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{ Written On The Bones }
*Kim Rosen On Reclaiming
The Ancient Power
Of Poetry*

ALISON LUTERMAN

In the early eighties I was part of a production called *Crooked Eclipses: A Theatrical Meditation on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, put on by the Boston Theatre Group. We didn't just recite the sonnets; we learned dozens of them by heart and moved, sang, wept, and wrestled with them. In the six months leading up to the show, lines of Shakespeare would arise in me unbidden as I waited for a bus or shopped for groceries. I count it as one of the best times of my life.

Almost thirty years later, after becoming a poet and teacher

of poetry, I discovered Kim Rosen's Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words (Hay House). In an era when creative-writing programs and workshops have proliferated like dandelions and it seems everyone wants to be a writer, Rosen asserts the value of becoming a "disciple" to a poem written by someone else. She claims that a poem can be powerful medicine not only for the mind but for the body and soul as well, and she has learned more than a hundred poems by heart, carrying them inside her as teachers, healers, and guides.

Rosen, who has a BA from Yale University and an MFA in

poetry from Sarah Lawrence College, shares her method of learning poems with students and audiences all over the world: in cathedrals, juvenile-detention centers, school auditoriums, and even the Louisiana Superdome. She grew up in New England and as a child wanted to be a poet, but the dry, analytical approach to poetry taught in high school discouraged her. She turned her attention to theater and, later, spirituality, becoming a teacher of self-inquiry. She was leading workshops on creativity when depression and her parents' failing health led her to begin learning poems by heart as a healing path. Poet David Whyte was her initial inspiration, but her ultimate teachers, she says, are the poems themselves.

Rosen and I met to talk about poetry, memory, healing, and the origins of language in her cozy home in northern California. It was a gray day, and the rhythmic patter of rain on the skylight provided background for our conversation. As we talked, stanzas from poems wove themselves into the discussion: one of us would begin to recite, and the other would join in, laughing as we groped for lines, honoring the source that feeds both our lives.

Luterman: What do you say to a person who tells you, "Poetry makes me feel dumb, like it's some puzzle that I can't figure out. I don't see that it has any relevance to my life"?

Rosen: [Laughs.] I love to talk to those people. I feel exactly the same way about so much of the poetry I read. For most of my life I was afraid of poetry. It was like this elitist club I hadn't been invited to join. In fact, many Americans seem to have a fear of poetry. Part of my motivation in writing *Saved by a Poem* was to help turn that around, to wake Americans up to poetry's power to heal and enrich us. In fact, my work is not as much about poetry as it is about nurturing the interior life. Poetry can be a lantern that shines into dark places within us. Poems can be powerful medicine for personal transformation.

One thing I might say to someone who can't relate to poetry is: You don't have to love *all* poetry. Do you love all music? Do you love every piece of art you see? Find just one poem you love, and speak it out loud. Your body, feelings, voice, and thoughts will come into harmony when you speak a poem that matters to you, and that can be incredibly healing.

Even people who supposedly don't like poetry have it all around them, but they don't realize it, because they don't call it "poetry." Every breakup I've ever gone through has a song connected to it. I remember John Lennon's song "Woman." Oh, my God. [Laughs.] I'd be dead if it weren't for those lyrics. Those words became the stepping stones that got me across the rushing river of my relationship's demise.

Find the poetry in the song you sing in the shower, or in the serenity prayer you recite under your breath after your kids trash the living room again. Most, if not all, scriptures were originally written as poetry. Look at the Psalms: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ." That's poetry. Why? There is music and imagery in the words. It's not just the words' meanings that speak to us; it's their rhythms, their sounds.

We complain that we don't understand poetry, but a lot of us recite prayers in other languages, such as Hebrew, Sanskrit, or Latin. Do you understand "Om Namah Shivaya" or "Baruch ata Adonai"? But in those cases there's a willingness to let it sweep into you and affect you. The same is true of music and art. When you attend a symphony, you lean back, close your eyes, and go for the ride. You're not thinking to yourself, *Now, what was Beethoven trying to say with that particular chord?* Most of us don't analyze a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe. We stand in front of it and observe what happens in our own bodies and minds.

But with poetry, because it's words on a page, we think we're supposed to understand it the way we understand a newspaper article. The left brain says, *Aha! This is my domain.* It wants a literal meaning to the poem. But poetry is the stuff of the right brain — the ineffable, the emotional, the relational — arriving dressed up in the costume of the left brain: words. Billy Collins has a great poem called "Introduction to Poetry." He invites people to "take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide," but all they want to do, he says, is beat it with a hose to "find out what it really means."

Luterman: But isn't it also important to understand the meaning of the words?

Rosen: I think we have to expand our idea of what the word *understand* means. It's not just the kind of understanding that comes with the solution of a riddle or a math problem. It can include a kind of revelation that comes through the whole body. Emily Dickinson wrote, "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" Dickinson is talking about a kind of understanding through feeling and sensation, not through the accumulation of information.

