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What Is Poetry For?

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WHAT IS POETRY FOR?

Ginger Adcock Hendrix

About ten years ago I went unsuspectingly to my mailbox and found an acceptance letter for my first published poem with a check for \$50—and, in the same stack, a letter from the IRS telling me I owed \$500 in back taxes. (What, exactly, they thought they were taxing is still a mystery to me, as I was a two-part-time job/living-on-student-loans graduate student at the time.) Questions of taxability aside, this was the moment I first asked the question: “What is poetry for?”

Stay with me. I’m about to talk about something you think you know about completely. I’m thinking of the Inuit people—all of their seven gajillion words for ice. A well-studied linguist will tell you that all those words are a true proof of the ever-changing, always-adapting nature of language.

I say that’s not all. I say there’s really not seven gajillion but 200 words for ice (or fifteen if you’re some guy from the University of Texas—but fifteen is still more than we’ve got and if you ask me the guy is a linguistic pessimist). I say all those words are the proof of the thing that drives the poet—*Saying*.

I don’t marvel that Eskimos had lots to say about ice. I do marvel that they kept trying to say and didn’t stop after ten or twelve words. They kept saying: ice that’s melted, ice that’s melted and refrozen, slippery ice, stinging ice, slushy ice, powdery ice, squared ice, ice with flavoring, the shiny thing about ice that makes you squint, the hot-coldness of ice on your tongue. They just kept at it because there was so much to say about ice. That passel of words is a tribute to *saying*.

And more than an indicator of how *much* there was to say (because they could compound the pieces of their language in a way that English doesn’t let us, so they could describe intricate differences with a single—maybe really long, but still single, word)

those fifteen essences or roots of that one word ice that turned themselves into those 200 words make me think they wanted to *keep* saying. They wanted to keep *saying* about something that was in front of them in every direction they looked—under their feet, out along the horizon, over their sheltered heads at night, in their tea, between their toes if they weren't so lucky, down somewhere a couple of layers of warm fur below their backs as they slept—all around.

I'm no linguist, but I say they kept talking about ice because it kept being around.

I know how they felt. I'm looking under my feet, out along the horizon, over my head at night, in my tea, between my toes, below my back as I sleep—and I'm saying. I'm just going to keep saying. Because the ice of my life just won't melt. So I have to keep saying.

I hear the voice of my writer friends in my ear as I write: "Are you saying that the end-quality of the poem is only a secondary consideration to the poet's experience of writing it?—that a bad poem is as good as a good poem?"

Well, of course I'm not saying that. I keep working to write good poems so that I believe them myself. Saying is only as good as it is believable. When I say my life, I hear my life; when I hear my life, I start to believe that it's all real.

That's what poetry is for. Not the said—the *saying*. 