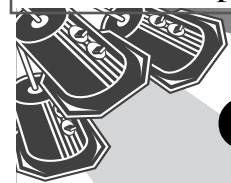


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CALLAHAN COUNTY

STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

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Poetry Media Service

THE MASTERY OF THE THING

A rereading of Gerald Manley Hopkins's great poem, "The Windhover."

By Ange Mlinko

Poetry Media Services

I fell in love with "The Windhover" when I was a teenager, recognizing right away the rapture of a love poem directed not at a particular person (though the poem is dedicated "To Christ Our Lord") but to life itself. The poem is widely anthologized, a cornerstone of the English canon, bridging the Victorian age and early-20th-century Modernism. Its author, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was a Jesuit priest who died at the age of 44. He had felt the tension between his religious and literary callings throughout his career, first burning all his work upon entering the priesthood, then taking up verses again only for church occasions. Hopkins vacillated between joy and despair both in his poetry and about his poetry—but at least he continued to write it.

When I was first discovering poetry, it was 1986 or so, and I was taught largely contemporary confessional and identity poetry written in modern, accessible, but (to me) dull language. So it was with a sympathetic ecstasy that I leaped back in time to Hopkins's sonnet written on May 30, 1877:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Fal-
con, in his riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and
striding

High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling
wing

In his ecstasy! . . .

By the end of the first line we have no idea yet what was caught, though it seems to be a "king." But the line break tricks us: it's really "kingdom" and it's part of a continuing, relentless trail of modifiers that are really metaphors, but metaphors for what? By the time we get to "Falcon," the bird mentioned in the poem's title, we're far from certain that we're talking about a real falcon and not a metaphor for yet something else. The poem, it turns out, is an epistemological narrative unfurling: What are we seeing?

Fear not: we are reading about a real falcon. "Windhover," my dictionary tells me, is British dialect for a kestrel: "a small falcon that hovers with rapidly beating wings while searching for prey on the ground." The bird is riding a thermal: "the rolling underneath him steady air," which, with its implied hyphens between the words, is a very particular type of air. "Striding" and "high" help build the feeling of "ecstasy," as does "rung," which is a technical term from falconry meaning "rising in a spiraling motion." But Hopkins also sees that the bird is "reined" by his "wimpling wing"—a wimple is part of a nun's headdress, which presses against her temples and keeps her hair back. In other words, the bird is exulting not only in the freedom of the air, but in the resistance of it too, the friction.

. . . then off, off forth on a swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the
hurl and gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding

Stirred for a bird, —the achieve of, the mastery of the
thing!

The bird achieves or masters something in his successful negotiation of the powerful wind, and it is this that "stirs" Hopkins's heart. His heart was "in hiding" before. Perhaps he was despondent or, like any of us most of the time, he wasn't noticing anything in particular about his surroundings until that moment, that dawn or dawning, a symbol of reawakening. The speaker of the poem could be anyone—man or woman, old or young—who somehow steps out of the ego and, by inhabiting another creature, finds a sacramental joy in simply being alive.

Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride, plume,
here

Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a
billion

Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sil-
lion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-
vermilion.

Hopkins's mimetic language turns from describing the kestrel's flight in the first part of the sonnet (the eight-line octet) to describing how its dynamics are also hidden in other things—and, ultimately, his own soul. As when the kestrel is buffeted by the wind and then comes back stronger, fire breaks from things when they "buckle." When the plow turns up the dull clods of earth, the new earth glints with minerals ("sillion" is a medieval term for the small strip of land granted to monasteries to farm). When a "blue-bleak" ember falls from a log, it flares up again with new light. And thus when the spirit falls against the opaque materiality of the world, it breaks open (gashes) with an insight, or illumination.

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--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or libel material.

Riding Inner Tubes

Eternal future, and eternal past

The smartest tutor, has the hardest task

We are so amuck, in the greatest mire

And can't get unstuck, though great the desire.

So much to tend to, with knowledge so vast

Makes us all into, such boasting outcasts

We know so little, and understand lest

All is a riddle, and all is a mess.

Oceans we know nil, and time races by

Fighting our windmills, though they still defy

Someone has said, that the whole world is flat

And they are all dead, so how about that.

We too look at space, as those looked in yore

A falling off place, or a place to soar

We know not you see, if we're in a cube

Or on endless seas, riding inner tubes.

-Weldon L. Smith

Eastland, Texas

Words You Can Use

Girandole: Here is a word for a grouping of jets of water, or perhaps fireworks, that are set into a pattern. Remember this word soon for Independence Day.

Humectant: This is a noun, or can be used as an adjective, for something that is moistened or is moistening. Wet earth might wet dry earth if they are combined, so the wet earth would be a humectant.

Laroid: When you go to the Gulf and see the sea gulls, you can use this word to describe things related to them.

Mellaginous: If it deals with honey, or anything to do with honey, you can use this word to describe it. It is not thought to be used much around Moran, Texas.

"The Windhover" is a sonnet as fierce and alive as that kestrel Hopkins saw in May 1877. When I first read it, for all my teenage ignorance about theology and archaic word meanings, it swept me up in its rhythms and dashed me down again with the sudden impact of that electrifying final line: "Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion." If we hear through our eyes when we read any page of text, Hopkins taught me that in a great poem's soundscapes, we "see" through our ears as well.

Ange Mlinko's poems and articles have appeared in the Village Voice, The Nation, and Poetry. Her latest book of poems is Starred Wire. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Gerald Manley Hopkins, and his poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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American Life In Poetry

Column 220

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

One of the privileges of being U.S. Poet Laureate was to choose two poets each year to receive a \$10,000 fellowship, funded by the Witter Bynner Foundation. Joseph Stroud, who lives in California, was one of my choices. This poem is representative of his clear-eyed, imaginative poetry.

Night in Day

The night never wants to end, to give itself over to light. So it traps itself in things: obsidian, crows.

Even on summer solstice, the day of light's great triumph, where fields of sunflowers guzzle in the sun-- we break open the watermelon and spit out black seeds, bits of night glistening on the grass.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright (c)2009 by Joseph Stroud, and reprinted from his recent book of poems, "Of This World: New and Selected Poems 1966-2006," Copper Canyon Press, 2009, by permission of the author and publisher. Introduction copyright (c)2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

Rhymes You Can Use:

Oleander

Coriander

Dander

Pander

Meander

Sander

Salamander



Nature scene

Photo by Patrick Ready



Flag Day
Sunday, June 14th

Writers And Poets!

The Eastland/Callahan County Newspapers announce that the Baird Star will be publishing submitted poetry and short stories. We will also be publishing a literary journal in the near future.

1. We ask for first-time publishing rights. All other rights will remain with the author.
2. There will be no payment, but you will get your works before the general public. We will

be sending sample copies to other organizations, the literary world and libraries for their archives and your notoriety.

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4. Each submission should be typewritten, single spaced, with author's name and contact information in the top right hand corner. You must include a SASE for the return of the submission.

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