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Mars Rover, the Power of the Particular, and Love

Abstract

"Poetry appeals to, and enlarges, our human capacity to know something deeply and, in that way, to love it."

Posting about reasons to value poetry from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/the-mars-rover-the-power-of-the-particular-and-love/>

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The Mars Rover, the Power of the Particular, and Love

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May 1,
2017

Aleisa Dornbierer-Schat

This is part two of a two-part series on the value of poetry, why no one reads it, and why you probably should. Read the first piece [here](#).

Recently, I took a long run on a cold spring morning. When I reached our lawn, the grass was starting to light up with the sunrise. The air was still. The streets were quiet.

Once inside, I encountered the usual Monday-morning tumult—bowls clattering in the sink, someone searching frantically for a backpack, pleading, resistance. I was about to give myself over to the frantic pace when William, our two-year-old, walked up and touched my arm. Quietly, he said, “freezing.”

I crouched down and said, “Yes, freezing.”

In the middle of the still-noisy kitchen, William proceeded to touch each part of my cold face, name it, and softly pronounce it “freezing.”

“Nose. Freezing.”

“Cheek. Freezing.”

“Mouth. Freezing.”

Then he began again, touching his nose, then my nose. His cheek, then my cheek. He wore a puzzled half-smile, and I could see him confronting, in his tiny, two-year-old mind, that deep and abiding mystery of human identity: *we are the same; we are different*.

It’s rare, in the middle of a frenzied morning, that I exercise this discipline—of slowing down, growing still, paying attention. But it’s something I’ve gotten better at over the years, and the time I’ve spent reading poems gets most of the credit.

Yesterday, in the first installment of this series, I made ambitious claims for poetry. I said it could delight or console us, it could engage our affections, and make us better and more patient observers of the world. And it does more than that, too. Like all forms of art-making, poetry reflects our desire to make sense of the world without dispelling its mystery, and it’s one of the ways we tell the story of our time and place.

Still, poetry achieves all this by remaining insistently *personal*. It may tell the story of our time, but only by appealing to us in particulars. If a poem is going to accomplish what a poem ought to accomplish, it will do so gently, by invitation, and without making pronouncements.

Let me ground my claims in a contemporary example—one of my favorite poems, and among them one of the shortest:

There Is Absolutely Nothing Lonelier, by Matthew Rohrer

There is absolutely nothing lonelier
than the little Mars rover
never shutting down, digging up
rocks, so far away from Bond street
in a light rain. I wonder

if he makes little beeps? If so
he is lonelier still. He fires a laser
into the dust. He coughs. A shiny
thing in the sand turns out to be his.

Here is a poem that, with great subtlety and economy of language, harnesses the arresting emotional power of the particular. Until encountering this poem, I'd never given the Mars rover a second thought. Neither had I taken much interest in the greater drama of exploration in space (the vastness of space, its lack of gravity, terrifies me). Most of the poems I love are about the natural world, or daily things, like chopping onions or walking the dog. More than meditations on the unknowable mysteries of the cosmos, I'm drawn to poems that illuminate the complex feelings between people, or celebrate the seasons and their singular smells and qualities of light.

But each time I read this poem, I am brought, in the space of nine lines, to a state of such fierce and tender affection—for the Mars rover!—that my eyes nearly well up in tears. In a mere six sentences, the poet has deeply engaged my sympathies and directed them toward something absurdly unlikely: an essentially featureless, unfathomably distant *machine*. I read this poem, and I feel a surge maternal feeling. I want to take care of the Mars rover. I want to read him a story. I want to offer him companionship, or solace. How did Rohrer accomplish this? And why does it matter?

In this poem, Rohrer imbues the rover with human qualities in subtle ways—he uses the pronoun “he,” for instance, and twice deploys the adjective “little,” emphasizing the rover’s smallness relative to the empty and inhospitable landscape. Now that we’re ascribing him sentient qualities and a measure of vulnerability, we’re primed to feel tenderness toward the small space vehicle, as if he were a child playing alone on a playground. Making his halting way across the rocky terrain, the rover’s tiny beeps—a kind of inarticulate speech—endear him to us further, inviting our identification and, ultimately, our compassion. Like a child at play, he shoots a laser, he digs. If he were human, perhaps he would be cold. Eventually, he coughs, and we feel moved to care for him like we might a child in illness.

Now that our affections are fully engaged, we experience, at the end of the poem, the deep and unexpected pleasure of recognition. In this otherworldly landscape, and in the movements of this small and distant machine, we perceive those most human of qualities: curiosity, wonder, and the desire to possess something and call it our own.

Wendell Berry, himself a poet as well as a farmer, says to truly love something requires knowing it, and to truly know something, or someone, requires careful observation and attention. He’s speaking in this case specifically of land, addressing the ways that industrial forms of agriculture, because of their speed and scale, undermine the kind of knowledge and familiarity that compel us to care for it, and care for it well (care-taking is, properly understood, an act of love, according to Berry).¹

Poetry appeals to, and enlarges, our human capacity to know something deeply and, in that way, to love it. Even a short poem like Rohrer’s demonstrates how poetry can first engage our attention—appealing to us through carefully chosen words and details—then turn our affection toward something other than ourselves. That “something other” might be a cat, or a rover on Mars. But a poem might further challenge us to broaden our boundaries of identification and affection—it might compel us to care for the vibrant ecosystem of a particular pond, for instance, or to empathize with a person who seems very different from us and who is experiencing loss.

A poem, understood in the simplest terms, invites us to *consider*:

Consider my cat [Jeoffry](#).

Consider the lilies of the field.

Consider the songbird—“its bright unequivocal eye.”²

This act of considering—of giving something or someone the gift of our full attention—is, finally, an act of love.

I think of William, considering my mouth, then his mouth. My still-cold cheek, then his warm and flushed one. Like the sound of footsteps crunching through snow in Edward Hirsch's poem "[Dawn Walk](#)," William, in each soft touch of my face, each quiet "freezing," was recalling me to

"The simple, astonishing news
That we are here.
Yes, we are still here."³

Footnotes

1. Berry's essay "Our Deserted Country" is included in *Our Only World*, a collection of the author's essays published by Counterfeit Press in 2015. [↩](#)
2. See the first installment of this series, which includes an excerpt from Jane Kenyon's poem "Having it Out with Melancholy." [↩](#)
3. "Dawn Walk" is the last poem in Edward Hirsch's collection *Wild Gratitude*, published by Knopf in 1986. [↩](#)