

## A Letter to Pratt in Praise of Books

Dear Darrin,

I am writing in the evening light; the river birds have begun the last of their singing, sweet whistles, and rapid staccatos that are their language. I imagine they are asking one another for the very same things we might ask for, a lasting grace that is more than just their flight.

Antonito blooms in the cradle of three rivers, all of which give their names and their water to the Rio Grande west of town. A gorge of andesite rock, scored with petroglyphs, directs the river south through a rift that split the llano in two at the earth's forming. The petroglyphs mark the passing of ancient civilizations; their crude renderings on the black stone are a lasting proof, a carved longing etched for us to interpret. Thermals rise from the gorge, and the river noise and the raptors make upon them a calligraphy of sound and flight that is like words at their genesis.

Further to the west, there is a storm tethered to the San Juans; the bruised sky does not descend east into the canyon cut by the Conejos and lined with cottonwoods. Today, for the first time in weeks, the river has green at her watery edges, the peak of runoff fading. The river is my home; it is what I return to, always my north and brightest star. It is the river that keeps my memories, each bend its own story. For all I know, it is this river of water and stone that is my soul. My friend Cristobal once fished here. This river does not belong to him, he of the fierce face, so angry or so afraid or so brave. This is the river where I saw him last, before the .22 slug to his right temple. The river has made it so that the final memories of many things and many ghosts can be washed clean, wet as water on stone, touched by every current; the river becomes this mirror that is both truth and the shimmer of the half remembered; slow, flat water, which heals and forgives. The river is what I try to save. I believe the river is better than all of us; it knows how we love, and it urges the broken parts of us healed, and that is why I am writing this letter; I believe books, language, and the perfect word hold that same power.

Sometimes it is easy to lose sight of what we are meant to do, what we are meant to change in the world. Are we meant to find the good stories, the most perfect word, to find the music of a line or sentence? We are seekers, and that is what we were made to do, to follow the rivers of our youth; linger at the deep pools of joy, pain, and regret; cast our hope to the answers beneath the water's mirror, that reversal of aspect that

allows us to see inside ourselves. We broker in what we see on a daily basis and also that which we imagine. We fuse the two constantly, alchemists that work at new meaning, new vision, new understanding. We must see differently; it is, perhaps, the only requirement of the job. Eliot called it prelogical thinking, and he claimed it was only available to and through poets. Shelley called the poet the hierophant of sacred mysteries, and Stevens, when speaking of the great blue and purple tabulae, said it “spoke the feeling for them, which is what they had lacked.” We must see reflected, there in the word, that which everyone else sees as human and tangible and then imagine it as sacrosanct and beautiful, no matter how ordinary, ugly, or foreign it may seem.

Do you believe, as I do, that we are here to save language and therefore the power of the written word? Yehuda Amichai described our modern voice as a “weary language, . . . a language that once described miracles and God.” That is why the books you publish are so important, so necessary—good books, long labors of words and thoughts that seek the sacred peace of a well-written line. It was books that saved me.

I come from a place where leaving has always been equated with success. Leaving is difficult at times; the ways out are marked with the glowing road signs of those that tried and failed. The fields at the edge of town are rigged with the land mines of doubt, failure, and fear. Leaving has never been easy. My only stated goal when I was young was to leave Antonito and never return. I would negotiate the land mines, ignore the roadside crosses and the scattered bones of the fallen.

I was never a horrible kid in school, though I think there are a few teachers that might disagree with my self-assessment; I do, however, remember being bored, tired of filling in blanks, tired of books that did not reflect me or my place. School was an oppressive force. Were it not for football and friendships I cannot say where my early path would have led. I remember the psychologist the district brought in, her battery of tests on me; the intended goal, I learned later, was to expel me. There were these mentions of reform school or military school. In short, I hated school, and then my freshman English teacher, literally, gave me a key one day. At the back of the room there was a locked cabinet whose contents were off-limits. She would constantly tell me, “Those books are for the seniors.” I am many things, but chief among them, I am persistent, to a fault. Finally, in what seemed like a moment of desperation, she told me, “Go ahead pick a book from back there if you promise to quit disrupting my class.” I was only too happy to oblige; if I never have to conjugate another sentence, I will be a happy man.

She handed over the small key, and I walked to the back of the room. I chose Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and a new world was opened. Emily Dickinson says that every poem has its trapdoor that the reader must fall through. I fell into that book and knew, at that moment, that I would love books and their saving power for the rest of my life. I cannot remember my first kiss, but I remember Kenyon Clutter and the fact that he ate apples to keep his teeth clean and that he carried a sheep on his fifteen-year-old shoulders through a Kansas blizzard. He was not an important character in the book, but I was in awe of Capote, of those minor details and how much weight they carried. I knew then that books, and the conjuring they possessed, were the first true-feathered bird.

Perhaps we are all here to trace and collect words, to sow meaning; we collect that thing which people discard as ordinary and bring it to a page of life where it can flourish and be the map of human struggle and therefore an instruction as to how we can all survive.

