

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

Tom Sheehan

Charnley and Leonard

Silence is the color in a blind man's eyes

Leonard wondered if it was some kind of contest, if it smacked of more than what it seemed. He had heard the poem a hundred times, Charnley always walking around with the book in his shirt pocket or back pocket suddenly reading it to him, again and again, and Leonard, the Blind Man of North Saugus, let the words sink in and become part of him, part of his sightless brain. Just like Charnley had become part of him. Charnley's face he could not picture, nor eyes, nor beard, nor jut of chin, but settled on the imagination of Charnley's hands and could only do so when he felt his own slim unworked hands, the thin fingers, the soft palms, the frail knuckles, how the fingers wanted to touch a piano but couldn't, or a woman, but who wants a blind man?

Charnley, he noted early, walked with a heavy step, a plod on the earth or trod surface, so that the framework of the old building vibrated and made echoes of itself. Charnley's hands must be robust and huge, Leonard thought, because he had been a farmer at one time, a tenant farmer, a milker of cows, a digger of land, a puller of weeds who just happened to read poems. Just think about that, he said to himself, think about the farmer, think about the distance between two men, how wide it can be, what narrows that distance, sound or silence? What kind of providence can a poem bring?

*Silence is the color
in a blind man's eyes,
sounded again.*

Though Leonard initially could not begin to visualize the poem on the page (not with the sensitivity or capture of Braille or the impressions of an old copper etching he'd known), perhaps not ever he thought, the way the verses were built, the white space supporting the sounds. This, even as Charnley repeatedly explained the structure, often testing Leonard's patience to the darkest limits, the words building on a pad in his mind, a pad conjured up in an instant. At first they collected in a bunch that he had time to separate and sound off on. What the hell, if he had anything he had time, a whole ton of time.

Then the words, each one in turn, eventually assumed a hazy kind of identity and a place alongside another word or two. Sense came of some of them finally, and then one night, alone, a clarity, as if a shell of awed proportions had gone off in his head, exploded its sound and meaning in a dazzling display of whiteness. His brother Milward had once tried to explain the properties of a white phosphorous shell to him, the heat and the dazzling light and the rush of energy traversing a forward slope of a mountain in Korea. The nearest thing to them Leonard had ever known, to both Milward's description of white phosphorous and this final poem, was pain. He used to tell Charnley his gall bladder attack was a poem because that had struck him awake on several nights at full alarm, fright leaping through his body, a stabbing in his guts, a poem of pain fully understood down to its root and rhythm.

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*his red octaves screaming
two shades of peace
in sanguine vibrato,*

Charnley had said, "I'll stop at the end of each verse, each line, so you can see, can visualize, how the whole damn poem is made." As if a piece of punctuation or explanation, he added, "Don't let my rambunctious choice of words upset you. I am not very selective, not schooled. I only mean by them what I'm trying to say." At that moment Charnley's voice was heavy and anvil-like, canyon stuff, back-of-the-barn deep, not a classroom voice, not a poet's voice, no obtuse edge to it, no carriage of partial mystery, no forecast of shadows. It was the no-nonsense voice of a farmer who knows the land is an enemy of wild proportions or the friend of a lifetime in one swift reaping. Patience, it could have said, all the rough stuff not withstanding.

"But your voice changes when you read the poem," Leonard said, "the sound changes, you get cryptic, short-tempered, and don't tell me I'm getting short or I'll kick you the hell out of here! You think I can't see you, don't you? Well, I know when you're standing in the doorway or in front of one of the windows. One room, one door, seven windows, I could find you in a damn minute."

And for his own punctuation said, "And don't shrug your shoulders like that. I know what you're doing when you do it. And your voice changes then, too. I could call you an *Octavarian*." He tittered, less than a *guffaw* it was, half full of respect, measuring, playful, reaching. "Hell, man, sometimes I can see better than you." His fingers tapped slowly on the tabletop, a radioman sending out his own code.

Charnley only smiled, yet standing in the doorway on this visit so Leonard could find him in that shadow of shadows, that deep shade of an eclipse of the whole man. He'd been in the shadows his whole life; his dimensions raw and few but known.

*a purple strike lamenting rivers
and roads lashed in his mind,*

One day a year earlier and there's no one there, and then a voice says, coming off the front walk of the one-room house that used to be the old North Saugus School, "I'm a new neighbor now. I'm Charnley. I come to live with my daughter Marla in the old Corbett house. I have a poem here about a blind man I'd like to share with you. I like to read some poems. Not all poems, just some of them. I've watched you walk all the way to Lynn to see your brother Charlie and all the way up the Pike to see your brother Milward, some days your cane flashing like a saber, the sun giving respect to its duty. This poem reminds me of you and I wonder what you might have to say about it."

Leonard's quick words leaped out of the darkness. "You followed me?"

Charnley spoke as if he were plowing the land, trying to make the furrow straight, the endeavor simple. "No, you were going my way, so I went along with you, some ways in the rear, but then I went past both times, to

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see Ma Corbett in the nursing home in Lynn and off to an old friend's new home in Lynnfield, but not far from Milward's place."

Charnley read him the poem for the first time.

*like a crow's endless cawing
of blackness anticipates nothing.*

"That's a damn love poem," Leonard shouted, "and I don't even have a girlfriend. What the hell are you trying to do to me? What are you saying?" There was no way he could fathom Charnley's face, what lurked in a half smile or the set of eyes, how his mouth was framed, the lips readable. If he dipped one shoulder in a half shrug, was it a signal he could interpret?

