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Rick Benjamin: Immersing ourselves in the poetry of real type

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It is school vacation week in Providence, which is no vacation for me work-wise, but it does mean that I am at leisure to spend part of each day with gifted high school students at New Urban Arts making poetry.

I have brought in eight manual typewriters, and when Vuthi and Joely bring in two others, we have 10, exactly the number we need to sit around three large tables pushed together. I have put out the “Random Acts of Poetry” sign that Jane hand-lettered for me.

Ray Marr, master-manual-typewriter-mechanic whose unassuming storefront is in Pawtucket, has made sure that all of our old-school machines are in good working order.

Though all of them have quirks — an old portable Remington with a ribbon that doesn’t always or ever rewind; a large, heavy Underwood, chrome wings flaring out of an otherwise rather grim-looking gray body, skipping spaces randomly; an Olympia whose “c” and “h” keys like to strike and stick together, stopping the typist in his tracks — I tell my young comrades in poetry to work around their particular machine’s idiosyncrasies, even to appreciate them.

There’s going to be no erasing this week, just second and third thoughts and lots of cross-outs using the letter “x.”

When prompted by someone else’s good poem and a simple question to spur thinking, all of us fall to the sonic task of imprinting poems on paper with real type. The sudden clatter’s infectious; not one of us wants to go back to using a laptop! Sometimes I simply find myself listening to the sound of their thinking, to the arrhythmic or rhythmic drumming of their fingertips as they move through a thought process that is slow for a change, tapped out in its own good time.

My friend and colleague, Beth Nixon, the other Fellow these past two years at New Urban Arts, has suggested “home” as a theme for the week. Each day after lunch she is facilitating the building of a large monster out of cardboard and copious amounts of masking tape and paper and paste from her own recipe slathered over everything.

By next week, it will also be brightly painted, animated, mobile and holding in its body one of our recycling cans. It is all part of an effort to express what it means to really care for a place that, for many of us, feels like home. By the second day in the poetry workshop, we are also talking about place as the most intimate of interiors, because our own stories house us, too. We talk about reclaiming our ground, about listening more carefully to the tales that most fully constitute our own identities while also keeping an ear out for the sound of mystery, for what we can hardly hear, if at all.

When my own kids were little, one of our favorite books was by Byrd Baylor and Peter Parnall, “The Other Way to Listen.” A boy apprentices with an old man in the fine art of listening, to lizards and rocks and even the hills. It is a slow and ambling narrative about how to tune in to what’s largely unheard of or from in our loud and busy world. It’s about paying attention, that is, to what’s nearest to home, like hearing the sound of your own thinking beating like a slow drum on the old Royal.

One of the best teachers in the art of listening was the poet William Stafford, who woke up each morning at 4:30 to catch the earliest light, sounds and rhythms of a new day. This is from his poem, “Listening.”

*My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where the rest of us had never been.*

I love the off-rhymed “screen” and “been” in this opening quatrain, because it is the poet retuning the reader’s ear to something just a little bit unexpected. I also admire how muted the first five beats are in the poem’s first line, and the way a

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moth falls or falters against a screen in lilting and lifting anapests, unstressed syllables followed by a harder hit.

Stafford says about his father in the next stanza that “More spoke to him from the soft wild night/than came to our porch for us on the wind,” which is such a simple and lovely statement about how refined an ear can become, when it can hear even what’s beneath a breeze. The poem closes on its one rhyming note, signaling perhaps the emergence of something singularly sharp and clear, a new note or frequency.

My father heard so much that we still stand

inviting the quiet by turning the face,

waiting for a time when something in the night

will touch us too from that other place.

Though Stafford is working primarily in the poem with a five-beat line, I hear in the last line maybe six or seven. I hear no reason not to emphasize words like “will” and “us” and “that.” It’s a subjective sounding, of course, but to me it sounds like the mystery of abundance.

Which is what I keep on hearing in the percussive sounds that young poets are making on manual typewriters at New Urban Arts. Minus smart phones and laptops and other electronics, they sound very much at home with lead type and inked ribbons and with carriages moving back and forth and scrolling up slow thought.

It is a more deliberate and thoughtful kind of marching toward something. And, speaking of March, here we are on the brink of something that will begin to resemble spring. I was also lucky this week to accompany a high school student on her visit to Hampshire College. Here are a few lines from a fine poet who teaches there, Aracelis Girmay, from her book, “Kingdom Animalia.” The poem is “March, March.”

Brown March whose branches itch with coming spring

& the yellow hands of dogwood in the yard.

Obscene, the beauty of skin again, obscene this Eden season

bejeweled by the bodies of the youngsters & the hard

clang of real light...

May your own first forays into the “real light” of March bring you nearer to the percussive sounds of your own heart’s imaginings as they tap toward the certainty of spring.

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