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POETRY

Words and One Liners

Ric Masten

TOP-SEEDED



Center court

he perfected his service
 his opening statement
 until
 it could not be returned

he entered
 many conversations
 but he died alone

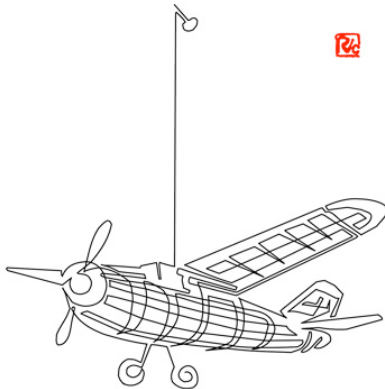
center court
 in his spotless whites
 +++

AFTERWORD

During my 78 years on this planet I can think of only three people who knew everything. I mean, whatever the subject, they could expound on it — they could quote from it. It got so that when ever I saw one of them coming I would cross the street to avoid being lectured "to," or perhaps "at" would be a better choice of words. And I mean they really did know everything or so it seemed to me. I have often wondered what would happened if the three of them had ever gotten together at the same time. Would they sit in silence and stare each other down or would they chatter like magpies listening only to themselves?

Perhaps this is the reason master Japanese artists always paint a flaw into their work. To be perfect is rather presumptuous and certainly less than human.

READY TO BE PAPERED



The superstructure
of slowing turning dreams

as a boy
I could never bring myself
to close my wooden birds
the ribs were always left exposed
the balsa framework never knew
the feel of paper skin

"I think they look better that way"
I'd say
the truth was
I could never keep the tissue
from wrinkling
and if nothing ever flew
nothing failed either
today
I play with words
and delight in trying my ideas out
on every passer-by
I fly the outlines
tell the punch lines
describing in detail
the prize-winners I am about to write

as before I keep myself surrounded
by the superstructure
of slowly turning dreams
and still it seems nothing really
at least in my mind
has taken to the sky
+++

AFTERWORD

When it came to constructing model airplanes, I threw the towel in when I was thirteen. In grammar school I was doing poorly — how many of you remember the "hundred demons" (one hundred of the most often misspelled everyday words)? Being as I am a person with no visual recall, I would force myself to memorize the demons like learning the lines to a play. And you know what? I would do fairly well on the Friday test. But what happens to the lines of the play a year after it closed. All gone, except for one or two of the biggies like "To Be or Not to Be." So on the follow up test a month or so later I would bomb out and have to sit in the corner wearing a tall pointy hat.

Then much to my delight the school decided to have a model airplane contest. Here was a chance for me to shine. Up until then I had never finished a single one but I was marvelous at creating the framework. The superstructure was kind of like memorizing the hundred demons for a Friday test. I must have had fifty naked P-38s & B-29s hanging on threads from my ceiling and not one of them papered and finished. But how hard could papering be? I knew about moistening the paper so that it would stretch tight and all the other tricks of the trade. But when the day of the Model Airplane Contest came I didn't enter any of the creased, wrinkled, dimpled examples of my incompetence. I stood on the sidelines watching; no one ever knew what a loser I was.

And what has this got to do with the composition of poetry? Everything. Though unlike the end of the above poem, when finished I certainly do fly them for any one who will listen. When I was an aspiring young artist, I once asked Richard Lofton, my teacher and a successful artist, how he got his paintings into the galleries. He admonished me by saying, "That's not your business! Your business is to make the art, but you must also share your art with anyone that comes anywhere near you. If you have anything to say your art will make friends and the friends of your art will see that it gets seen."

It didn't work out for me with model airplanes or with art but just imagine me flying coast to coast on United or Delta Airlines. As soon as we cleared the tarmac I would turn to the poor soul in the seat next to mine and say: "Do you want to hear a poem?" Don't laugh! I did. And more than a few times this behavior garnered me invitations to speak at conferences and colleges — and for big bucks!

I, THE CATERPILLAR



I, the caterpillar did see Saint Butterfly...

I, the caterpillar
Did see Saint Butterfly.
I was working on my weaving
And I saw her flutter by.
And I wondered that a thing
Could be so fragile and so frail,
Dancing on the lilacs
All the way to jail.

