

On Finding a Copy of “Pigeon” in the Hospital Bookstore

I prowled up and down the rows of the hospital bookstore with a fevered intensity; “fevered” because it was a hospital, “intensity” because I was perplexed by the mysteriously ruptured tendon in the middle finger of my right hand in sympathy with which the whole hand had cramped so that I could scarcely hold a pen or open a jar. Even a five-month-old octopus in the Munich zoo can open a jar!

The octopus’s name is Frieda, which reminded me of D.H. Lawrence, and thinking of him brought me to the hospital bookstore. It was minimally stocked with anything resembling literature, offering those in pain, afraid, or just dully waiting for test results a choice of pink-jacketed chick-lit, cookbooks, investment guides or glossy thrillers spilling blood as red as that pooling down the hall in the O.R., as though emulating some homeopathic principle of curing a disease by a surfeit of that which caused it.

And perched as eccentrically as the sparrow who sings from the rafters at Loblaws, and looking just as lost, was the only volume of poetry in the store. Reading it I recognized at once what I disliked about the bulky bestsellers nudging it from the shelf like bullies in the halls of high school, their meaty faces full of self-regard, their minds absent of thought. I hate the omni-present present tense, that fake cinematic contrivance meant to create a sense of “being in the moment” with the hero as though life were a constant rush of adrenaline with no possible mood but surprise.

Whereas poetry offers the results of its meditation tentatively; it is not embarrassed to show that thinking—some of it slow, arduous, confused—has taken place. And then poetry doesn’t rush ahead shouting, “Look at me! Look at me!” Instead, it takes your hand, your poor mangled hand, like the good surgeon it is

and massages it joint by joint, feeling for the sore places.
And because it doesn't speak without reflection
you trust it, and let it cut you open.

SUSAN GLICKMAN