

Richard Siken: Meet Me at the Page Where

??but to me, onion, you are more beautiful than a bird??

?Pablo Neruda, Ode to the Onion

My friend Annie is an onion, according to Pablo Neruda. At least that's what she insists, when she's been drinking, and she's not happy about it?no, not at all. She slaps me on the shoulder: Pablo Effing Neruda? what does he know? I have read some Neruda, especially lately, and I still have no idea what she is talking about. Chris doesn't either. We sit there, trying to look compassionate, while she rants. This has been happening more and more frequently and we are beginning to get worried. I'm not an onion and he's not an onion and she's not an onion she says, voice rising as she starts pointing at people randomly. And love? Love isn't an onion either. Love is a battlefield.

At first we thought it was simply metaphor aversion?why say that something is really something else? as the argument goes?but it's something deeper, more sinister. She hasn't just been lied to, she'd been duped. The story, as far as Chris and I can piece it together, goes something like this: Annie works in a bookstore and she saw this book, of poems, with a gold foil sticker on it that said prize-winner, so she bought it expecting it to change her life, and it didn't.

Now, when I've been drinking, I have been known to insist that I am a chocolate labrador or a mexican tile warehouse, but I do not expect this to change anyone's life. When Chris has been drinking, he looks at people intently and says things like Okay, I'm gonna cross the line here? or My only regret is that I can't pee fire? I'm not sure what Pablo said while he was drinking, but I bet it was good.

Gold foil has tricked many people. Think: religious paintings. Often, people with halos get listened to. True, Pablo Neruda hasn't been painted with a halo, but he might as well have been. Actually, I don't know; I've only seen photographs of him. And he may have been a hottie when he was younger, but?like Einstein?most pictures of him are from his later years: mature, distinguished, stately, and often sporting a goofy hat. What I like most about these pictures is under that hat. Allegedly, the human head weighs eight pounds. Neruda's head looks like it clocks in at fifty: jowls, chins, wrinkles; a man enfleshed; a fifty pound head in a toy hat. There are worlds in that head, you think, looking at it. You look at that head and okay, maybe you don't immediately feel the need to make out with him, but you'd talk to him, you'd want to talk to him. I used to drink for free because I was a hottie. Now I drink for free because people want to talk to me. I look in the mirror and see a thirty-five pound head, and gaining, and I think Well, at least I'm in good company.

Anyway, I'm in the bar with Chris and Annie, drinking for free in a noisy room full of blather and deceit, trying to figure out if Pablo has done us wrong. Certainly he has done something, but is it an injustice, has he been irresponsible? Even if he did say that we were onions?and he didn't?what's so wrong with that? The reader and the writer meet at the page: the writer rising up, as if from underneath the ink, to whisper, and the reader bending in from above,

leaning in, to hear. There are arguments about text-accessibility and reader's trust, but really: is meeting at the page any different than meeting at the bar? Should it be?

Sure, we go to the bar to drink, and we drink to get drunk, but peel back that layer and there's yet another: we get drunk to leak a little truth. We get drunk so we can say things, often things we'll want to be able to deny later. I'm not saying she doesn't mean it, but when Annie leans in after knocking back a few and says You're my special guy. You're my angel. You fell from Heaven and landed in a Pontiac... well, it's not the kind of thing she usually says in daylight. But I know she means it, and I know she thinks it, she just needs a certain venue to get to it.

Chris likes Pablo because Chris doesn't believe that words have to mean something. And, if pressed, Chris is the kind of guy who can see how he's part onion, how we're all part onion. But Chris is an optimist and Annie is not, so there's that also. She used to be, she used to believe that words not only meant something but they helped. I think this is the real problem. Sometimes words don't help.

We're at the bar with Pablo Neruda—we might as well be—and Annie's got something going on in her head and we're not helping. We're all leaking a little truth, but it isn't helping. In fact, it's making it worse. I'm an onion. Big deal. Now what? You say you're an onion and you feel like you've discovered something, resolved it, summed it all up, but really nothing's changed. I'm an onion. How does that help? What would help? Is help what we should be looking for?

Misery loves company. That's something drunks know deep down, if there is a deep down, if we're more than just layers and layers of something with no true center, if we're more than something that just makes you cry when you cut it open. Yes, misery loves company. And sometimes what you need from a bar is its physical truth: a place to flirt, or fight, or fall down. You have to understand the venue. The page, the bar—sometimes you go, not to get help, but simply to burst into tears or pee on the floor.

Many have argued, will continue to argue, that the job of the writer is to enlighten, inspire; to encourage not just feeling but thinking, action. It's a beautiful notion. It's also unreasonable. One more drink and Annie is going to burst into tears. Not even the fifty pound head of Pablo Neruda can stop this from happening. And it will be a good thing. And then she will move on. Meet me at the bar, Annie. Meet me at the page where this can happen. Catharsis, or the calibration of inner and outer worlds, or simply being frustrated and feeling it. Sometimes words don't help. Sometimes words don't have to.

There's a poem by Frank O'Hara that I will show her tomorrow. A poem titled "Poem" as many of his poems are titled. In it, Frank is trotting through a perfectly ordinary day and suddenly?

and suddenly I see a headline

LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!

there is no snow in Hollywood

there is no rain in California

I have been to lots of parties

and acted perfectly disgraceful

but I never actually collapsed

oh Lana Turner we love you get up

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