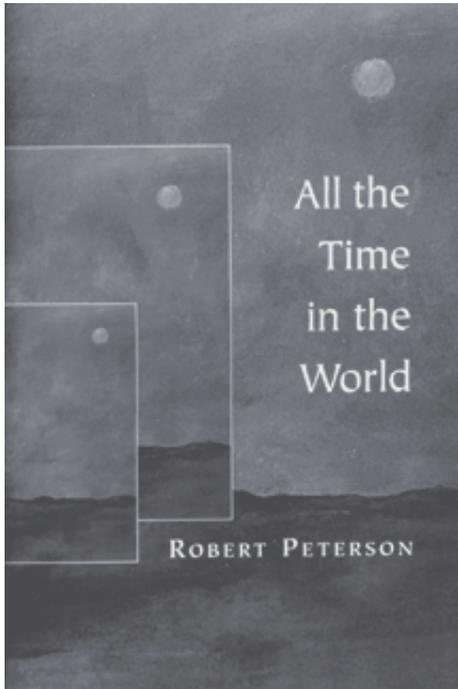




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Poet's Poet



Robert Peterson's poems don't mean--
they are

By Morton Marcus

ROBERT PETERSON is a poet's poet. He makes the most daunting verbal task read like an afterthought, performed while he is frying eggs. *All The Time in the World*, his ninth book, has just been released, and it is vintage Peterson. All the elements that have distinguished his work in the past are present in the new volume: the self-deprecating wryness, the mundane subject matter, the musicianlike attention to the rhythms and nuances of American speech. And throughout the volume, Peterson demonstrates once again not only why he is one of our finest poets, but why he wears the mantle, as only a handful do, of "poet's poet."

In a much-repeated phrase, Archibald MacLeish

said a poem "should not mean, but be." That paradoxical comment implies that the total experience of reading a poem should express its meaning, rather than the poet's stating the meaning directly. That totality is experienced by the reader through the poet's word choice, tone of voice, image, sound, syntax and rhythm--as well as idea.

Few poets either take the time or have the technical ability to follow the dictates inherent in MacLeish's definition. Peterson, however, uses all aspects of the poet's craft, and uses them so flawlessly and with such deceptive ease that he fulfills MacLeish's dictum, it seems, without trying.

Taking as his subject the ordinary world and the trivia we encounter on a daily basis, Peterson tells his poems from the first-person perspective.

In this way, the reader gets the impression that he is strolling down the street, standing in a hotel lobby or having a beer with a wry, sharp-eyed companion who is observing the life around them. Many times, this companion makes himself the butt of his own observations, winning the reader's affection by showing he is as mortal--and, therefore, as flawed--as the reader.

PETERSON'S language is an exquisitely modulated rendering of American English. From his word choice and rhythms to his internal rhymes, as well as his use of assonance and consonance, Peterson always demonstrates an ear astonishingly tuned to the musicality of our spoken speech.

Take for instance this seemingly nonpoetic group of lines (from the title poem) describing the poet waking up, and observe how the lines end and lead into each other, and how they perfectly modulate the rhythms of speech in a gently ironic tone of voice (triggered, in this case, by the phrase "What can one lose"):

Cold outside.
Contemplating the ceiling
while waking with care,
by degrees
what can one lose
by once again considering
the astonishing Chinese
living on that vast plain
divided by great rivers
& mountainous masses ...

Now go back and see the purposeful use of "c" sounds that supply the music and the "o" and "d" sounds that add polyphonic minors to this musical mix, which ends with the heavy "m" sounds of the last two words--"m" sounds that have been almost wholly absent from the previous seven lines and so seem to boom out the massiveness of the mountains when they are used.

Still contemplating the Chinese 15 lines later, Peterson presents another seemingly nonpoetic series of lines.

Watch again how the lines end and lead into one another (now using "g," "p" and "o" sounds), but this time observe how the sweep of the lines highlights the poet's mock neutral tone of voice, which wryly portrays the calmness the poet will, in the last line, propose as a possibility for his own dissolute life with tongue-in-cheek self-mockery.

I've been told that as a people they share the grand notion that even poor households have calm, modest gods with good intentions & that all knowledge can be found in a single untidy rented room exactly like this one.

