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The Art of Hearing: Interview with Stanley Plumly

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The Art of Hearing: Interview with Stanley Plumly

Stanley Plumly is the author of six books of poetry, including Out-of-the-Body Travel and In the Outer Dark. His most recent book is The Marriage in the Trees. Along with being a distinguished lyric poet, Plumly is a major scholar on the life and poetry of John Keats. Plumly has received grants from the NEA, Guggenheim, and Ingram-Merill foundations. He has lectured and taught throughout the country. Currently he is a professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park. An Exile editor spoke with him recently.

EXILE: I've noticed in your earlier work, the poems, as in *The Giraffe*, are much shorter, and there's more of the obvious, always present "I," and in the recent works, the stanzas seems more open, longer, and the "I" is more in the background.

PLUMLY: That's learning. That's getting better, and I hope, wiser and richer, and all that stuff. My first two books, I have to say, and I've said this before, I didn't have workshops. I didn't know anybody. [The poems] were my workshops. That's where I learned and in a way the learning process is about doing what you can do and then getting past that point. That's what I could do. I think those are typical problems of a young poet. It's like when children are asked to draw. They always make themselves big or small, depending, and the rest of the world in proportion or disproportion. The rest of the world is in disproportion to myself in those poems—I'm large and it's small. Well, I figured out that it's quite the other way around, that I'm small and it's large. That's a much healthier and more rewarding theory, it seems to me. That's what you see in the poems from *Out-of-the-Body Travel* on—a recognition of the scale and size of memory and experience in that memory compared to one part of it, and in a way I was just a part of the drama of that memory. The rhetoric fits that perception. The lines get wider. The stanzas get thicker. The poems get longer.

EXILE: What about the landscape of your poems, past and present? James Wright was a big influence on me, I guess, and you and Wright both came from the same landscape, yet your poems are so different.

PLUMLY: We're from the same county. He was from the lower part of the county and I was born in the upper part, which is the farming area in Barnsville. St. Claresville is the county seat and it's between Barnsville and further high up, Martin's Ferry, which is right on the river and the industrial part of that county. But James Wright, as much as I love him, his impact on my own poems has been, I think, not great. I can think of other poets he's influenced much more. We share something else, a sense of the world, a sense of seeing the world, and a sense of place. The actual writing—there are other people who have had an impact on me that he doesn't have, the way he makes a poem, the voice of the poem.

up there, buddy?"

"Would you stop shaking me? You're not my buddy. And you're not helping."

"Oh, so now you want my help?"

"What? No. Just shut up and hold the ladder."

I suddenly decide it's time to become philosophical and poetic or something. "You know, I read somewhere that if you tell your friend that you're angry, you won't be anymore."

"Won't be friends?"

"No, dicko. You won't be angry."

He looks at me and hesitates for a second. "So now you're saying we're friends?"

"Co-workers, associates, whatever. The basic theme still applies."

"Oh."

"But if you don't say you're angry, it'll grow, like a tree or something."

Josh ignores my rambling and continues trying to tear the panel open and I'm still busy holding the ladder and wondering about how we can return to a co-worker relationship in which I'm more in charge until Beth walks up. Actually she's kind of skipping.

"Oh my God—Josh, your face is so bright red." I'm thinking this definitely isn't what he needs.

He looks down at her and sneers. "That's because this is hard to do."

"Well, then," she puts her arm around me, "why don't you have this piece try for awhile?" He needs that even less.

"I'll do it, okay? I can do it."

She pushes back a cuticle with her thumb. "You're so cute." If his face weren't already flushed from exertion and anger he would've been blushing as soon as she flounced over here. "Oh, Lorraine wanted me to tell you guys to finish stocking the hair dyes when you're done with this little project."

Josh groans. "All she wants us to do is work."

And I of course just can't repress the witty sarcasm. "Funny, since we're, you know, at work and all."

Beth and I enjoy a hearty chuckle but Josh ignores us and attacks the light panel with renewed vigor. He's gnashing his teeth and snorting and clawing at it with rabid zeal and frankly I'm a little disturbed.

"Dude, you're a beast."

And then with a grunt he pulls really hard and the ladder vibrates in my hands. The entire light panel breaks free and the three of us are pelted in a shower of broken acoustical tiles and screws and dust and miscellaneous debris. There's a big hole in the ceiling and the light panel sways over Josh's head, suspended only by the electrical wires. It's still semi-working though and the dying bulbs' yellow and gray flashes of light make the scene even more beyond bizarre.

"Whoa," is all Josh can articulate, and Beth and I echo his sentiments as we brush ourselves off.

Lorraine comes sprinting over with the back of her striped cardigan flapping behind her, demanding to know what in God's name happened. We're just kind of staring blankly at the carnage Josh produced while random customers start flocking around us,

asking stupid questions with their hands covering their open mouths.

