A Poetry Reading

Alfred Alcorn '64

A considerable turnout milled around in the spacious library of the Center for Criminal Justice. It was an incongruous mix. Among the word-stricken, bleared-eyed, unkempt types who frequent poetry readings, were a good sprinkling of cops, some still in uniform, as well as lawyers and other worthies from Seaboard's criminal justice establishment. I also noticed a lot of women. Perhaps they were confusing Morgliesh with a character in the crime novels of a well-known British mystery writer.

A crew from Channel Five busied themselves setting up lighting, testing mikes, and arranging two cameras, one stationary and one on a dolly. They were there at the behest of the BBC, though there would no doubt be a snippet about the event on tomorrow's news.

As we stood around before taking our seats, I found myself gratified by the apparent esteem with which many of those in attendance held me. One burly state trooper—Sam Brown belt, jodhpurs, the whole rig—sought me out to shake hands. "We're behind you a hundred percent," he said. Marvin Grimsby, the center's director, also came over—I had given the Bernard Lecture here a couple of years back—and introduced me around.

I already knew Lieutenant Tracy, of course. He was there with his wife Katrina, a petite, dark-haired, pretty woman. We were chatting when Detective Lupien of the state police came over. We shook hands warmly. He asked me how I had been faring. I told him there were longer and longer stretches when I forgot all about being shot at or nearly run over.

"But stay alert," he told me, the warmth of his voice belying his dark stony eyes.

While settling in on a chair at the end of one of the several rows arranged before the lectern, I took his advice and glanced around at the stacks that led off on either side. I began absently thinking that these benign refuges from the clamorous world would soon be gone, along with the books and peace and quiet they harbor. What couldn't you find online? The age of Gutenberg, including these temples of reading, were disappearing right before our eyes. What next? A fine wire implanted in the appropriate part of the brain for the direct transmission of organized thought, which is what reading and writing is, after all.

At which point I gave a visible lurch. Watching me intently from the stacks to my right down near the lectern was the tall, dark-haired thirty-something man who had been watching me at the theater and in the parking lot. He also bore a resemblance to the driver of the Humvee that nearly ran me over. He held my gaze for several seconds before turning and pretending interest in a book he had in hand.

A moment later there was movement around the lectern. Marvin Grimsby, in company with Wendell Brothers of the Wainscott English Department and Commander Adam Morgliesh of Scotland Yard, emerged from a side door. The latter two sat on chairs provided and Grimsby began his words of welcome. I glanced again at the stacks to find my stalker had disappeared. But surely, I thought, touching the Glock in its belt holster, he wouldn't try anything with all these cops around. If I wasn't safe here, where would I be safe? But his presence began to gnaw at me.

Brothers, a pale, shaggy man who, like so many literary academics, appeared bereft of words, introduced the poet in halting phrases before hitting his stride. Brothers spoke of the new territory Adam Morgliesh had opened up for the searching light of poetry. "If his verse to date has been unflinching in its collision with life, the commander's new collection, *Rigor Mortis*, is unsparing in its confrontation with final things. These poems, with their sparseness of language, with their subtle, honed wit, and

with their fateful cadences, compel the reader to shake hands with his own mortality. But not alone. As the 'Bard of the Yard' —as the commander is known in some quarters—so plangently depicts, we are all standing in our own tumbrel as it creaks its way to our own particular and personal gallows."

The Scotland Yarder acknowledged the scattering of applause with a downcast nod as he arranged his material on the lectern.

There was more of the Oxford don about Commander Morgliesh than of an intrepid public detective. His large, saturnine face with its strong nose and pouched eyes wore an expression of tolerant, subdued humor. It was of a piece with a tall, sturdy frame, abundant, graying hair, a neat blue button-down shirt, club tie, and an old but by no means shabby corduroy jacket.

I had not taken time to retrieve any of his poetry from the library or even to peruse samples online. So, except for Brothers' introduction, I was quite ignorant of the man's work.

He took a moment to thank the Center and those who had organized the reading. Clearing his throat and speaking in a rich, Oxbridge accent, he said, "I won't spend a lot of time explaining my poems as I trust they speak for themselves." In an aside, he added, "If a poem cannot speak for itself, then what can?" He smiled and went on. "I will be reading from this new volume the title of which, *Rigor Mortis*, alludes to the rigor of both death and poetry and to their simple and absolute strictures. By that I mean there is no poetry without words and there is no death without finality. At least for now."

