

The Poet Within; of, Leading with your Fingers

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Summary

- The in-house counsel is to the organisation what the poet is to society: the seer and the witness. (Both guide the moral imagination—of society, of the organisation.)
- Poets write difficult truths so beautifully no one feels able to turn away. Counsel must speak difficult truths, too—and they could learn a thing or two about that from poetry.
- Good poetry, like all art, marries freedom and discipline. So, too, the art of in-house counsel.
- The in-house counsel serves their organisation best
 - by standing outside it (or perhaps deeply inside it) and questioning conventional wisdoms
 - and by thinking and writing with compelling clarity.
- There's no need to deliver your advice in haiku or iambic pentameter, but with just a little more attention to the music of fine writing, you can engage more than just the mind or your readers—and for more than just a moment.

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**“We work in the dark, we do what we can, we give what we have; our doubt is our passion, our passion is our task—and the rest is the madness of art”
(Henry James)**

“For poetry makes nothing happen; it survives/ in the valley of its own making, where executives/ would never want to tamper” (W H Auden)

“All good things come by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy” (Norman Maclean)

“Be generous with the truth and economical with how you tell it” (Mark Tredinnick)

“I have risked my life for my work, and it has cost me half my reason” (Vincent Van Gogh)

“Poetry allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living” (Mark Strand)

The Economics of Spring

I

Midnight is a parliament of frogs. The ground vibrates with their shrill contentions, the various factions of their self-belief, and my breath smokes the black air, inventing galaxies

that spread and atrophy

before I can breathe them back again. The night smells like any one of a dozen childhood camps, in which the present has pitched her tent.

II

The trick is to fall asleep beside your sons at eight and sleep them to sleep till ten and wake and stalk the sleeping house till twelve.

These are the hours the rest of your life

spins around and nothing is impossible

and nothing has to happen. And in the morning the news

I have reached the shed reaches me as I reach the shed, and it all starts over.

III

By noon, the sun is in recession and the future is in cloud and the day is cold in its boots. The wind comes off the road bringing news of every passing car. So the fallen world goes.

One's work in it, a purgation.

A steep and necessary climb under friendly fire. The price one pays

for loving too well the imperfect world is the imperfection of the world.

IV

Trees, those ossified spirits, quicken in a rising wind. They circle me,
pleading their silent cases when I leave the shed to pee.

Winter loosens the world's grip on itself;

it stands our slender inner lives

out in the weather. The black cat, who's wandered into our care like a saint
into retirement, climbs two arthritic steps ahead of me and falls into the blue

V

Chair. White-cheeked rosellas bright as drag queens in the morning rain,
the easterly air and the daffodils the children planted, pushing up out of winter,
and the wood-ducks on the river:

this is how it always went. In the beginning
was the world. And in the end. The words came in the middle. The world
gave them to us with no particular end in mind. And what shall one give

VI

In return? I sit here writing poems like cheques, wondering
if they'll bounce, when the phone rings, and I drop my best pen,
nib down, and it doesn't.

As oracles go, that's blunt. We're speculators,
my friend the painter tells me; we back what's in our heads;
we float our souls in a deregulated market, helpless as lovers,

hopeless as drunks.

VII

I sit in the ebb of winter writing fifty-dollar poems at a thousand-dollar desk:
the story of one's life. My desk is made of railway sleepers
which I sit here, morning on morning,

trying to wake. This is no way to prosper,

but that's not what it's for. I'm doing what the ironbarks did
before they felled them; I'm doing what the fettlers did after that.

VIII

You do what you must. The work at hand. You stand; you fall; you give
 beneath the profane rhythm that travels you daily, in which you are told,
 but only obscurely why. As I walk

to my shed and hear the cows across the river,

I think I'd rather be going down to work as hard to do and as easy
 to define as men once did down here. But I stop wanting that at the door.

IX

Tim from downriver came to the river when the bottom fell out of the valley.
 I didn't want to keep doing, he told me, for twenty-seven cents a gallon
 what had been hard enough at fifty.

And now his neighbour's spoiling the river

to carry a road to his new subdivision in what Tim had mistaken
 for his view. Landscape—another deregulated market.

X

When I say to Tim, conversing, as neighbours do at dusk by a river,
 Same thing happened to poetry long ago, he laughs at whatever he thinks I mean
 and shows me the ruins

of the old bridge where the cattle used to traffic

between the now doomed paddocks of the middle distance and my shed.

The future's going the same way the past went. Only sooner.

XI

I was born empty, and each morning I wake empty again.

Who you are is where you've slept and whom you've slept there with.

This morning, then, I am three children

and the Osage Orange at the door;

I am the ice on the windshield and the summit of world leaders come to nothing
 up the road. In flood by nine, I walk to the shed to empty myself making phrases.

XII

And it's one kind of sin to stay indoors today, spring coiled in the morning's bed,
parrots limning the ends of winter. It's another kind to leave one's work undone.
No way out, no way back,

I throw wide the shed's door and compromise.

The outside walks on in; the inside out. My deaf and dilapidated muse sleeps on
in the reading chair, like one of the saved. White blossoms open on my fingertips.

Insolvency

Five children and three or four expensive habits—one
of them a life, the rest of them the ways one finds
to fill it—and you, my love: all this I pay for with poetry

And hope. I'm leading my life backwards, the way one
ought, the way the sages did, anyway, those holy fools
on Cold Mountain—losing first one's station and then

One's way, and slowly all one's shallow-rooted certainties,
all faith in meagre virtues. And at last, the way back home.
I was a lawyer, once, then a businessman. Now I practise

Poverty, emptiness; I cast out lines to catch the world, while
up the hill my family gets on with what families get on with.
Do I bankrupt my household, then, or starve my soul? How

Do I live my life beside those I love, without losing *it*—
and without losing *them*? Until I find a better question, I'm
gonna keep working away at the econometrics of grace.

From "Eclogues" (Mark Tredinnick)

But, listen: no one reads poems to learn how to vote. Verse can't change
the future's mind. You write it like rain;

you enter it like nightfall.

It isn't for anything; a poem is country,
and it needs you to keep walking it, and I walk out into it now, carrying my friend
and smelling the paddock wind and feeling the rain cold on my face.