The Poetry Cure

Sometimes, the cadences of a good poem are all you need.

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CHRISTY PORTER SPENDS HER DAYS HEFTING CRATES AND PICKING CANTALOUPE TO FEED MIGRANT FARMWORKER FAMILIES in Southern California's Coachella Valley. It's hard work, and it shows. The 48-yearold nonprofit director walks with a seesaw gait on arthritic and overtaxed knees. Her arms are dotted with spider bites, her legs often splashed with oil from do-it-yourself attempts to fix the forklift.

Yet despite the dings, Porter seems to glide on a cushion of air. Like one of those airboats skimming over crocodile-infested waters in the Everglades, she rides a little higher than those around her. Her cushion? Not a daily meditation practice or a stress-busting supplement, but poetry. In her mind's eye, its images and rhythms transform her everyday surroundings into something new and fresh.

Sure, it's 120 degrees outside, but isn't that brutal glare simply the world blazing, "like shining from shook foil," as Gerard Manley Hopkins said?

And yes, she occasionally runs into sidewinders lurking under the warehouse stairs. But it's hard to be spooked when she thinks of Emily Dickinson's "narrow fellow in the grass."

"You know that starburst filter that photographers use to make everything sparkle?" Porter asks, shaking her blonde hair out of a big straw hat. "Poetry is like that to me."

Indeed, healers through the ages have turned to poetry for its remarkable ability to soothe and console, much like prayer and song. The Iroquois fought off depression after the loss of a loved one by chanting a condolence incantation. In ancient Egypt, healing verses were written on papyrus which was then dissolved into a brew to be sipped.

Today, poetry is actually making its way into some doctors' offices. Harvard poet-physician Rafael Campo, author of The Healing Art: A Doctor's Black Bag of Poetry, is convinced that reading, writing, or reciting poetry can be therapeutic. In his own internal medicine practice, he likes to slip sheets of poetry among the prescriptions and brochures he hands out to patients.

Campo believes poetry can let people see illness differently (the starburst lens theory), as well as help them stay on an even keel amid life's spider bites and forklift breakdowns.

While he's certain that poetry is good for people, he can't tell you quite why. "We're just at the early stages of understanding the possible mechanisms of action," Campo says. "But poetry probably affects people beginning on the level of the neurons in the brain stem. When patients read or recite poetry, the rhythms have been shown to improve the regularity of their heart and breathing rates." Indeed, a study published in the International Journal of Cardiology showed that when volunteers read poetry aloud for 30 minutes, their pulse rates were slower than those of people in a control group who engaged in conversation.

The hurdle for Campo is getting patients past the "quiet panic" that poetry triggers in some people. "Many of us learned to fear poetry in grade school," he says. "Yet it's the most elemental language we have, and the best poems are not at all alienating."

It's possible to overcome poetry panic at any age, but an early positive experience with the art form helps. Campo remembers his father reading the patriotic poems of Jose Marti to him in Spanish at age three. It was as soothing as a lullaby, he says.

Porter, too, was lucky enough to fall in love with poetry long before she ever thought to fear it. As a five-year-old growing up in a Kentucky coal town, she was often absorbed in The Better Homes and Gardens Book of Children's Verses. Her dad, a coal miner with a third-grade education, encouraged Porter to recite poems aloud. Both father and daughter thrilled to the galloping suspense of Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman," and to the evocative power of sentences like "The moon was a ghostly galleon."

“I didn’t even know what a galleon was,” Porter recalls. “I had to look it up. So it’s a dark and stormy night, and the moon’s a ship. When you’re a kid, that’s pretty exciting. You start to think: ‘Isn‘t this a neat way of saying things?’” Porter didn‘t have to completely understand the poems in order to love their sound and force. Indeed, doubters often believe that to appreciate poems you must decipher their obscure messages. Actually, much of a poem’s power lies in the simple elements of imagery and rhythm. “The content isn’t always so important,” Campo says. “Poems can enter us through visceral channels that don’t depend at all of cognitive processes.”

When we read lines of Yeats and feel an instantaneous tightness in our chest, the poetry is bypassing our analytical minds and acting directly on the body. “The best poems just come screaming into you,” Porter says.

That‘s exactly what happened to Porter when she reached the threshold of adolescence and the poetry imprinted on her in childhood began to play a more profound role in her life. Her father started to drink heavily and her parents divorced. Porter‘s grades plummeted.

Her seventh-grade teacher-perhaps noticing a need in the troubled girl, brought mimeographed copies of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Spring and Fall: To a Young Child” to class. Porter was riveted by the poem’s message of loss (“Margaret are you grieving/Over Goldengrove unleaving?”). As well as feeling she had company in her sorrow, she was floored by the realization that she truly knew what the poet meant: Margaret was silly to be weeping over fallen leaves when there were so many other losses coming.

Once she got to college, Porter was hooked. She blew her entire textbook allowance on books by Denise Levertov and other poets. “Levertov thought of poems as morning prayers, and they started to feel like that to me, too,” she says. “Poetry is just regular people in an enlightened moment. The good poems pass that enlightenment on to you.”

These days, colleagues sometimes take a look at Porter’s curriculum vitae and make jokes about her college days spent studying poetry. “Hah,” they snort. “That done you a lot of good?”

Yes, actually.

There was the time, for instance, when Porter was stuck at Chicago’s O’Hare airport during a snowstorm, en route to visiting her father, who was dying of black lung disease. She mused on an Emily Dickinson poem that reads, “The quiet nonchalance of death/No daybreak can bestir.“ In the chaotic airport, surrounded by stranded travelers, she felt poetry’s hush and comfort.

“Poetry steadied me,” Porter says. “I knew what to expect because I truly trust Emily Dickinson. She’s been right so many times before.”

Today, Porter keeps poetry close at hand-Wendell Berry on a warehouse shelf and a puppy-shredded 101 Famous Poems anthology under the seat of her battered van.

But mostly the poetry is inside her:

“There are poems that will always be written in the hard rock of my head,“ she says. “They come back to me at times like hymns. It just feels good to know they’re there.”