I tried to listen. But seeing X, as I called him on the wanted poster in my mind, I had walked back into the nightmare of terror. That is to say, I was in the grip of a fear that feeds and festers in the imagination while in no way being imaginary.

The commander was saying, "I have been asked why, as a law enforcement officer, I write poetry. I think the question is a polite way of insinuating that something as squalid as crime and as pedestrian as police work is antithetical to poetry and to those Olympian realms to which it aspires. Or once did, at any rate. I have no coherent answer to the assumptions in that question. I can only tell you that we must look within ourselves to find that larger world into which to escape the quotidian banalities of existence. And, as we all know, police work too often involves that ultimate banality of which Hannah Arendt wrote so eloquently."

As he went on, I glanced around again. My stalker was nowhere to be seen. Or was that he, behind me and to my left, sitting in one of the lounge chairs that surrounded a low table strewn with periodicals? I thought of discreetly taking the Glock from its belt holster and making it handier in my side pocket.

Or was I just being melodramatic? Perhaps the fellow was one of those shy but devoted fans who fixate on someone for God knows what reason. Or was he a kind of spotter, keeping an eye on me and communicating my movements to a trigger man whose silenced pistol already rested on the bindings of some law book as he took careful aim?

Behind the lectern, the commander peered down at his text and intoned the title, "Troping the Light Fantastic" and began, reciting from memory:

> Time is the fire
> We burn in,
> D. Schwartz told us.
> He's right.
> A few of us
> Blaze brightly
> In our hours
> And leave an afterglow.
> More of us
> Smolder dimly
> Waiting for a spark
> Before we burn out.
> Most of us
> Are grateful
> Simply
> For the light.

"Speaking of light," the commander said, turning to the technician in charge of the filming, "could you angle that light just a bit. It's right in my face."

He waited. He cleared his throat. He read "*Circ de la Vie.*"

We all balance
Above the abyss.
There is no safety net
To ease the drama
Not of who falls
Or of who hangs on
But of when.

I eased from my chair and stepped into the nearest opening in the stacks. The commander was saying something about the influence of Philip Larkin on his work. I shifted the Glock from its holster to my side pocket where I encircled its butt with my right hand. The commander began reading "After Larkin."

Between death
And decrepitude
We usually choose
The latter.
It's not just
Fear of that
Undiscovered country.
It's that we think
We'll get better,
The way we have
Gotten better
All our lives,
As though there's
A cure for time,
As though life itself
Were not fatal.

He said, "Working out a poem has been likened to solving a crime. But too much should not be made of the comparison. Words are both more available than the bad guys, but also just as intractable if not more so. It might be better to say that they are both, justice and poetry, compelling in that they each satisfy a craving for order."

In the twilit world of the stacks, I found myself in a section devoted to the philosophy of law to judge from the titles about *Leviticus*, the *Code of Hammurabi*, and the like. I paused as the poet recited "Again."

The murdered body
Of the young woman
Lay dumped
Like so much rubbish
In a roadside ditch
Beyond the verge.
Futile anger gives way
To pity
And to a yearning
For the pale Galilean
To come again
To teach us again
About doing unto others.

The phrase "murdered body" resonated as I moved toward the light at the end of the row I was in. I did not want to be a murdered body, I told myself. Anything but a murdered body. I came to a line of carrels, those modest chair-and-desk cubicles where apprentice scholars practice their trade. These were spaced against the wall and facing off to my right. They were empty.

I paused to listen as the commander read a poem about what he called the bogus art of murder.

Murder for some
May be a form of art
With its own rules,
Its masterpieces and duds,
And a tradition going back
And back and back and back
To our ape ancestors.
Murder may be just.
Murder may be necessary.
Murder may be clever.
But murder is never art

Because murder has no claim
To beauty.

Still trying to listen, I was attracted to a carrel where the chair was pushed back as though recently vacated. A book lay open on the desk. I paused, hearing the commander's voice but not his words. Overcoming scruples about invading the privacy of another, I glanced down at the book. Then I turned it enough to glimpse the title and author: *The History of Murder* by Colin Wilson.

