The Value of Celebrating Poetic Voice in Middle Age

Description

The AutoEthnographer

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Authorâ??s Memo

I woke up at 1am last Saturday from a deep sleep, my chest burning, probably from anxiety and the rich food I had at dinnerâ??meds be damnedâ??but my mind was also on fire. There was this pull to wake up and listen to the poetic voice that was muttering to me in feverish tones, even though Iâ??ve been on sabbatical all semester, so the usual work stress was not present. I was tired and sleeping hard and wanted to ignore the early morning interruption.

I tried to meditate myself back to sleep by visualizing a scene from a trail in the Smokey Mountains; one with a chattering stream, sunlight dappling between the Oak and Pine trees, my feet planted in mountain dirt, and a hazy sense of bliss. This did not make my limbs feel heavy or ready to release tension as it usually does.

In that space between deep sleep and alertness, I was ruminating on voice and poetry and could not make the furious thoughts stop. I knew I should get up and write down what was streaming inside my mind, but I wanted to sleep. Surely, I would remember things in the morning. (Of course, I never remember the phrasing of night thoughts or lines of poetry in the morning).

â??Here it is NaPoMo, Iâ??m executive poetry editor at The AutoEthnographer tasked with championing poetry, and I was not writing. As if that wasnâ??t enough, I was supposed to be writing a feature on voice in poetry, and I was mute.

I counted backwards from 9, 999. Around 8000, I stumbled around in the dark for something to write on and found the paper calendar that I had bought at the beginning of the year but had not used. I was spurred on by thinking about a presentation I was to give on everyday creativity and the connection to creative research methods in a few days. And I had not begun to put together my non-existent thoughts, and here was my mind writing the presentation in my sleep.

I also considered the fact that April is National Poetry Month, and I had not written a single poem. And the embarrassing truth is that I had not written a poem this year. Here it is NaPoMo, Iâ??m executive poetry editor at *The AutoEthnographer* tasked with championing poetry, and I was not writing. As if that wasnâ??t enough, I was supposed to be writing a feature on voice in poetry, and I was mute.

So, I scribbled a few pages of what was going on in my mind. In the dark. I didnâ??t want to turn a light on and wake up fully. After a page, I put the calendar down and tried to sleep.

No luck. Words and phrases were still ramming into my conscious mind demanding an audience. I reached beside the bed for the calendar and wrote some more.

This cycle occurred a few more times before I could make the voice stop and go to sleep.

â??I wrote three poems. They may be mediocre. They may be decent. But the fact is that this was a way for me to think about poetic voice, how my ideas of voice and how to achieve these ideals are changing/clawing/charging the way through middle age.â?•

Two days after, I opened the calendar afraid that the thoughts that had seemed urgent, important, and possibly insightful, would be illegible or worse, mediocre. I sat in a coffee shop on the boardwalk in Ocean City, NJ watching the wind rustle grass in the sand dunes and whip up waves. The scenery stirred that poetic voice I had missed, the one that woke me up from a deep sleep and demanded I pay attention. I wrote three poems. They may be mediocre. They may be decent. But the fact is that this was a way for me to think about poetic voice, how my ideas of voice and how to achieve these ideals are changing/clawing/charging the way through middle age.

The reason I shared this story is that it is all about voice (and a reminder that you should always have a pen and paper by the bed). We often tell students to write what they know. This advice is meant to help them find their voice, to find a way into story and to trust that what they say is worthwhile. The problem for me lately is that Iâ??m not sure that poetic voice is a static thing that one finds. Iâ??m not sure

nurturing voice like it is a needy newborn is the right metaphor, either. I spent my 30s trying to find a poetic voice that was not like the stale academic one I had learned in graduate school and one that was not like the earnest, fragile, and raw one from my 20s (Faulkner, 2020). And I spent my 40s polishing that voice with poems in form, poems that functioned as poetry and as research (Faulkner, 2021), and poems that incorporated images and visual art forms to push what language can do and reach beyond the page (see https://theautoethnographer.com/collage-and-erasure-poems-baby/).

â??I see the emergence of a different voice, one that is not polished but one that is also not earnest in the way that new voices can be. It seems that perhaps poetic voice can be fractured, multiple, and singular all at the same time. Voice is multiple and engaging, angry and funny, intuitive and rational.

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Now in my early 50s, I am thinking about poetry and voice deeply. Sure, the poems that I wrote in the coffee shop in New Jersey are based on what I know, but they are also a reaching for something more, something just beyond the horizon. I see the emergence of a different voice, one that is not polished but one that is also not earnest in the way that new voices can be. It seems that perhaps poetic voice can be fractured, multiple, and singular all at the same time. Perhaps voice is something that furiously wakes you up at 1 am. It is also the whisper of something you once knew, forgot, and is fluttering back to you. Voice is multiple and engaging, angry and funny, intuitive and rational.

