

Swimming With John's Ghost

Category: Poems

written by Daniel Becker | May 27, 2016

Daniel Becker

During the service, after the *mensch* acclamation
and before the sermon-sized metaphor
that started with a tree then lost me
a comrade from the morning shift at college—
they shared a lecture hall and the appreciation
that all sleepy students are sleepy in different ways—
quoted John bragging about having the North Grounds pool
all to himself at sunrise. Morning people brag
about their mornings. This morning the lifeguards,

proving they do pay attention to the lives they guard,
have the music tuned to oldies—Sam Cooke crooning
you-ou-ou-ou send me as Sam's fans adjust their goggles.
John, easy to spot in that shameless bathing cap
he claims helps part the waters, takes the lane next to me.
We're standing there praying the water isn't as cold as it is
and waiting for one of us to acknowledge our existence.

Bummer about that service I say, hoping not to sound
too relieved he doesn't want to share my lane.
Total he says. Then we submerge. Strange how dying
helped his stroke. He doesn't have to breathe but does—
old habits die hard.

I'm a little choked up in the locker room
and he suggests *doing something about that cough*.
He would know. Since it is a locker room
I share some locker-room wisdom:
when the going gets tough the tough get going.
John takes his cue: *practice doesn't make perfect,*
perfect practice makes perfect. We allow a moment of silence,
but before any hymns erupt I share my favorite hymn fact:
Emily Dickinson poems can be sung to the tune of *Amazing Grace*.
I dwell in pos-si-bil-i-ty he sings almost on key,
then asks if he can borrow my brush. *Get real* I answer.
Who wants to catch someone else's static?
We commiserate about chlorine and dry itchy skin.
We put our pants on one leg at a time,
an act of faith that grounds us. *See you later* he promises
and just like anyone walks out the door.

About the poet:

Daniel Becker practices and teaches general internal medicine at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, where he also directs the Center for Biomedical Ethics and Humanities.

About the poem:

“The events in this poem were all true enough. John had an office across the hall from me, and it is convenient as well as important to remember him every time I go to my office.”

Poetry editors:

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