

Letter to a Young Writer

ELENI SIKELIANOS

from Summer at St.-Nazaire

(Dear L.,)

Ravines hold out against quiet things, rotting
things move back towards waters we know in the shape
of that sea

There is expertise in any
field of wheat. You said the word

& a scorpion of dust
& string floated out
of the light & flickered
past our ankles. Later, the corpse

of a scorpion shriveled
under the door & I
thought I should ask—What's the deal
on scorpions?—& there was a scorpion, hooked &
quiet, a slim
S-shaped wafer—is it
“wildlife”? Dark, & the bright possible
poison needles its tips in, takes possession

of the mind. There is expertise in any
scorpion, each a series
of surfaces of light exploiting
the laws of vision. Poetry

is not a boxed set, stabbed
with a white arm
of light, no
expertise. Let this

technology (of scorpions) order light, revise
the politics of dogs, and sex,

the dun-colored crepuscular cities out
on the abandoned horizon. Which little piece of dust will
make us happiest? Usk? Usk? Everything I always wanted to know

about the 500 kilometers of pipes that run through our city
is coming back to me

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This is, in fact, the last section of a 17-page poem, entitled "Summer at St.-Nazaire." The poem explores a number of things, including the speeches stars might give, seemingly abandoned postwar cities, how days condense around the body, and the life of objects, such as T-shirts, emptied of human involvement and washed ashore. But you ask about the word *expertise*.

I suppose I was thinking about how each plant and animal operates in the world from a complex system of "expertise" (much of it instinctual). A grain of wheat, for example, has genetic encoding that allows it to know when to begin to push out of the earth and sprout up towards the sun, how to catch water, how to manufacture energy out of sunlight. A scorpion has another very specific "knowledge" set that allows it to survive, and our human eyes have a very particular frame of expertise that allows us to perceive that scorpion (which, by the way, glows in ultraviolet light, and has survived several earthly melt-downs with an anatomy hardly changed since the Carboniferous; they have also been found to withstand atomic blasts). In her essay "Seeing," Annie Dillard points out that unicellular organisms are, in fact, the only creatures on earth whose brains do not edit sense impressions, and

therefore, ironically, are those that have the most “complete,” the most expert picture of the universe. I think it could be said that we humans are obsessed with “expertise.” Every second, it seems, someone is further developing technology that tells us something about our hormones, sleep patterns, subatomic particles, long-range nuclear systems, necessities of war, fields of wheat, computer systems, and so on.

There is a bit of an argument, thus, in my use of the word *expertise*, and especially in conjunction with poetry. Is poetry a technology of sorts? Possibly. But I wouldn't want to call it a form of “expertise.” I see poetry as a multi-limbed entity, groping its way into the world, an organism that proliferates meaning and possibilities of meaning at every point it is touched.

Expertise as journey, rather than destination—a trying, a testing.... If we set out to write about things we already know, we might just as well write reports. In the intercellular activity of the ribosome, the rough spots on the endoplasmic reticulum are where the ribosome can stick, and proteins (the body's building blocks) may be made (an intricate form of cellular expertise). The parts of poetry that often excite me are the parts where the poem falls apart—where the surface is rough—the unpolished spots, the parts of least expertise, where poetic “device” fails and falls away.