

The Metal We Call Salt

In his poem 'The Simple Truth', Philip Levine recalls a solitary evening in June. He buys 'a dollar and a half's worth of small red potatoes' from a street vendor, boils them 'in their jackets', and eats them 'with a little butter and salt' before walking through 'the dried fields / on the edge of town,' the darkness gathering around him. Later, this memory gives way, dissolving at the edges as Levine turns his attention to a certain kind of knowledge. 'Some things / you know all your life,' he says:

They are so simple and true
they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,
they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker,
the glass of water, the absence of light gathering
in the shadows of picture frames, they must be
naked and alone, they must stand for themselves.

This thought is rendered with the clarity and exactness of a still-life painting. There is a firmness to each image – the glass of water, the salt shaker, even the shadows of the picture frames – each object almost graspable as the poet lays them out in turn, 'naked and alone', upon the table of the poem.

For Levine, the truths he has in mind are rendered just as firmly, even if he never comes to articulate them. In fact, these truths are so self-evident, so absolutely clear, that to express them in a poem would be to undermine them: 'they must stand for themselves'. More than this, their simplicity somehow resists articulation; they are known but inexpressible, like something deep beneath the surface, too far down to reach. 'Can you taste / what I'm saying?' Levine asks abruptly, appealing to the tongue for something other than its language:

It is onions or potatoes, a pinch
of simple salt, the wealth of melting butter, it is obvious,
it stays in the back of your throat like a truth
you never uttered because the time was always wrong,
it stays there for the rest of your life, unspoken,
made of that dirt we call earth, the metal we call salt,
in a form we have no words for, and you live on it.

By the end of the poem it is clear that this knowledge – however surely we may feel it – is beyond the clutch of our expression. It sticks in the throat, ‘never uttered’, forever pooling back into ‘a form we have no words for’. Equally clear is that these truths come to sustain us. They are nourishing and earthy, returning to us, time and again, with the life-giving abundance of a necessary harvest.

Clearest of all is the lingering taste of Levine’s poem. As he fails to express these truths – like objects of a painting, out of reach beyond the surface of the canvas – Levine insists upon ‘the metal we call salt’, the same salt he pinches over his evening meal, a taste immediately known but near-impossible to describe, essential and sustaining, drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world, in a form we have no words for, and we live on it.

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Levine addresses the delicate failure of poetry to say the things which can’t be said. After all, writes Mary Ruefle, ‘The great lunacy of most lyric poems is that they attempt to use words to convey what cannot be put into words.’ ‘How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,’ begins a poem by Jack Gilbert, ‘and frightening that it does not quite.’

Perhaps the best that words can muster is to say that they are lost for words. It’s what makes the withheld revelations of ‘The Simple Truth’ so tantalising. They seem on the tip of Levine’s tongue, as

though he’s desperate to share them. How do you describe the taste of salt, the poem seems to ask, without reaching for *salty*?

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During the summers of 1946 and ’47, Elizabeth Bishop spent several weeks in Nova Scotia, where she had been raised by her maternal grandparents. As part of her itinerary, Bishop visited her hometown, Great Village, for the first time in over a decade, seeing once again ‘the richest, saddest, simplest landscape in the world,’ as she would describe it in a letter to Marianne Moore. These trips proved to be fertile ground, mapping the terrain for several important poems, including ‘Cape Breton’ and ‘The Moose’, not to mention ‘In the Village’, an autobiographical story/prose poem in which Bishop revisits the turbulent period of her early childhood. Bishop’s return to Great Village also generated one of her best-known poems, printed in *The New Yorker* the following August, later appearing in her second collection, *A Cold Spring*.

‘At the Fishhouses’ begins, as Bishop’s poems so often do, with a bright and concrete rendering of the observable world: an old man glittered with herring scales, netting in the eerie light; ‘the heavy surface of the sea, / swelling slowly as if considering spilling over’; the ‘iridescent’ silver of the fish tubs, masts and lobster pots; an ‘ancient wooden capstan,’ cracked and stained with streaks of rust. Down ‘at the place / where they haul up the boats’ Bishop encounters the Atlantic – ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear’ – a sight at once familiar and unfathomable.

To ‘dip your hand in’, she imagines, would result in sudden pain: ‘your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn / as if the water were a transmutation of fire’. Bishop’s sea is paradoxical: burning and cooling, liquid and fire, both ‘dark’ and ‘absolutely clear’. As if to haul its meaning to the surface, Bishop, too, draws on the subtleties of taste. ‘If you tasted it,’ she writes, ‘it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue’:

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
 drawn from the cold hard mouth
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

In contrast to the fixity of the poem's opening section, Bishop takes a dive here into abstraction: not quite knowledge, but imagined knowledge; not quite imagined knowledge, but what imagined knowledge might be like: bitter and briny, perhaps, but unmistakably the taste of salt.