"What's wrong with you? What did you do?" Lorraine's livid and she closes her eyes for a few seconds to regroup or something. Her blue makeup looks even more offensive under this furious light.

Josh's lips are quivering and he takes a step down the ladder. "I don't know. I just, I..."

But he's interrupted by a loud creaking and the wires snap and the panel swings down and smacks into him and the ladder falls over. The severed wires cause a short or whatever happens when the current breaks and all the sets of lights dim and then die throughout the store. The emergency lights blink on immediately but they're not nearly as bright as the main fluorescent ones.

He really does crash to the floor in a broken heap of fluorescent tubes and cheap poly-blend fabrics, but not because I did anything. He lands kind of on his side and he's laying on the floor holding his left arm and grimacing. His face has lost all its glaring redness but now it's just weak and sallow instead.

Beth bends over to help him to his feet. "Oh my God, are you okay?"

He repels her with eyes that flash like the fluorescent lights he just killed. "Leave me alone—I'm fine." But I know he's not.

"I can't believe this. I cannot believe this." Lorraine's rubbing her striped arms frantically. "Look at this. Just look—what the hell have you done to my store?"

He turns to her and just stares with the same savage look he gave Beth.

And Lois is yelling from up front at the registers. "What's going on? Lorraine, what should I do? Is everything okay?"

Lorraine spins around and hisses at her. "Everything's under control. Tell the customers that everything's fine. Just keep ringing people up. We need somebody up there."

But no one's up there except Lois because everyone in the store converged on Aisle Nine when they heard the violent racket. Everybody's just kind of standing around uselessly, looking concerned but not very helpful and wondering what could possibly have caused this fearful situation. I stare at the old man with the pasty pink head that made us fix the lights in the first place and I try to look as pissed as possible so he knows this is all his fault.

Then I look down at Josh and he's trying to hold back tears that are probably just as much from embarrassment as they are from pain. When I knocked him down in the Cart Corral he stayed on his back on the asphalt like a submissive dog while I told him I made him. I look at the fallen ladder on the floor next to him and I realize he climbed it because of me.

Then he rises clumsily from the wreckage on the floor. He's still piercing Lorraine's light blueness with his own burning eyes and I think again that I made him, I just made him.

—Tom Dussel '01

EXILE: Well, continuing the idea of landscape, I just spent five months in England. I lived there for five months and what I was struck with was time, the idea of time in that place versus the idea of time here, in this place. I was talking to an English writer, Neil Gaiman, and he seemed to think that the difference between England and America was that in England, one hundred miles is a big space, and in America, a hundred years is a long time. Is that notion in any way connected with your feelings about the so-called American line, the inability to make an American line in poetry?

PLUMLY: Definitely. Whitman says that, really. He was the first one to make an issue that the size of the poem, that the grasp of the poem, that the embrace of the poem must match the size or sense of experience in our landscape—in Robert Lowell's phrase, "forever pioneering" sense that we're always moving in the direction of the future, the open road sense. England—you go over there and the trees seem shorter. Everything is on a scale and yes, a hundred miles is a tremendous distance there because there's so much in between, so much texture, so many trees, so many roads. There's so much density of life. We don't have much of that here. Even in our so-called cities, there are vast areas that are just vacant in a way. That's also a theme, that vacancy, not just space—it's emptiness too, and that's an issue in poetry... I've lived there [in England] a lot. Some reviewers have referred to me as the most English poet, not just because of Keats and the Romantics, but just my feeling for the landscape, for a more intimate landscape, I think, than Whitman is looking at, something more closer to Dickinson, perhaps.

EXILE: Could that be also because of your sense of form?

PLUMLY: Perhaps. I pay much attention to the old values of line and form, that's true.

EXILE: In terms of form, a friend of mine, a poet, was wondering why you choose, in *The Marriage in the Trees*, to write in blank verse?

PLUMLY: It's the length, really, the time it takes, that's what I'm after in a fourteen line poem. That's our sort of haiku. Certain things are satisfied, certain kinds of moments, certain experiences, the saturation of emotion is just about that. It's a deep restrain, but it's a small restrain of experience. The sonnet-length poem can cover that. Rhythm, it seems to me, is an issue of assonance and consonance, near-rhythm; English is rich in that. That's what I pay attention to, that music. With the decasyllabic line, even the blank verse line, that slants. That's the chief way to look at the way I make a line. If it's a sonnet, it still puts a tax on the length of the line, on the length of the poem, the length of the line breaks.

EXILE: I noticed in the reading the other day, you were counting.

PLUMLY: Was I?

EXILE: I couldn't figure out what you were doing with your hands while you were reading. But you were counting out the sounds of the poems.

PLUMLY: I wasn't conscious. I was counting. I was hearing it.

