Lecture excerpt on Patrick Lawler's "Whole Poems"—a close reading of counterpoint in the poem, and a comparison with Diane Thiel's "The Minefield"

As I grew to appreciate and love many of Patrick's poems, and as my students loved and appreciated them in Colorado and later Pennsylvania, two poems in *Feeding the Fear of the Earth* stood out more and more: "Mickey Mantle Sees Isabel Allende Holding the Head of Hermann Hesse as he Dreams of Mother Eve" and "Whole Poems." What they shared was a powerful theme of the father as a character who one could not admire or love easily, if at all. In a poetry book where one could say, "[e]veryone is someone else and no one is himself," to give a different use to Heidegger, these poems had extraordinarily powerful, poignant self-revelatory moments. "Whole Poems," especially, had been given a prominent place in the book by Patrick—it was the penultimate poem, so it was almost the last word there.

I'd like to read and briefly comment on "Whole Poems" now and put it into the context of other confessional poets because one cannot appreciate the way this poem stands out without seeing what other poets have done with similar materials. So after reading this poem by Patrick, (and getting it onscreen so you can all follow along), I'll read a short well-known poem by Diane Thiel, "The Minefield."

Whole Poems

In Cambodia they have a thriving industry

in wheelchairs and artificial limbs.

Thousands of landmines are hidden

in pockets of earth

throughout the country—Claymores

and Chinese models.

In the '50s my father broke his back,

fell off a ladder while he was welding

at a chemical plant. For years

he had to wear a back brace and fight

a Workman's Compensation case

he barely won.

If you walk in Cambodia, you are in danger:

The antipersonnel detonating devices.

The trip mechanisms. The booby traps.

The Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks says:

Install the Claymore facing the center

of mass of a kill zone. The fragments spray

and rip and cut. With patient malice,

the mines wait for years,

thinking all the time their meaning

is undermined until finally

they exuberantly burst. The Chinese model

is propelled upward out of the ground

and reaches a level about the height

of a child's face.

With his broken back, my father didn’t work

for years while my mother saved

Green Stamps and we lived in a cellar.*

Instead of a house, we lived in a stump.

A cave with a flat tarpaper roof.

With tiny rectangular windows too far

above our heads, too small to let in any light.

Green Stamps like moss

grew all over the tables.

The ex-soldiers and farmers and mothers

and school children drag the lower parts

of their bodies like sacks

along the roads to Phnom Penh.

My father’s back brace looked like the rib cage

of a prehistoric reptile—like something

you’d find in a Spanish monastery

during the Inquisition.

I didn’t want to look at it.

There are two messages here:

whatever stays in the earth is dangerous

and whatever stays in the earth will save us.

And, of course, there's something else.
In a lab in Massachusetts researchers
are growing human ears on the backs of mice.
Scientists grow the tissue by first creating
an ear-like scaffolding of porous,
biodegradable polyester fabric. Human
cartilage cells are placed throughout the form,
which is then implanted on the back of a
hairless mouse. I wonder
what would grow out of my father's back.

I've always been aware I had a certain destiny.
Right now, I'm supposed to be in Cambodia,
making artificial limbs. I'd make elaborate
prosthetic devices. I'd gather gears and grease
and grinding things, levers and wheels.
I'd work with tubing, haywire, parts of a red
bonnet. I'd make limbs from small engines
and balsam and wax. I'd make windmills.
I'd work with putty and glue, with tintype
and spokes, guitar strings, and plastic.
I'd gather kindling and gourds—

the insides of clocks, tassels, colored ribbon.

I'd whittle crutches into ships.

I'd gather things that sparked

when they rubbed together. I'd take out

the thin insides of pens for veins.

What I want is delicate machinery to carry

pain. What I want are carousels

for fingers, music boxes for hands.

I say: Rise. Get up. Please, walk now.

But my father digs his way down into

his house, and my mother dreams of birds,

collecting them in books. And me?

Whole legs grow out the backs of mice.

Whole poems rip out the back of my father.

In "Whole Poems," there are at first two parallel, seemingly detached themes running in counterpoint with each other. (Let me define counterpoint in poetry briefly here: there is an interplay between themes so that the reader can carry multiple threads through the poem just like in contrapuntal music when the composer sets up multiple themes or melodies that interrupt each other or play at the same time. One hears the elements alone and one hears them as they resonate

together, which creates more possibilities for meanings, ironies, resonances and dissonances.)

First, there is the landmines theme in stanzas 1, 3, and 5. Then there is the father's story of disability in stanzas 2, 4, and 6. The initial stanzas of each theme just set up the initially unrelated "problems" in the poem—the hurtful, even crippling unexploded landmines in Cambodia, and the father's accident and crippled condition. Notably, already there is a common thread—people are being crippled by landmines, and the poet's father was crippled too, albeit at work. In the next stanza, the danger grows, especially for children, because the Chinese landmines would be especially deadly to them. Importantly, we still have in our minds the idea of the father in the Lawler household and the children who were around him. This means that the "patient malice" (19) of the landmines in the third stanza spills over into the fourth stanza, that shows us the father at home, unable to work. Interestingly, the poet refrains from showing the father in this stanza at all—what the poet tells us is that the "father didn't work/for years" (27-8). Instead of his presence, we get the S&H Green Stamps, which were these stamps that grocers would give out when you paid, and if you saved enough of these stamps in piles of little booklets—and you had to paste them into the booklets yourself, you could buy things like cheap toasters, tables or chairs etc. Here the image of the Green Stamps seems to represent a kind of decay in a very dark place.