I offer the following five poems to you. I hope that when you read/hear them you see a way into your own stories and ideas of poetic voice.

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Photo of woman singing by Alexandr for Pixabay

On the precipice of their 50th birthday, the overachiever realizes itâ??s too late to fuck up

to drop the biscuit

and take up with someone 20 years younger

smoke in the tub smoke during dinner smoke in bed

make salad with the carrots of so many obligations

quieten the domestic din with a solo ride

wherever the hell they want

no whining or neat packaged snacks allowed

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and

quit the gym forgo the extra helping of greens

throw out the map of knowing

torch the considered plans with the lighter

they stole from the corner convenience store

in a town theyâ??ve never been

and also

forget to pick up the kids from school

ignore the pleas for every piece of themselves

skip the team training to get too drunk

the liquor burn the slur of memory

then

hit on the hot dean

punch the colleague who asked them to make coffee

in a professional meeting piss on the pretention and preening

teach students off the record

blow up the learning objectives withered assessments

with youthful verve the smirk of a smart aleck

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because

they canâ??t tell that younger self the fracture

of their personas the rejections of face

will soften and mold to their frame

like lying in some unreturnable overpriced bed

The overachiever surveys their wall of trophies and wonders whatâ??s the point

When their yule log cake unrolls on the serving platter

like it gave up carbs

and still canâ??t do ten decent sit-ups

When their 13-year-old canâ??t hear them over the screech

of pop culture the YouTube videos

the mediocrity of the mundane more interesting

than a middle-aged woman with their *signature contributions*

When they read that being healthy at 50

means 23 more years of good working and only 8 years of disability

they speculate they have 21 more years of being brainy

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before they become too old crumble like a desperate academic

into the rubble of discarded templates outmoded theories worn-out syllabi

their tread one drive away from a blow-out

When they canâ??t numb the self cut off years by drinking all the alcohol

Mimosas at sunrise bottles of pinot noir at noon Manhattans every day at 4

because they know too much refuse to be sober curious

because there is no award for their *crystalized intelligence* their *social cognition*

improving their self fitting in not stirring it up using the model

being the prototype of aging well

During National Poetry Month, the overachiever chokes

and canâ??t write a single line

no poems about parents that donâ??t understand youth and rage

feelings strung so tight they shoot from the mouth like a rubber band

ricochet back find all the soft spots the bristly edges

their parentsâ?? concerns are too far away memories of their other life

the time before children more present than what they had for breakfast

and

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no poems about motherhood because their teen needs privacy

no writing about the low thrum of fear in the school drop-off line

not just the cars that swerve out of order parents too precious to wait their turn

but the sickness in a country where kids are like clay pigeons

shot up for target practice the price for Americaâ??s masculinity problem

and

no poems about writerâ??s block or middle-aged insomnia

wanting to sleep needing to wake up having to sandwich

between work and home parents and kid love and obligation

the little pieces of them strewn through time and place impossible to describe

the feel of life as numb as the space before and after this present middle

because

When the overachiever tries to write about middle age, they realize that no one cares

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When they wake up at 1am burning with poetic thoughts, the overachiever realizes that they are a clichÃ©

they are not crushing middle age

or any other violent metaphor no making 50 the new 30

tackling the day with a girlish stride meditating away the hot flashes of youth

though they use a treadmill desk balance on one foot while brushing their teeth

walk their dogs three times a day floss like a boss and always wear a helmet

the tweaks of their middle age maladies are boring staid (yawn)

the horizon of old age no longer endless like the ocean view

but more like a human-made hill by the hospital in a flat town

the hip coffee shop playing dance music from their 20s

where the kids wear the recycled fashion from back when they were cute

too many years ago to remember the feel of the beats

their voice singing along the angst the earnest feel of emotion

so now waking up at after midnight with chest burning raw terror

thinking thoughts so large they refuse to stop

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this must be poetry angsty proof that their still relevant

but most likely this is the sting of anxiety the revenge of heart burn

the reflux of work that no meds can fix

past anxieties and future anxieties of being enough

Credits

The poem, *On the precipice of their 50th birthday, the overachiever realizes itâ??s too late to fuck up*, first appeared in Heroin Chic.

Faulkner, S. L. (2021). Buttered Nostalgia: Feeding My Parents during #COVID19. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *38*(6), 1877-1900. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02654075211012478

Faulkner, S. L. (2020). *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method, and Practice, 2nd ed*. Routledge.

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