Bishop appears to stumble upon a simple truth of her own, apparently concerning knowledge itself. It is a knowledge constantly in process – 'historical, flowing, and flown' – half given by and half extracted from the world, like the earthy, metallic truths of Levine's poem.

It's difficult to say for sure, but the closing lines of Bishop's poem seem to have to do with continuity. More specifically, she appears to bring two temporalities into alignment, setting the permanence of sea and salt against the briefness of experience, the succession of moments which determines our existence.

'It is never clear in a moment what is of a moment,' writes Maureen McLane in her chapter on Bishop in *My Poets*, her devotional memoir to the writers who have shaped her. It's a phrase which seems to reach a hand into the depths of Bishop's closing lines, which leave us feeling almost sure we almost know what they might mean: that our knowledge is experience; that our experience outdates itself; that our history informs how our experience will shape us next. By this final phrase – 'historical, flowing, and flown' – we realise that the poem, too, has already flown by, that we have tasted it, and that the taste will remain, forever, in the back of our throats.

'Literature not only reports on what happens and on what may happen,' argues the critic Michael Wood, but is itself part of experience. When we read we feel each word – in the mind, on the tongue. 'Our reading is an immediate event, like tasting salt or coriander.'

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Salt has several uses: as a purifier, a disinfectant, and a preservative. It stands for permanence and integrity, fidelity and truthfulness. In *The Last Supper*, Leonardo's Judas Iscariot – moments from departing to betray Christ to the Romans – is identifiable as the man who, leaning back in his chair, has just upset the salt cellar.

During the 1960s the British painter John Salt was increasingly drawn to the cultural iconography of American vehicles – often excessive and ostentatious – and to the aesthetic opportunities afforded by photography, a neutral and objective mode of representation which seemed to offer freedom from the dominant artistic pressures of pop art and abstraction. Salt came to be identified with an emergent group of American painters known as the Photorealists, who used photographic imagery as a way of precisely and objectively painting ordinary scenes from contemporary American life. In the 1970s, Salt began to paint abandoned cars, variously damaged and neglected, achieving uncanny verisimilitude with a labour-intensive process involving airbrushes and hand-cut stencils.

The most striking quality of Salt's paintings is their vivid reality, their fidelity and truthfulness to the images from which they're made. Salt even manages to convey areas of blurriness and excess light – the soft-focus and glare he somehow transfers from the photographs – which, far from giving the paintings' artifice away, enhances their illusion. The artworks comment on the nature of representation with a double strike; painted from photographs, they are, after all, copies of copies. More than this, however, Salt's paintings arrive at their own expression of continuity concerning the flowing and flown realities of

lived experience and the gradual corrosion of the present to the past. The vehicles in Salt's work tend to be vintage models, which in itself complicates their play of temporality. Though their condition varies, they are nearly always damaged, ranging from the dents and scuffs of low-key urban collision to the smashed and twisted metal frames of crashes and dismantlement. A great many of Salt's cars have not been used or touched in years, bearing the outward signs of decay, often overgrown by weeds. The paintings imply a time which is already long past, but also gesture towards the indefinite continuation of each scene: the gradual spread of spots of rust; the upward growth of trees and shrubs; the melting of the snowfall from a rural upstate parking lot. In the words of curator Linda Chase, 'These wrecks are not only in the landscape, they are becoming part of the landscape. Given enough time, we can't help thinking, they will disappear completely.' By preserving a single moment with such exquisite accuracy, Salt's paintings come to emphasise their own failure to change, their inability to keep up with the processes of growth and deterioration they prompt us to imagine. The moments in the paintings are both permanent and not, refusing to articulate the changes they relate.

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Salt's paintings remind me of several photographs by the American landscape photographer Mark Ruwedel taken at the Bonneville Salt Flats, an ancient lakebed stretching over 30,000 acres, said to be so flat as to reveal the curvature of the earth. The flats are home to the Bonneville Speedway, which hosts a number of annual speed events that take place every year between August and October, once the salt surface has dried.

'I have come to think of the land as being an enormous historical archive,' Ruwedel wrote in 1996, 'especially those places where the land reveals itself as being both an agent of change and the field of human endeavour.'

Split in two by the horizon – the sky above almost completely empty – one of his photographs shows a lopsided, deserted car. In the distance, through what could be mist, we see the vague outline of mountains. The car is enclosed within the concentric circles of its own tyre tracks, grey blemishes across an otherwise pristine surface. As with John Salt's paintings, the photograph invites us to think in two directions at once: back, through the 'enormous historical archive' of the salt flats and their missing lake; forwards, to the slow erosion of the car by time, corroded and consumed by salt.

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'Can you taste / what I'm saying?' Levine asks, offering the poem with the same urgent insistence he encounters in the street vendor: "Eat, eat," she said, / "Even if you don't I'll say you did." The taste is bitter, then briny, then surely burns our tongue. It is deep, and sharp, and obvious, and full.