The Disinterested Search for Truth

An Editor's Note

"*Life is a gift. Love is life*" observes a preacher's sign in a poem by Allison Eir Jenks, called "The Lord is Easy to Please." The Jenks poem admirably resists pointing out that the sign is an example of wishful thinking, which doesn't make the sentiment untrue but merely empty of spiritual value. The paradox of poetry and fiction, of creativity itself, is its intellectual nakedness. If I, as editor, have done my job well, you, the reader, will be spared the disease of wishful thinking. The Chinese philosopher Mencius could have been reading such a sign when he wrote, "I hate glibness, for it will be mistaken for righteousness."

Essayist Floyd Skloot in this issue exposes his and his wife's experience in Paris, and says, "We might not miss it, we agreed, but we'd remember it." Skloot's ability to look at the Paris trip directly, for what it was, not for what he wished it were, is a small example of a great virtue—what I propose as disinterestedness. Disinterested writing goes fearlessly toward direct apprehension of the elements, presenting details to people whose assent will not automatically be given.

My early training as a poet came partly from a group of friends close to my age, mid 20s to early 30s, and many of them now, after years, have become true playwrights, novelists, poets, computer technicians, lawyers, and entrepreneurs. Some are dead. We had a kind of fervor to us that demanded blunt, direct, often, in retrospect, embarrassing statements of what is.

When Muriel Rukeyser wrote in a poem, "No more mythologies," we took that to mean, Nothing that isn't true, and anything that is. Bodily functions, personal relationships, named names—all material for poems and discussions in front-porch workshops.

"When the mind knows its inner-most ideas will be exposed to nonprofessional outsiders," write Carol Bly and Cynthia Loveland, in a new book called *Against Workshopping Manuscripts*, "the mind will screen back its keenest ideas in order to avoid contumely." Our group—among them, Higgins, Field, MacLean, Sandler, Wagner, Mbembe—while hardly professional, then, was of a mind: We cultivated directness. If I can say anything about us, we did not cultivate what Bly and Loveland describe as "fear of one's peers."

Ask Jenks' preacher to read Adrian C. Louis' poem "Note to a Pine Ridge Girl Who Can No Longer Read." Life might be a gift, but it also can be dirtied adult diapers, and the wife's two fingers that had to be cut off, and the speaker's confession, *God forgive me for okaying that*. We can dispense with the phrase "Love is life" because Louis' poem shows us what love actually looks like.

In "The Lord is Easy to Please," Jenks places herself in the netherworld between the ideological purity of churchgoers and her speaker's alcoholic mother. The common appraisal tells us that poets must live in such an in-between place—outside both formal group prescriptions and self-absorption. Artists, themselves, might not always achieve that place, but the closer truth is this: That is where art, itself, must live.

William Stafford's great poem "Upon Being Called Simple by a Critic" lives in that netherworld, which is neither of self-justification nor of retribution for the critic's contumely. The poem appears to be about plums—"I wanted the plums, but I waited," it begins. Stafford thanks the critic for his or her honesty. The poet simplifies his life. He lets the plums be plums. He practices humility with a joke on himself—opening the fridge, he says, "Sure enough the light was on." In the end, he is saved by his directness: "I reached in and got the plums."

Of course, the plums embody his art, as they allude, also, to the larger world of modern poetry; what I want to say, however, is this: Stafford uses the poem to examine his life, not to defend it.

Being disinterested means more than going without fear; it means going where the material goes, whether to Paris or, as in another essay here, to Sumatra. Glibness celebrates easy conclusions; disinterested writing celebrates the search. "The satisfaction of the hunger," scholar Helen White has written, "the final justification of experience, is to be found in the experience itself. . . . The contemplation of the object and not its conquest or use toward some other end, that is the purpose." Creative-writing workshops, Bly and Loveland tell us, often train young writers to write for audience—the workshop, in their case—which means to write for automatic assent.

The larger culture remains suspicious toward art because art succeeds only to the degree that it abandons self-interest and wishful thinking—the two qualities that drive our general, cultural discourse. Fiction and poetry, in modern times, at least, tend to be diagnostic and not therapeutic, as former *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham has described literary writing. The writing in this magazine, too, wants to examine a dilemma rather than solve it.

For such examination and, I venture, for understanding, we go to literature more and more—as I went to David Madden's "A Cry of Ice," for its comprehensiveness, for its shivering, naked, out-in-the-cold-of-winter searching. Try another magazine, if you must have a villain. If you think the speaker in the poem by Allison Eir Jenks sits, figuratively, between churchgoers and her alcoholic mother because she rejects them, you are wrong. She is not uninterested. She is disinterested. She loves them both.

—Robert Stewart