Even the way Peterson tells his stories and chooses to make his observations provide classic lessons for other poets of "how it should be done." Instead of making similes and metaphors, moving our minds through external comparisons from point A to point B, then to point C and finally to D, Peterson leaps from point A to D, forcing the reader to fill in the left-

out steps, and thereby making him enter the overall experience of the poem in the way MacLeish was talking about.

Although the new volume abounds with examples of this process, an earlier book, *Leaving Taos*, which was selected as a volume in the National Poetry Series in 1981, contains the perfect illustration of the method. Recumbent in a dentist's chair, in a poem called "Hands Folded Like Napkins," an anxious Peterson suddenly says, as if out of nowhere, "Someone's trimming a hedge,/the Paris Express arrives ..."

To the inattentive reader, the images make no sense. From the reader who has granted the poet his complete attention, a whoop of laughter may fill the room, as he realizes he's been taken directly into the poet's mind as he experiences the sounds of the dentist's pick pricking at his teeth ("Someone's trimming a hedge") and the sudden head-filling noise of the dentist's drill ("the Paris Express arrives").

The operative words here, of course, are implication and indirection: what the poet is suggesting by his images; what he is expressing through innuendo; or, if you will, what he chooses not to say.

HIGHLY INFLUENCED by the gently ironic, resigned tone and indirect methods of Chinese poetry, Peterson brings to *All the Time in the World* all the elements his readers have come to prize in his eight previous volumes. In the new collection, however, Peterson further develops his already minimalist tendencies to say less where other poets would say more. At the same time, he adds a tongue-in-cheek series of garrulous lists to a number of the poems, wonderful and unexpected verbal explosions, comic bouquets of words sprouting in a magician's hands as if from nowhere and expressing, with a seeming shrug of the shoulders, "Why not?"

In fact, the new volume is paradoxically as much a relaxation of the poet's self-imposed rules as it is a strict adherence to them. It is not surprising, therefore, that the title poem, the longest Peterson has ever written, abruptly ends, having solved none of its weighty questions because they're unsolvable, and the poet is as happy with that solution as he was with plunging into the problem to begin with. As if playfully following the MacLeish dictum, the meaning of the poem, for the poet as well as the reader, is nothing more than the verbal engagement of the question.

If there is a major difference in the 27 poems that make up the new collection, it is an emotional openness on the poet's part toward his material and toward the world around him that he has purposely suppressed in his previous volumes. This new vulnerability is clearly shown in "Veteran's Day, 1993," in which Peterson drops his alternately tough-guy and self-deprecating personas in coming to terms with one of the most traumatic events in his life, his involvement as a very young U.S. soldier in the invasion of France during World War II.

At the end of the poem, he tells himself, as well as the reader, that at times "it becomes/extremely important" to acknowledge that ordinary lives have gone through "unspeakable suffering," for reasons of "honor and decency," and he identifies himself with other veterans of the period who are haunted by feelings of pride, loss and terror, all jumbled together, when he says that there are moments when

there's absolutely no
alternative
but to quit fighting it
& let go

Usually a fashioner of short poems, Peterson offers the longest poems he's written to date in the new book. The length of the title poem has already been mentioned. But there's also the

wonderful "Hotel Victoria"; with humor and pathos, the poet ruminates on the transitory nature of political power and personal glory, after seeing a plaque dedicated to the Shah of Iran in a hotel lobby in Mexico. Woven into the pattern of the poem is the poet's contemplation of his and, by extension, our ordinary lives in contrast to the lives of celebrities.

From a selection of poems concerned with his travels in Mexico to observations on things as diverse as his cat, auto mechanics, the death sentence and a defunct restaurant in the Arizona desert, Peterson shows he is as unpredictable and alive to the world as ever, balancing his longest poems to date with his shortest, a group of 31 haiku-like observations he calls "31 Watermelon Seeds."

All the Time in the World shows once again why Robert Peterson is a poet whose voice I'd want to have speaking beside me as I make my way from one day to the next, for his poems are like companions who find significant things to say about the endless proliferation of trivia that makes up our lives. What higher praise can one give a poet than that?

All the Time in the World
By Robert Peterson
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