Letter to a Young Writer

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In Part Two of the ongoing series Letters to a Young Writer, poet and professor Susan Mitchell corresponds with a contemporary composer as a means of exploring the relationship between poetry and the human voice. She confronts the need to be "addressed by something larger, an intelligence both intimate and public" and reflects on the role of the poet in a civilization, a "habitat," under attack.

SUSAN MITCHELL

To Claudio Barrès,

Thank you, dear friend, for the gift of your new work, your haunting and mysterious song cycle. In the last two weeks, whenever possible, I have listened to music. I think this is because music is able to lead me through a complex emotional experience, through many stages of grieving and healing, before I am capable of sorting things out intellectually, before I can even think. It is especially to music filled with the human voice that I am drawn, to the *lieder* of Schubert, Schumann, Grieg, and now to your songs.

In my craving for the human voice, I have also been drawn, inevitably, to poetry, but it has not been easy to find poems that speak to my emotional needs, so different now from what they were before September 11th. So many of the poets I had been reading with pleasure suddenly seemed to be self-centered, preoccupied with their own personal tragedies and concerns. I wanted to be addressed by something larger, by an intelligence both intimate and public. Finally, I turned to W. H. Auden, something that surprised me because he is a poet I have read only occasionally in recent years. And it was not only to the log-

ical choice, "September 1, 1939," that I returned. I reread "Horae Canonicae" and "Memorial for the City" and "A Walk after Dark," with its chilling lines, "Somebody chose their pain, / What needn't have happened did." I think what drew me to Auden was something I had not heard in his poems before—the barely controlled panic and anxiety that lie just below the almost flat surface-voice of weariness. With them I could feel the tremendous effort intellect was making to take over, to find a form for disillusionment and protest, rebellion against what need not have happened, but did.

It was especially to Auden's long sequence, *Thanksgiving for a Habitat*, that I turned, because it is all about habitat as a surrogate for the human body. Destroy my home, and even if I make it to safety, physically unscathed, I have been emotionally, spiritually violated. As someone who grew up in New York City and spent much of her adult life there, I can say that a lot of my life in that city was lived in public spaces. As a result, after a while, through routine and daily ritual, these other spaces became extensions of home. The whole city felt like home, which explains why, even though I am living fourteen hundred miles away, I nevertheless feel that my home here in Boca Raton has been violated by the terrorist attacks in New York. The first three days after the attacks, I spent almost entirely in my bedroom, watching the horrific images over and over on television. But slowly, I began to reclaim the other parts of my house, and reading *Thanksgiving for a Habitat* was part of that process since, as the poem moves from room to room of Auden's house, it seems to construct it, and along with it, a good deal of Western civilization.

I needed to read Auden because his voice is both civilized and civil, because the very breadth of his knowledge, his many allusions, affirm our culture, and consequently, to read him takes me through the process of building and constructing my world. Not long after the attacks, a reporter near Ground Zero gathered some of the papers that had been blown from the World Trade Center and read them aloud to her television audience. The scraps were collected at random, many of them work orders—written in English or in other languages, like Chinese, which she could not pronounce, but only acknowledge.

I was deeply moved by this. Her acts of gathering and reading seemed like gestures toward construction, toward putting together what could not be put back. I was reminded of the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis searching the world for the missing pieces of her slain husband—and of Cadmus, at the end of Euripides's *The Bacchae*, trying in vain to make whole the torn and mutilated body of Pentheus. I was deeply moved because those simple, perfectly ordinary work orders suddenly seemed numinous, as did the smallest details of simply doing one's job in the days that followed the attacks.

Over the last two weeks, I have come to see how interconnected everyone and everything is, not only in the United States, but in the world. And seeing how everyone and everything is necessary to the health and vitality of the whole, I have been thinking about the poet's role or job in our society. If Gerard Manley Hopkins was right when he wrote:

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells;
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame," *God's Grandeur and Other Poems*. New York: Dover, 1995.

then what is it that poets do? What is the meaning of their work for the whole? To say that the poet is a maker, as the ancient Greeks did, is too general to be helpful. Composers, painters, sculptors—these are makers, too. Latin provides more help than Greek, for the ancient Romans had three words for poet, each word targeting specific roles and operations. A poet could be a *vates*, a prophet through whom a high power speaks. Percy Bysshe Shelley thought of himself as a prophet in his "Ode to the West Wind," when he wrote, "Be thou, spirit fierce, / My spirit!" and then, "Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!" A poet could also be a *carminium auctor*, or writer of songs, and Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, saw himself as a singer: "arma virumque cano"—"I sing of arms and the man" is how he begins his epic poem. But it is the third role that I find most interesting. A poet could be a *conditor,* a founder or builder, which is how Ovid thought of himself. In ancient Rome, a *conditor* was someone who built storerooms for valuables. Such a storeroom was called a *conditorium,* and this word should not sound utterly foreign to us, for our own *condominium* comes from the Latin. Poems, then, are places where our culture is stored, where civilization as we understand it is preserved. Poems are the cultural equivalent of DNA, what we try to pass on from generation to generation. So to read a poem, as well as to write a poem, is to enter in the process of civilization-building.

It would be a mistake to think of a poem's form as a storeroom into which the poet's words are poured. When it comes to poems, the storeroom and what is preserved are inseparable. For poems are made of patterns of thinking and feeling, and these patterns are what is preserved. And poems are made of language, and language is what poems preserve. As a poet, I feel especially custodial toward language, something that should not surprise you, Claudio, since the last time I stayed at your house, how many grammars of old languages did I have with me? Languages are precious to me, not only because they preserve all the sounds we can make, but because in words the history of human thinking is stored. If I keep rummaging through dictionaries, it is because I feel some old word may preserve meanings we need to know, meanings that are suddenly vital to us.

In the days and nights that followed September 11th, I did not sleep much, and during those nights I read through dictionaries of old languages—Latin, Provençal, Old English, and Gothic, the language of the West Goths who were alive and well in the fourth century. Since *freedom* is a word we hear a lot in the news these days, I began looking for earlier understandings of that word. To be free means first and foremost to be unconfined and unrestrained and has some connections with open air in German; but it also means to be candid and open, to be frank and spontaneous. Free speech does not mean: to say whatever silly or frivolous thought that comes to mind; it means: to be frank and candid, using words that match one's deepest and truest thoughts and feelings. The Goths must have done a lot of thinking about freedom, because in addition to our dictionary meanings, they had another meaning: to be free meant to be preserved from danger, to be safeguarded. It is easy enough to feel free when one is safe, out of harm's way, but what the old Goths understood is that it is only when one is free that one is safeguarded. I like to think that poems, so outspoken about who we are, so frank in their love for our civilization are what keep us safe, and that as poets and readers we participate in the process of keeping our country free.

As ever,
Susan Mitchell