

Poems

Gale Acuff

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Editors:

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Production Editor:

Kate Averett, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

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Introduction

Gale Acuff

Percy B. Shelley wrote that poets “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” meaning, in part, that their task is to expose purge cruelty and its practitioners. William Blake advocated the breaking of “Mind-forg’d manacles” of institution which makes lackeys of those whose only fault is their struggle against what they don’t understand about themselves and, hence, others, because the reluctance of authority to encourage or even permit them to understand what would undermine such authority.

Whatever truth may be, I doubt that it can be found dishonestly, and if the search for it can be undertaken unhindered by a power structure actually designed to contain, control it, and ration it, then there is some hope to be had in institutionalism, and some faith not misplaced in appropriate authority.

But I’m not sure whether an institution can really be bigger than the sum of its parts--a single dissenting conscionable conscience reminds us that all things are permanent solely in their tentativeness, and durable only because of their fragility.

The speakers in my poems are searching for something which will last; what lasts is the search for that which might last, which may be a fruitless attainment but for the truths to be found along the way. An answer might satisfy a question, but it might not be a substitute for it, and whatever power structure tries to determine what “Truth” is, that structure is truer than the truth which it pretends that it cannot only identify but master.

Surely one of the offices of the poet is to make truth /ess than it seems to be so to emphasize what it is not and what the pursuit of it entails; without the engaged artist who can negotiate this pursuit, we are lesser for imagining ourselves greater.

The pursuit of truth and of freedom are similar, if not identical; freedom isn’t freedom, by definition, when it can only be allowed.

Snap

Gale Acuff

In this shot of me from '57
I'm looking at me now taking me in.
I don't know that then but I know it now,
and even then I should've known better,
that some fifty-two years later I'd be
looking back on me looking forward and
not just into Father's camera. Look
at you now, I seem to be saying then.
So I do: I put down the black-and-white
print of me, goggle into the mirror.
Yes, there we are. Where's my new digital?
In the underwear drawer. I fish it
out and set the timer and look into
the lens, if you call it a lens, and there
I am, and was, and will be. But one day

I won't be posing anymore, though how
still I'll be then, and in perfect focus,
except that perhaps my eyes will be closed
and no one will nag *Let's try that again.*

Beyond

Gale Acuff

It won't be long before I die and go
to Heaven to be judged, my soul any
-way, my body will be in the ground where
it kind of began and if I've been good
I get to stay there, in Heaven I mean
and not just in God's courtroom, no, but in
Heaven itself to live eternally
which is like forever except better,
no beginning and no end I guess though
I had one, a beginning I mean, and
I'll have an end, when my body won't work
anymore but falls apart, probably

slowly if I'm lucky but maybe fast
and maybe even all of a sudden
--I could die with the snap of a finger,
quickly and suddenly and there I'll be

in line up in Heaven to see God and
get judged and if the judgement's bad, not that
God's judgement is, is bad that is, I'll go to
Hell but still dwell eternally, if
you can call that *dwelling*, and if I've been
good then goodness up in Heaven's what I'll
rate and the fact is that nowadays I
feel pretty hale and I'm not dead yet, no
kid should be, and though I might live to be
100 and that's ninety years from now

to God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost
and angels and saints and non-sinners in
Heaven, not that there are some sinners in
Heaven but then again that's why Jesus
died, they teach us at Sunday School, so that
whosoever believeth in Him shall
not perish, *perish* is a fancy word
for die, *but have everlasting life*, then

to them who art in Heaven, old's not *old*,
maybe the point is that nobody in
Heaven sins, at least not anymore, though
maybe they did when they were alive, not
that being dead in Heaven is being

not alive but that they don't have to sin
nor even want to sin and probably
have forgotten all about why sin's fun
and if they haven't they don't give sinning
a second thought, beyond temptation's what
they are I guess but of course I'll never
know until I'm dead myself but for now
compared to Eternity anyway

it's not that I'm a lot smaller but that
I'm a lot younger but on the other
hand if God was never born and never
dies then the life He lives isn't much like
life at all so I'm actually much

more experienced than *he* is. Amen.