

Heroes

An Editor's Note

Giles Corey lived in Salem Village in the late 17th century, but what matters here is his ongoing life in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. In 1692, Corey stood accused of having served bread and wine at a witch's sacrament; and, for legal and moral reasons, he refused to accept the charges or stand trial. Since my first reading of the play, in college, one moment has remained emblematic of what personal conviction looks like: Great stones were laid on his chest, Miller writes, until Corey would plead aye or nay. "They say he give them but two words," reports a girl in the play: "More weight."

I would like to have met Giles Corey, but no more so than Arthur Miller, himself. Now, on the occasion of Miller's death, Feb. 11, 2005, having missed my chance, I continue to believe that showing up in person to meet the masters, the great people, even briefly, uplifts us. Recently, I heard that a writer whose short stories I admire was doing an interview at a local radio station. I won't drop the name but will say this: When he stepped out of the studio, I was there. "I just want to shake your hand," I said. It occurs to me that I was alive when Hemingway was alive, but I was too young and witless to go shake his hand. The same goes for Picasso, Martha Gellhorn, Langston Hughes, Henry Miller. Each has presented moments in art that have shaped me and helped shape the world.

Arthur Miller would have been harder to meet than most, no matter how great, if only because his four-year marriage to Marilyn Monroe—herself alive when I was alive—gave him status more like a prince, or, in this land, a president. The question is, can a momentary encounter, a dinner, a drive to the airport, a drink, really amount to anything profound, as we might imagine a touch on the cheek by Christ, the Buddha, or, in our own time, a Wangari Maathai? Let's say it affects us to the degree the person's work affects us. Sitting at a dinner table with the poet of "The Amen Stone," Yehuda Amichai, for example, helped even me understand the startling fact that spiritual transcendence can come from us human beings.

I am told that in person heroes can be disappointing. The observation has become predictable, hackneyed, always cynical. Sure, they hit on our women, drink too much, or just want to be left alone. What goes unsaid is that such disappointments serve our spiritual purposes, as well. My own friend and mentor for many years, David Ray, has written of when he, as a young poet, approached the great Robert Frost to have a book signed. "I don't sign paperbacks," said Frost. That story gives me hope that any of us might overcome our own pretensions, as Frost surely did long enough to write "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

I once arranged for the current Hall of Famer George Brett to record a 30-second radio "promo" for *New Letters on the Air*, and in preparation developed a grand dream for myself, that Brett and I would strike up a friendship, go fishing together, hang out. That was 1980, and Brett was hitting at the time over .400; bumper stickers proposed "George Brett for President"—though that November, Ronald Reagan took the crown. I found Brett in the Royals' locker room before a game, sitting back, reading a book. He had not been notified of our arrangement or of my dreams, and I barely convinced him to proceed with the recording. "Okay, let's go into the laundry room where it's quiet," he said. Then, quickly, albeit grudgingly, he began to

read the script I had prepared: “This is George Brett. Whenever I or my teammates on the Kansas City Royals want to listen to great poetry, we tune in . . .” He read my odd, outrageously condescending script in one take, smoothly, without flinching, which I never have ceased to admire. I had thrown him a curve, and he went down and got it.

In the course of my job, I have had the honor of visiting at least briefly with the likes of Mona Van Duyn, Etheridge Knight, Gwendolyn Brooks, Donald Justice, Stanley Elkin, all of them—mostly gracious, at times testy or challenging—were sanctified by their humanity. Years after that earlier meeting, David Ray wrote a poem of thanks to Robert Frost that includes these lines: “Hope for the past, / yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage.” Being in the presence of people such as Frost, or David Ray, himself, offers a connection to each person who has leapt what B.H. Fairchild describes in one poem as “the vast gap between talent and genius.” Fairchild means, between the ordinary and the transcendent.

Here, in this issue of *New Letters*, you will experience the work of just such writers, your neighbors, your friends, people who could jostle beside you on a subway or bus. In the winners of our Literary Awards and other writers here, established and newer, we see people fully engaged in acts of courage, even heroism, taking what’s laid on them and responding with the literary equivalent of Giles Corey’s defiant, “more weight,” that is, with this new work.

—Robert Stewart