

Two Poems: “Poetry in America” and “Elegy Against —, Ten Years Later”

Julia Spicher Kasdorf

Pennsylvania Poets Series, October 7, 2015

Julia Spicher Kasdorf is Professor of English and Women’s Studies
at Pennsylvania State University.

Poetry in America

The Barnes and Noble in Evansville, Indiana mostly sells coffee,
though the manager said 10 or 12 showed up once for a local author.
One, besides my friend Laura, came for me. I thought of priests
who must pronounce the full Eucharist even if no one goes to Mass,
thought Virginia Woolf and Oscar Wilde looked kind of pained
as Barnes and Noble posters, and facing 15 empty folding chairs,
I suggested we all just go downstairs for coffee. I was hopeful—
I hate bookstore readings, which pay nothing but constant interruptions:
Customer service on line 8. Does one keep reading in that case, or pause
to incorporate the line into her poem? *No way! I came to hear poetry!*
said a woman in walking shorts and sandals with socks. *I’m a poet, too.*
Can’t help the disease. It’s either write or go mad. She had bangs
and plastic glasses like Ramona the Pest. *I’m Barbara. Don’t write*
much now, too busy working and labor organizing at the Whirlpool plant.
Come from Henderson, Kentucky, over the river. You hear of a white person
committing a crime in Henderson, that would be my relative.
But let’s get going. I’ve got things to do yet tonight. So I got going.

Sometimes Barbara moaned as if she’d tasted something delicious or cried,
Hey, that was a good one! People walking by eyed us the way
they look at preachers in bus stations. A woman and little girl sat in back.
The mom held a book about women who love too much in front of her face

like a mask, the girl imitated with a Madeline storybook, but sometimes she peeked at me, and they stayed almost to the end. Barbara took my book from the stack waiting to be returned. *Wouldn't buy it if I didn't like the work,* she said as I signed, then walked out with us. *You know, it's still 73 cents to the dollar. No matter how much education you have, you're working harder and making less than a white man. For women of color, it's worse. And now all we get is backlash. Well, I'm a 50-year-old woman, and they can kiss my ass.* That spring, Barbara had fasted for 19 days at the gates of the governor's mansion because he'd turned Kentucky's community colleges into trade schools. *Do you know what that means?* She jabbed me with her bird eyes. *No history, no political science, no literature, no going on for a college degree like I did, and you watch, it's coming to other states. Evil bastards will call it job training, but it's just one more way to keep poor people down.* Outside, light mist drifted onto cars in the parking lot, softening neon signs down the strip. *Take care of yourself,* she waved a blessing. *Where the hell is your umbrella?*

Elegy Against —, Ten Years Later

I can't say his name, but I still see his poem
on a sheet of paper trembling in his fingers

until he spread and pressed them onto the table
in that small room of bad light and bad air

in a place called the Cathedral of Learning.
Other students complained: not his words,

but the ferocity of his voice, how his face
suddenly shone with sweat when he spoke.

That fall I encouraged them all to write
their sadness or their happiness. I didn't try

to complicate their language or smarten up
their ideas. That fall everything seemed simple

and stupid. I bought spent asters from buckets
on the street and walked aimlessly on rare days

of blue, lucid sky like the skies in Oklahoma
where he grew up dodging belt buckles, poor

enough to enlist before Kuwait. His name lost
but not the poem where he sits with an officer

in an open Jeep somewhere in the desert
as the officer gripes about his wife then pulls out

a pistol and shoots at a camel lumbering by.

When I read the news, I imagined him bloody
in a claw foot bathtub back home. Surely
in poor Oklahoma the tubs are ordinary, but
how could a plain tub hold his body? I want
the graceful curve, white and smooth and cool
and tender against his large, hard shoulders.
He said he promised the Army never to speak of ——

I didn't know what to believe, there in my office
I just tried to encourage him to write, as if ——

Dan. Was it Dan or Dave? How do you guys get
such excellent posture? I once asked him.

They train you not to feel pain, he said, gazing
straight into my eyes.

From Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *Poetry in America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011)