"Everything is love, Leonard, or no love. Everything. You don't need a girlfriend to have love. I don't have a girlfriend. My wife's been dead two-three years now. I love this poem. You made me see what it's like, this poem. I just want to know what it does for you. If it does anything. I am never sure of things like this, such argument or reasoning. You sow a seed, take care of its bed with tender care, it grows. If it doesn't, better find out why."

"You're like a damn busybody hen, popping in here, following me like I was a damn cripple or something, sticking this poem in my ear. I never had a poem in my ear."

*And now, for all my listening,
it is your hand on my heart,*

"I'm trying to be a friend, Leonard. I wanted to share something with you. I'm just an old farmer who loves this poem."

"Not outright pity, I take it."

"None at all. I don't give a damn if you never see another shadow in your whole life, if that's what you want to hear from me." Leonard knew he was blocking one of the windows, the idea of sunlight failing around him, a personage of shadow.

*the mute fingers letting out
the slack where your mouth reached,*

They had, with that declaration, become friends for one long year. Charnley would come and read the poem, always reading it from the book, never having it memorized, saying he couldn't do it. Leonard never told him he had it memorized, had said it a thousand times a day it seemed for months on end, at first the words cluttered on the pad and then standing like singular statues. There would be a pot of tea on the old kitchen range, converted to gas by his brother Milward, and the tea would hit the one room as if it had been sprayed with pekoe or oolong or something else Asian, a cutting swath of clear acid in the air, hitting the sinuses, clearing them, drawing Leonard and his friend to the stove on cold days

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or to the small porch on warm days, the late sun spilling on their feet, the poem following the way a shadow comes along or moves ahead of a body proper.

Leonard said one day, the wind bitter and cold outside, the windows rattling, "Why don't you ever read one of the other poems?"

"It would only dilute this one, Leonard, cut right through it. If I know one poem in my life, it's worth it, and I know this poem because you know it. It's real for me. It's like my wife, my one woman forever. I'll not dilute her. Not for one damn minute. Not forever. The same as having a best friend. There's only one of those. Everyone else has to get in line.

*reached, your moving away,
a pale green evening down
the memory of a pasture*

Came the day eventually, in the sock of winter, they said the poem like a duet at work, the words falling in place with unerring accuracy, rhythmic, shared, together, almost one voice, the room expanding around them, a spring pasture coming to them, silence coming at them, one word and then another word hanging in space like they were parsing each one in the midst of the air, a letter at a time, a slight whoosh if need be, the rush of a consonant or its soft command on the lips, sibilant, syllabic. The blind man and the sighted man said *silence* as if they stood in the middle of a mausoleum, and the word hung there for them and then died away and became itself. All around them they felt the word become itself. When they said *color*, some long minutes later, Charnley had his eyes closed and Leonard had his wide open, and they knew they were twinned in this sound, this nothingness. Leonard was ferociously at ease.

The next day the knock at the door was timid, feminine, like feathers, Leonard thought, pigeon feathers in the eaves. It was Charnley's daughter Marla. "I have news about my father." The tone of her voice abounded with that news, harbinger, omen. "I found him this morning in his bed the way he wanted to go, peacefully, in the darkness. That's just what he said to me one night recently, 'Peacefully, in the darkness.' He also said that when it comes on him he wanted you to have this book." She placed the book of poems in Leonard's hand. "He said you'd know what to do with it."

She was a smaller shadow than her father standing in the open door, the wind rustling behind her, death hanging back there in the darkness of the day as if it were words ready to be spoken, dread highlights hunting the darkness. The old schoolhouse had no echoes, no vibrations, the sills socked home tightly on the granite bases. Half the size of her father, Leonard thought, yes, perhaps half the size.

Leonard motioned for her to close the door. "Shut the death out," he said, and his fingers found the page of the poem where that route was worn like a path. Listening for her steps, seeking minor vibrations if there were any, he offered the open page to Charnley's daughter, their hands touching. An electrical movement passed through them and he remembered a static charge coming at him once from a metal file cabinet at Milward's house.

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Her voice was soft, hesitant. It would take her time. He had plenty of time. Now Charnley had all of it. Against one window she posed a smaller shadow, but a whiteness lurked in aura. Leonard thought of the white phosphorous Milward had spoken about as Charnley's

daughter Marla sifted through the poem. He tried to picture her small hands holding the book open. There was something delicate he could almost reach, fragile, silken, but it was lost in the poem as she spoke it, her breath instead nearly touching him, cinnamon with it, and perhaps maple syrup, yet day and night all coming together in the one essence:

Arrangement by Tones

*Silence is the color
in a blind man's eye,
his red octaves screaming*

*two shades of peace
in sanguine vibrato
a purple strike lamenting rivers
and roads lashed in his mind,
like a crow's endless cawing
of blackness anticipates nothing.*

*And now, for all my listening,
it is your hand on my heart,
the mute fingers letting out
the slack where your mouth
reached, your moving away,
a pale green evening down
the memory of a pasture.*

It was faint but indelible, he decided; discoverable, he assented; mild but ascendant, he owned up to; and Leonard the Blind Man knew how soft and delicious it was on her tongue, at her lips, coming from her mouth, the poem, the poem her father had found for him.