate the city of Cologne. Who could've known that a bend in the river would become the colonial capital of Rome's northern empire, acquire a cardinal's hat and privileges, hatch from a clutch of churches a cathedral to challenge heaven, then flourish for a time as a port commanding one of Europe's major shipping lanes before the iron horse and the mechanical bird, before fossil-fed monsters heated up the ancient games of greed and power the few have always played with the many, staking nations on a dare, banking on turning strangers into scapegoats, whipping generations into orgies of hatred and violence till the whole continent caught fire and twice in a single century even the honorable succumbed to the poison of patriotism. Deluded by drill and discipline they followed the false lead of flags and marching bands herding the sheep heroically to their slaughter and leaving Cologne ingloriously in ruins – bombed into heaps of brick scrap metal craters shells of homes broken doors unhinged wall paper peeling across smashed tables cracked kitchen sinks Dürer's *Hands* crushed askew behind shattered glass collapsed floors a toilet bowl open-mouthed as though petrified at the height of a primal scream: ashes ashes everywhere: the city 32 million cubic meters of rubble where 262 air raids buried 20,000 dead – and somewhere in among the debris the bruised and battered dreams of a child turned into a nightmare.

Massacre of children and their mothers, of the sick and the old, civilians mutilated to demoralize the troops, dismembered, incinerated in numbers ten times the days so far recorded in my life. In the acrid incense of burning flesh a pathetic God choked to death in his vomit, his blessings cut to ribbons, his faith in rags of disbelief as flames danced on the river whose dark waters flowed silently under bridges linking firestorms.

To have survived this inferno is no more miraculous than to have been born into it. The luck of a throw of fate's dice assigns to each of us a country of origin, the luck of countless draws between male and female lined up all the way back into precambrian mists. It's not always the fastest and most forceful sperm that enters the egg; sometimes the dreamy-eyed latecomer is admitted and the strongest shut out. It seems that cells that have no mind have a mind and meaning of their own. Every birth refutes the law of probability by the caprice of conception and survival. None of us should have come into being in the first place, none could have been predicted. Nor would I have chosen of all times and places the time and place there and then. But you don't negotiate chaos. In the casino of life too the odds are stacked against you. To escape flying bullets or bombs warrants no pride and no merit: you can't dodge them; you wait and when you hear them, you're safe. Their whistle lets you know they've missed you. Only silent shrieks kill, shrieks for the lucky to hear.

I was not always so lucky in my dreams. There they assaulted me for decades and woke me in fear and panic for without a sound they found their target. I died a thousand deaths and lived to see another dawn when the sun slapped my face back into affirmation. Slowly the years grounded the Lancasters and Flying Fortresses. An uneasy armistice came to prevail in the land of my dreams after I moved to a world where war was hearsay.

Here vast solitudes are invaded only by the wind and the dark skies flash only with dying comets and the ghostly dances of northern lights. Night now brings forgetting, offers coveted oblivion. The bloodthirsty beasts of war swoop down on me in broad daylight instead. They bear different names: Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Rwanda, Afghanistan and Gaza, each of them recalling reenacting reviving the surreal scenes I witnessed in those years of terror and tyranny so bone-chillingly beyond belief and bearance I can no longer be sure what fevered fear projects on the walls of memory and what I experienced, what panic stampedes into images and what I saw turn ten thousand childhoods into one long nightmare.

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Find the Mot Juste

In the sultry gloom of a summer's night
fireflies flick their lights on and off
like children discovering electricity.
Stars veil their distances by signalling
their presence long after they've moved on.
By the pond a solitary bullfrog throbs
unctuously like a baritone practising a bark.
Suddenly in a flash the children and the fireflies,
The bullfrog and the baritone fuse with the stars
And flood you with a feeling of affiliation –
or is it wholeness, harmony in alienation?
You search for the word to define the moment
till you find the *mot juste*
does not exist.

The robin's sprightly ululations wake you.
Through the open window you inhale the scent
of combative greens and cut-throat flowers in the grass.
A multitude of hands reach from the maple tree
for the limits of the sky. Your mind comes to rest
on a cloudbank propped against the horizon.
You try to store all that against a wintry day,
trying to name the singularity of the instant
in which the robin rose from your dreams
and a daisy opens one eye to an uncertain future.
By the flicker in the tree and the scent you knew
that you knew something you cannot know
because you find the *mot juste*
does not exist.

The dark taste of coffee drifts across
a conversation about the weather. You register
the egg stain on the table cloth as the radio reports
floods have triggered a famine for 20 million people
in Bangladesh. Something in your partner's
knitted brow curtains a memory provoked
by a shaft of sunlight falling across the open mouth
of the sugar bowl. You hear a coloratura soprano
project her highest pitch beyond any narrative
to become the focal point of all that is
there now and forever in that piercing note
for which the *mot juste*
does not exist.

But you can find a just word
for the famine that entered your kitchen
between the tongue-twisting grapefruit
and the bacon-and-eggs over easy.
It must be a tough word because half the world's
people live each day on less than the popsicle
your child sucks between meals. Their children
are chained to sewing-machines and what they suck
is the gross indecency of our assets. You don't need
imagination to see beyond your tourist guide
or look under your luxuriously appointed dinner
table and observe the skeletal dog to know
that for all this the *mot juste*
does indeed exist –
find it or it'll choke you.

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