To me a good poem is like a sacred mind-altering substance: you take it into your system, and it carries you beyond your ordinary ways of understanding. I call the nonconceptual elements of a poem — the rhythm, the sound, the images — the "shamanic anatomy." Like a shaman's drum, the beat of a poem can literally entrain the rhythms of your body: your heartbeat, your breath, even your brain waves, altering consciousness. Most poems are working on all these levels at once, not just through the rational mind.

When I was in school, I was taught about the meter of the poem — iambic pentameter, dactylic tetrameter, and so on. I was taught the definitions of *simile* and *metaphor*, and I remember being quizzed on the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet. But no one told me these were consciousness-altering substances! No one told me rhythm could free my mind, a rhyme or simile could crack open my thought patterns, and assonance and alliteration could allow my feelings to flow in new ways.

A man named Christopher in one of my workshops was working with Rumi's poem "Love Dogs" in a rendering by Coleman Barks. Christopher had been sent to me by his singing teacher, who felt I might be able to help him bring more

spontaneity and emotion into his voice. Even in ordinary conversations, his speaking voice sounded as if every inflection had been composed ahead of time.

“Love Dogs” challenges the reader to cry out with longing, as a dog does for its master. It was a perfect poem for Christopher, because that unselfconscious flow of feeling was exactly what was missing in his singing. He learned the poem quickly and easily, but one line always tripped him up: Barks’s version goes, “The grief you cry out from / draws you toward union.” But every single time, Christopher said, “The grief from which you cry / draws you toward union.”

It seems like a small difference, doesn’t it? And the meaning is basically the same either way. When I asked him about it, Christopher said he liked his version better because it was grammatically correct, and Barks’s wasn’t. Never end a phrase with a preposition, right?

Barks could have chosen to be grammatically correct, but he didn’t. There is something more compelling than grammar moving his line: the momentum, the way the energy travels through the body as it is spoken. Say the line both ways, and feel the difference in the sensations in your body and the movement of your breath: “The grief from which you cry”; “The grief you cry out from.”

Luterman: The first version seems neat and predictable, and the second is kind of a wonderful mess, falling over itself and open-ended.

Rosen: Exactly! Christopher’s version shuts tight at the end: “The grief from which you cry.” Barks’s meter is irregular and ends on a weak beat, leaving the energy open and vulnerable: “The grief you cry out from.”

The amazing thing is that when Christopher finally spoke the line the way Barks had written it, his voice broke, and this huge sob came bursting out. He was scared and embarrassed at first. He hadn’t let himself cry in public since he was a kid, so it was quite a stretch for him, but he did it. And that release freed his voice and his spontaneity.

Luterman: At the risk of sounding elitist, isn’t it important that a poem be *good*?

Rosen: What is “good”? Sometimes I cringe because a poem seems trite to me, only to find out that those words saved my friend’s life when she was going through her divorce. Think about art or music: You love Aretha Franklin; I love Beethoven. You love Rothko; I love Rembrandt. Maybe a certain poem doesn’t sing to me, but if it opens someone’s mind and heart, who cares whether I find it good or bad?

Luterman: You recently wrote a blog in the *Huffington Post* about this country’s “metro-phobia,” or fear of poetry. Why is American culture so poetry-phobic, whereas other cultures revere poetry and poets?

Rosen: Only a few generations ago in the U.S., poetry was much more popular than it is now. My father, who is ninety, still remembers the John Donne sonnet he memorized in grammar



KIM ROSEN

school. Poetry recitation used to be a fixture of small-town American entertainment. But over the last few generations we have managed to marginalize the art form. And it’s not just about the rise of TV, radio, and other technologies taking the place of poetry. Did you know that the most popular TV show in the Middle East is *Million’s Poet*? It’s like *American Idol*, but the contestants recite poetry. The show has even inspired a TV channel completely dedicated to poetry, an idea that seems unimaginable in the U.S.

So what happened here? I have lots of ideas, but no definitive answer. Writer Eve Ensler says that we live in a country where people have forgotten to think in metaphor. With the loss of metaphor comes a lack of imagination, ritual, mystery, and discovery.

I also suspect that the qualities of openness and humility that the best poetry encourages may have been lost in Americans’ drive for upward mobility. Many poems look behind the superficial masks we wear to the vulnerable self underneath. John F. Kennedy said it beautifully in his eulogy of Robert Frost: “When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.”

Maybe the U.S. — and please forgive me the audacity of this sweeping generalization — doesn’t want to be reminded of its limitations, its kinship with all life. It doesn’t want to look into poetry’s truthful mirror. As a country the U.S. has been identified with a strong will. We’ve “pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps.” Maybe poetry, *real* poetry, requires a healthy surrender of willfulness. Maybe it demands a *willingness* to be changed, to be affected, to reveal our wounds without denial or muscling through.

(end of excerpt)