Poem and Commentary: The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently

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Poem | Commentary

The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently
by Thomas Lux

is not silent, it is a speaking-
out-loud voice in your head; it is spoken,
a voice is saying it
as you read. It's the writer's words,
of course, in a literary sense
his or her "voice" but the sound
of that voice is the sound of your voice.
Not the sound your friends know
or the sound of a tape played back
but your voice
caught in the dark cathedral
of your skull, your voice heard
by an internal ear informed by internal abstracts
and what you know by feeling,
having felt. It is your voice
saying, for example, the word "barn"
that the writer wrote
but the "barn" you say
is a barn you know or knew. The voice
in your head, speaking as you read,
never says anything neutrally- some people
hated the barn they knew,
some people love the barn they know
so you hear the word loaded
and a sensory constellation
is lit: horse-gnawed stalls,
hayloft, black heat tape wrapping
a water pipe, a slippery
spilled chirr of oats from a split sack,
the bony, filthy haunches of cows...
And "barn" is only a noun- no verb
or subject has entered into the sentence yet!
The voice you hear when you read to yourself
is the clearest voice: you speak it
speaking to you.

and a commentary on the poem by another writer...

by Todd McKinney
Greensboro, NC, U.S.

One reason this poem is so memorable is because we all know this voice Lux writes about, this voice that speaks to us when we read. So, reading this poem is a lot of fun because we hear that voice as we read. But what's really exciting is how this poem teaches us about this voice: that it is unique to each individual, that it is something that occupies the "dark cathedral of our skull" in the same way a bird occupies a birdcage, that it is a perspective shaped by experience, and that it is not neutral precisely because of experience (which then validates everyone’s voice and existence and, more importantly, our right to speak about that existence). All of this should make us want to hear that voice, to understand it, to live in it.

Then, when we think of this poem in terms of this chapter, all of the sudden this voice becomes something much larger. It becomes a personal space within a landscape. It becomes a voice that speaks not only when we read a page from a book but also when we "read" that which is in our gaze: people, landscape, culture. It is still there in our heads, informing our present experience with that of our past. And if we listen closely enough to this voice in our heads, it will be our understanding of all that which makes up the landscape of this world.

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