EXILE: I even asked David Baker if you played a musical instrument.

PLUMLY: No, I don't. I'm totally deaf as it were to the technological aspects of playing music. Just hearing it.

EXILE: This is self-indulgent, but I was wondering if we could talk about a specific poem, "The Art of Poetry"? Just to continue the thoughts of music and hearing. The reason I told you I liked the poem so much is not because it's about poetry, but because it's about hearing. I have a hearing loss myself and I really felt a connection to that.

PLUMLY: It occurred to me one day, I guess I was thinking in the general territory, when I heard that radio interview with that woman [the hearing child of deaf parents]. It was fascinating to me, the problems of what deafness means. Perhaps in the literal sense, but also in the figurative sense, too, about being able to hear your experience, to hear your own tones, to hear other people that way, because everything is tone, and how valuable, how indispensable that is to poetry. There's a lot of flat writing around today... It seems a lot of poets get by without any interest in the ear. What is it they're after? What is the register of emotion they're after? They're looking for something else, I guess, but I'm not buying it. In a way, "The Art of Poetry" is the art of hearing. That's what that poem is about for me.

EXILE: Me too. Another thing that seemed to be recurring in your poetry, along with hearing, is the trope of sleep. I used to be an insomniac. How does that figure into your work?

PLUMLY: It's a subject, if you know what I mean by subject. It's an issue, whatever we want to call it. More than that, I think it's a way of perceiving the day, adding up the day, what Whitman calls "the tally." Not that someone necessarily lies there and rehearses because you do that usually before you fall asleep, that's a way to count what you did. Run through the narrative of the day, that's a way to fall asleep. But it's also what wakes you up, something that didn't quite work right, something that didn't get resolved, some fragment... The truth I found about sleep is that I love to sleep. I want to, but I'm not always sure what the difference is, what caused me to sleep well or not. A lot of people fear not sleeping, feel threatened by it. What I've learned is to embrace it and use it. In a way you sort of become your own ghost. You rise, but it's not really you. It's this other being who walks around and maybe reads a little bit, eats a little bit, turns on the TV and watches a movie you would never see any other time because there are all these other ghosts up. It's a special time, that time of the day. You have to recognize that, accept it.

EXILE: Is it a way of eluding death?

PLUMLY: I suppose it has death all over it. You're more aware of your mortality at that hour. Everyone who has sort of thought about it recognizes that, recognizes it intuitively and doesn't say so because it's fearful. It is associated with death. Sleep is the great archetype of how death works, the allegory of the day—the morning is this season, and the afternoon is that season. At night I think you're never more alone. I've often wondered what it would be like to be with someone willing to wake up in the middle of the night, or who did wake up and without anyone complaints, said, "Let's talk," or, "God, it's great." I've never met anyone like that. The people I've been hanging around with always complain. That part's tricky, domestic life. Domestic life for the insomniac is more difficult.

EXILE: Talking about death, many of your poems are elegies. You said that Keats' odes are also really elegies.

PLUMLY: I think that they are, and I think that they all are coming out of that high moment, recovering as much as does from Tom's [Keats' brother] death, which is a rehearsal or revisiting of the death of his mother who he also tended. Here he is trained as a doctor who becomes the ultimate patient. At the time he writes the odes, he's moving into the patient phase. There are inklings that he's about to recognize that he's no longer the healer but the one who needs to be healed. That's also, I think, part of the complexities of the odes. Where does he stand, which side is he? The emotional subtext is, I think, Tom's death and its aftermath, not just the odes but the poems around that time, too, also figure into this whole emotional narrative.

EXILE: It seems to me that in Keats and in your poems there's that connection, that trying to hang onto what's lost.

PLUMLY: I think that's true, definitely. In my case that's true, the perishability of things. It's a form of longing, I suppose, one of the forms in which that longing manifested itself, the degree to which it's felt in various times, in various contexts. I think that's a wise perception, making connections, holding on.

EXILE: In your newer work, are you making the same kind of connections?

PLUMLY: Probably.

EXILE: I saw you had a big notebook of new poems

PLUMLY: It's not as big as it looks, mostly blank paper. There are a few poems in there. But yes, I think so. Maybe they're a little more muscular, more active in the world, less complex, a little more passive, if you will. I work very hard on them, actually. But I don't quite have...poems I want to write. I have a couple of those I want of the right magnitude. There's a certain neat, middle-ground magnitude that I need to have achieved in these

new poems, but I want to stretch that. I have sixteen new poems, but about twelve of them I really feel good about, solid about. Sometimes you don't know. You just don't know. You give it all out, but some of your poems, they were right, you were wrong. It's just that it wasn't what you thought you could get or wanted or needed. You trust it, but in fact, it was something else. You weren't able to see that, but the poem saw that.

—Alison Stine '00

"Untitled" by Amy Denner '99