When we make the jump to the fifth stanza, there can be no doubt that the meaning of one stanza is meant to spill over into the next one. The family that "lived in a stump" (30) resonates with the Cambodians dragging their lower body parts "like sacks" (38), seeking medical care, one imagines. This vision of horror, in Cambodia then builds up the stressed atmosphere that overflows into the sixth stanza when the poet, remembering his impression as a boy, experiences real horror at his father's back brace.

The seventh stanza, then, is really about all of the above. If "whatever stays in the earth is dangerous" (46) applies to the landmines, then it also applies to the father's disability. However, with

the father we need to imagine that the unseen crippled man is sort of like a landmine in the cellar—he also is underground, after all. Then, at the same time, "whatever stays in the earth will save us" (47) means both that the unexploded landmines could "save" people by never exploding, and likewise, in the cellar, by not exploding, the father could "save" his children.

Then the poem takes a different tone and turn as we hear from the poet more as a grown up, reflectively imagining how technology could create monstrous or healing prosthetics or therapies. There is great irony in the idea of an implanted human ear on a hairless mouse's back; the juxtaposition with the father's back in the very next line forces us to think of how the father might be compared to this poor hairless mouse, an image of emasculation and horror.

Even more ironically, the technologists seem to create monstrosities like mice with human ears growing out of their backs while the poet as artist imagines healing and therapeutic prosthetic devices made out of odds and ends of junk one might find discarded in a cellar. In his dream, he becomes the artist as healer, wanting to heal his broken father. But the father himself pulls away, and we see the repetition of the pattern that forces us to compare the mice and the father again— the former (mice) are being made even more monstrous with freakish legs growing out of their backs. And, finally, in the last line, "Whole poems rip out the back of my father."

So whereas we started with the Cambodian landmine threat in the beginning being counterpointed with the family underground, in the end we have the monstrosities of technology (a symbolic way to represent that horrifying back brace) versus the father who still cannot be saved. Yet even in that recognition of disability, horror, stagnation, "whole poems" emerge. At the same time, there is a powerful verbal ambiguity in the syntax of, "Whole poems rip out the back of my father," for that could mean both that they *rip out of* the back of my father—which is essentially a creative act being compared to a violent action, almost like a backward birth-of-a-poem process, and that *they rip out the back of my father*, i.e. *they rip the back of my father out.* In a way, this latter reading

expresses perfectly the ambivalence of the poet who both loves and wants to protect and heal the father and the poet who as a boy feels horror and revulsion and fear of the father. So even to say that the father is revolting is a kind of a violent act, and this "whole poem" is that violent act.

Upon reflection, I would say it is a more affirmative poem because the poet himself emerges whole because the poems have emerged whole, and that is what the poet, and the artist as healer needs most—to come out with the whole truth. He is aware of the pitfalls, the victim-hood that could engulf him. He has imagined a way to be free, thanks to his compassionate desire to heal the father. So even though, on another level, telling the truth about the father is a way to symbolically "kill" the father, that is not what happened, and that was never the conscious intention. Still, we can hear and feel the powerful ambivalence.

One may be reminded of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* when he said, "the strong dead return, in poems as in our lives; and they do not come back without darkening the living."

I'd just like to pause here and reflect upon how evolved this style is by looking at a very fine poem on a similar theme, Diane Thiel's "The Minefield." And let's try to get this on screen so everyone can see this:

The Minefield

He was running with his friend from town to town.

They were somewhere between Prague and Dresden.

He was fourteen. His friend was faster

and knew a shortcut through the fields they could take.

He said there was lettuce growing in one of them,

and they hadn't eaten all day. His friend ran a few lengths ahead,

like a wild rabbit across the grass,

turned his head, looked back once,

and his body was scattered across the field.

My father told us this, one night,

and then continued eating dinner.

He brought them with him—the minefields.

He carried them underneath his good intentions.

He gave them to us – in the volume of his anger,

in the bruises we covered up with sleeves.

In the way he threw anything against the wall –

a radio, that wasn't even ours,

a melon, once, opened like a head.

In the way we still expect, years later and continents away,

that anything might explode at any time,

and we would have to run on alone

with a vision like that

only seconds behind.

(http://www.dianethiel.net/minefield.html)

Thiel's poem does a brilliant job of presenting the initial trauma during the war and then showing how it carries into the next generation. It all makes perfect sense, and it makes one feel the pathos of

carrying the burden of a parent with untreated PTSD. It is a great example of the confessional mode that we know so well. However, in Lawler's "Whole Poems," one realizes, we are getting a far more three-dimensional experience. We are getting the complexity of a boy's emotions at a disabled father—the horror, the compassion, the helplessness, and the fear, all of which are counterpointed with an entirely different set of scenes of horror, passion, helplessness and fear. Because of these juxtapositions, the meanings continue to evolve, to grow, to resonate and acquire new depths and new ironies. Because of the counterpointed parts and the ways they move, the poem can evolve, adapt and change far more than simpler poems can.

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