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Buzzing With Orion

I had dinner at a table next to Poet Laureate Robert Hass not long ago. The restaurant was lit by the jumping light of votive candles, and I wasn't sure it was him until he started relating to his companion the etymology of the name "Michael," his face aglow with the picayune detail of it all.

I took a class from Hass my sophomore year at Cal, before he was poet laureate and without ever having heard of him before. I was simply fulfilling a requirement toward my English major, just as I had been when I signed up for a class taught by Thom Gunn and was later floored to discover that there were five pages devoted to him in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*.

Unfortunately, Hass's class met at 8 a.m., on the corner of campus farthest from where I lived. "Bring coffee and breakfast and glory in the *virtue* of being up so early," he advised. "Pretty soon you'll be thinking you can run before class." But late nights and spring fever and young love and young heartbreak soon conspired to keep me far from Barker Hall most Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

When I did go, Hass was dynamic, thought-provoking, a little loopy. "I have a friend who has a genius for misery," he said once. "He's the Eeyore of my existence." Hass was fascinated by language, enthralled by human nature, passionate about poetry. Everything held wonder for him. "If you look hard enough at the sunrise, do you figure it all out?" Instead of taking notes that would help me when it came time to write a paper, I found myself writing down things he said that struck home. "The only people you can really wound are the people you have loved, or who have loved you," he said on the morning I sat red-eyed in the back of the room, caught up in the crushing sadness of a relationship that had fallen apart over the weekend.

One of the course requirements was to commit three poems from the class to memory. At the time, I thought it was a stupid exercise; I have always disliked memorizing things, when books are so readily available. But Hass spoke of wanting us to have poems that we could carry "buzzing in our heads" after we left his class. I chose each of my three poems for a different reason: e.e. cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town" because it had a pleasant sing-song rhythm that was fun to say out loud and easy to memorize; Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," I admit, because I had already memorized it for a zealous fourth-grade teacher. But my third poem was Adrienne Rich's "Orion," which I chose because, more than anything else I read that spring, it spoke to me. It used to make me cry, lying in the darkness, to repeat this poem, with its mixture of sadness and irony and hope and defiance, seemingly culled from my own life.

I was terrified when the day finally came to recite my poems for Hass, making my way to his office in Wheeler in the early spring evening, mumbling bits of poems under my breath. For weeks I had been mouthing poetry everywhere, in the library, while jogging, while making sandwiches at my deli job, while lying in bed before I fell asleep.

I arrived breathless, partly from the climb up to Wheeler's attic, where the English professors have their offices, and partly from sheer terror. I suspected that Hass would know I hadn't been

in class all semester. Heart pounding, I focused on the blue dusk outside his window, the Campanile chalk-white in the last of the setting sun. He made no comment about my attendance record, and when it was over I thanked him and ducked out, relieved.

The funny thing is, after all the stress and complaining, Hass was right. I do carry "Orion" in my head; not the whole thing, maybe, but beautiful fragments of it. The other two poems, beyond the first couple of stanzas, have fallen off into the chasm of my post-college brain, somewhere in the same dark recesses where I used to know how to conjugate French verbs and solve quadratic equations.

But "Orion" comes to me sometimes when I am daydreaming, or when I glance up at the night sky to see him doing his celestial cartwheels, arms spread wide. Spring 1992 was a difficult and wild and exhilarating semester, one in which I often feel I learned more *outside* my classes than in them. But from Hass I grudgingly learned the living, human side of poetry, and the importance of having a poem to carry buzzing in your head.

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