I worry sometimes that my students are losing their ability to love or appreciate the inexhaustible strength of words and their power. I think they betray that which you and I would never betray, that thing which we give ourselves to like prayer. We call upon language to protect us, give us light, and there is a grace in what we chose to do, the books we give ourselves to, the hard-earned pages that lift us toward being whole. I think that there are others like us, a race of people who still love the eloquent transcendence of the exact word, the beautiful and sensuous hip of a perfectly rendered comma that can send any of us on a river journey toward interminable love.

We search the geologic layers of the human condition and we bring it to the page because that is our job, to record that which matters, the memory worth saving, the history worth telling, the woven words that form a music that has always been meant to save us. Sometimes we are called to save our fallen home and its forgotten places. Sometimes we are called upon to save the window in each of us, the portal mirror that allows us to interpret the sacred mysteries. What is language to you? How, perhaps, has it saved you? Is it, like Li-Young Lee said about poetry, each poem is a "descendant of God."

Language is my wife's love of living and remembered things, language is my mother's hands or my father's tired back, language is my daughter's smile, the medicine of it after I believed that parts of me were broken forever. Language is water that carries me simultaneously forward and into the past.

I am writing to you from the banks of the river; the storm never made it off the mountains; the birds are silent and there are so many stars out beyond the dark, swaying bodies of the cottonwoods. I strain for the notes of some sound against canyon walls, but there is only the steady thrum of river. Thank you for the work you do, for your dedication to good and important books, their magic and message, their language of liberation and hope. This letter is in praise of books, their limitless potential and their sacredness. I suppose, by association, this letter is also about friendship and about what is lost or can be lost. I hope to someday show you the Conejos, the river that is my home water. I will show you where I caught my first fish, point out the bend where I last saw my friend Cristobal and his stringer of fish. I will show you my hometown, how much it needs hope, how much it needs books like the ones you publish. We all need to see ourselves in words; each of us needs our history to be told and understood, and for your contribution to this end, I sincerely thank you.

I am writing to you from the banks of the Conejos River, and I am wishing you a good night. Perhaps you will dream of words and their origins, and in your dream they will begin to fly and work the dusk light of your memory, collecting in their beaks and in their winged flight the parts of your being that were you long ago, and the words will circle in the alpenglow to form the stories and poems that rise toward the growing night, toward stars, toward the timeless space between their origin and your dreaming them back to the page, forever and forever without cease.

Be well, my friend, and keep bringing us toward a place where the music of words is rendered with grace.

Adios,

a.

**reading lesson or the ghost of Clifford Brown**  
*for Bill "Guillermo" Tremblay*

Guillermo do you hear the flutes  
the high near God part of them  
at the beginning of Clifford's *easy living*

you must you call us around the  
front of the table as if you are going to  
tell us about the ghost in Clifford Brown's trumpet

but you read us Yusef's *jasmine*  
your finger with its nail cut short and square  
is conducting every line you pause as you mention

the trumpet player "who is almost kissed  
by enough pain —Clifford's  
shadow on the edge of the stage"

the first time i met you  
i heard my father's voice  
remember to look off the safety

feel the pressure and step up in the pocket  
then look to your left  
the running back will come open underneath

i've seen eyes like yours my entire life  
the deep run of trumpet and water  
it is not about what you are saying

i know Guillermo it is about  
what your eyes are saying  
secret language

your finger pauses over the poem  
you ask if we hear the phrasing  
the way Clifford leans into his trumpet

the brass God that purges  
what Hughes called  
the sadness of the song

don't you see how we are already  
undressing the brunette  
the moment Yusef mentions egypt

the poem is all wrapped up  
between notes  
the white space of the unspoken

the girl to my right loves  
John Keats and she is  
not listening

she asks someone to her left  
a dandelion whisper  
what the hell is he talking about

he is talking about silence  
how the breath makes the song  
feel like loss

he is talking about how the playing  
makes it like a small taste of a  
broken but remembered joy

don't you see what his finger  
wants you to hear  
Bird's spoon and Chet Baker's too

the flame beneath it  
sweet and evil tonic  
a building tagged into dust by drunks and gangs

there don't you hear it  
Clifford is playing your pain  
minor keys the flute

is waiting for its moment  
it is not all about sound  
changing sign and signified

it is still pain  
learn to read it  
trust those leaps

they are as real as the  
red headed man that choked on his tongue  
why are there so many bottles

can't you taste Yusef's poem  
how fear and lust are  
wrapped up in jasmine

Clifford Brown is dead at twenty-five  
black rain pennsylvania turnpike  
on the way to a gig in chicago

his trumpet strains  
sweet hummingbird  
please live forever on that flower of a note

his eyes are closed so tight  
as if he can't dare look at what  
he has created

there are so many ghosts  
be-bopping out of his horn  
real as the room we are in

the poem is almost done  
Guillermo is silent and i  
don't know if we have gotten his point

the one where he keeps telling us  
that it isn't a poem if it isn't touched  
by some orbit some

distant moon of this pain  
this trumpet song  
of our human soul