So I hung her
In a pale white cage
Up in a broken tree.
I longed to climb inside her eyes
And listen to the sea.
And I would give my body to be lifted
By her wings

AFTERWORD

Over the thirty-eight years of my career I must have spoken in well over five hundred universities, colleges, and community colleges, to say nothing of the hundreds of high schools I've performed in. It might be interesting for you to know that the invitations to speak on campus rarely came from the English Department. "Ric your work is too thin, too accessible, not layered with enough metaphor and simile!" I remember one English Department head coming up to me after I got a standing ovation from the students saying, "Well, that was really something Ric, but I hope you know it isn't poetry, it's Vaudeville!"

No, the departments that found the honorariums to bring me on campus were Interpersonal Communication, Psychology, Education, Counseling, Public Speaking and Drama. Those were the departments eager to have me come and show off my wares. Once in Florida I was even invited to speak to the Department of Electrical Engineering. The teacher ordered every student to be present telling me that in that one hour and fifteen minutes his egg-head students would learn more about poetry than in the required English classes they had been forced to take. However, I must admit my feelings were always a bit hurt when the English department snubbed me. .
Sadly I believe that America's general distaste for poetry started in grade school. The students were never allowed to be creative. The problem was that subjects like poetry, art and dance must be judged

But I, the Caterpillar
Am tangled in my strings.

For who
Would have the grocer
Check the items from the list?
And when my loves are sleeping
There are eyelids to be kissed.
And the yellow bus keeps coming
At four o'clock each day,
And I the caterpillar
Cannot get away

If I had a pair of wings
And knew I wouldn't fall,
Then the simple act of flying
Does not mean much at all.
And if I jumped without them
Well, I wonder what we'd find
In all the empty rooms
That I would go and leave behind.

So I the caterpillar
will keep working at my trade
And I won't know what I'm weaving
Until I get it made.
If I don't believe in butterflies,
I can tell you this
We all will do what we must do
Simply to exist.

I, the caterpillar
and Saint Butterfly.
+++

subjectively, which is impossible to do. "I like this one. I don't like that one." So we tell the students what Shakespeare meant by that sonnet and then we test and grade the students' retention. I could always tell you what the Bard's lines meant to me that morning but there was no real way to judge my response. I either remembered what I learned about that sonnet or I failed. It didn't matter how creative my answer was; it wasn't what we know Shakespeare meant. But I have to tell you that in all those ivied halls I performed in for thirty-eight plus years, of the ten best teachers I came across probably seven of them would have been English teachers. Teachers FIRST and good at English second. .

When you read or listened to my lyric "I, the Caterpillar," did you get confused, wondering what in hell is this poet is trying to say? Or did you go into your own life's experience when you decided who the caterpillar was and who the butterfly was? I often use these lyrics to I address the mess I believe education makes when it comes to poetry. I was guilty of it for years myself. I carefully explained what the poem was all about before I read it because I wanted you to march in lock step to where I wanted the words to take you. What a total rip off!!!! I obviously didn't respect your creativity. .

Recently I have changed my ways so that you always get two interpretations for the price of one. The poem you heard and made sense of for yourself and then in the AFTERWORD you'll find out what I was writing about. This in no way negates your creative interpretation of my lyric.

Just think of what you would have lost if you knew ahead of time that "I, The Caterpillar" was written to Joan Baez (Saint Butterfly) trying to explain that I (the Caterpillar) was a working stiff in a print shop eight hours a day five days a week eking out a living to keep my family afloat. And I wanted to join her at the sit-in at the Laurence Livermore Labs (and be arrested and put in jail for six weeks) making a powerful statement for peace. But the yellow bus keeps coming at four o'clock each day and I had to pick up my four kids and drive them the three miles from Highway 1 to our house up in the Palo Colorado Road.

All of the above is offered to encourage you to decide what poetry means to you. I believe that you are all poets but somehow along the way were taught that you weren't. The coffers of education are running low on funds and there really isn't any money to bring poets, artists, dancers and philosophers on to a campus. So when ever possible I give my time for free. I refuse to sit idly by and let our institutions of learning become nothing more than a trade school!.... (My Ph.D. History professor daughter April, is my proof reader and she remarked "As if poetry isn't a trade. And what's wrong with learning a trade anyway?")

Beat it kid you bother me!

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