Paranoia came over me in waves of muddled fear and self-doubt. Had someone known I was coming to the reading and deliberately left a book open, one that I would see as a portent? Of course not. I was being silly. Or was I? Cat and mouse games are all very well as long as you are not the mouse. Touching my Glock again, I moved along the carrels on high alert.

I paused then because I wanted to listen to the poetry. I reached a spot along the row of cubicles from where I could hear the recital quite clearly. The commander intoned the title "Knowing," and began.

The price
Of knowing
Is knowing
That you
Will know
And know
Until the day
You know
No more.

I was contemplating knowing no more when the back of a head belonging to a tall, dark-haired man came into view in the last carrel. Had he been dozing, bent forward, head in arms. Was it he? And if so, what was I to do? Creep up to him and poke the barrel of my gun into his upper vertebrae for a hotly whispered interrogation? Just who are you? Why are you stalking me? The object of my gaze, perhaps sensing it, turned and gave me a puzzled look. It was not he.

It was then, with a heady sense of empowerment, that I knew I was not to be the victim of terror this time. I would systematically track this guy down and confront him, with the Glock if necessary, and make him tell me who he was and why he was stalking me.

The poet sipped water from a glass and indulged in a manly clearing of his throat before talking about how he had selected and arranged the verse in his new volume. "I came up with three general categories: crime, death, and miscellany. I like to think that time is the theme linking all of them. But, of course, there may have been a bit of shoe-horning here and there. 'Oh, To Be in England' expresses what might be called perverse nostalgia." He read:

When in some grand place
Listed on the National Trust
Or in some idyll green,
I yearn for the banality
Of the real Britain,
Of pebble-dashed blocks
And treeless car parks
And motorways that lead

From nowhere to nowhere.

I kept moving. I went past the carrels toward the back of the hall along the stacks, checking into each as I went. No one. I came out where the lounge chairs were set around the table. Not there, either. I returned to where the stacks opened into the rows of chairs and kept just back where I could both see and listen.

The commander was peering around at his audience. The mobile camera dollied to his left. After another sip of water, he said, "Poetry is a funny business. The fact is, if you read the ingredients on a tin of curried lamb with just the right cadence and tone of sententiousness, you can make it sound like poetry. Bad poetry, perhaps, but poetry nevertheless."

He turned a page. He said, "Ghosts."

You don't have to die
To be a ghost.
A lot of us already
Haunt this sphere
As much with
Our presence
As we ever will
With our absence.

Like a ghost, a determined ghost, I melted into the stacks that walled off the back of the hall. The titles here ran more to popular fare. I might have browsed *Criminality and Creativity* or *Criminals I Have Known* or *Who's Who in Organized Crime* or *The Gravity of Law* or *The Midnight Court* had I not been otherwise occupied. I moved with uncommon stealth behind the first column of books and peered out at the ranks of attentive listeners. X was sitting in the back row of chairs over to the right. But he had changed from a windbreaker and chino trousers to a brown turtleneck and jacket of dark green tweed. As I pondered, quite seriously, how and where he had changed his clothes, it occurred to me that I had entered a shadowy area of my own mind. Because suddenly my stalker was everywhere. All of the tall, dark-haired men of a certain age could have been he.

This may have resulted from a mild psychopathological condition unique to myself. I remember once, during a visit to Innsbruck in Austria when, while waiting in the train station, everyone I looked at resembled Mozart to a remarkable degree—or at least his likeness as rendered in the della Croce oil. At first I found it amusing and somewhat incredible. I considered asking them if I could take their pictures. Then, as the episode persisted and deepened, it grew alarming. The spell didn't break until I came upon a short, heavy woman sitting with her back to me. When, trying not to seem nosy, I positioned myself for a glance at her round, scowling face, she turned out to be the very likeness of Beethoven.

I paused to calm myself. I closed my eyes, took several deep breaths, and slowly counted to ten. I have found that the unassailable logic of numbers is an effective antidote to impending mental chaos. It worked. When I opened my eyes, the taller men with dark hair of a certain age had all returned to being themselves. Which did not mean, of course, that someone was no longer stalking me. I reminded myself that someone had paid Dennis "Blackie" Burker to kill me. That wasn't imaginary unless all of life is imaginary, a kind of dream we consent to.

The poet paused without apparent annoyance as several latecomers entered and found seats. I took the opportunity to cross over to the stacks lining the other side of the hall. The carrels here, all empty as far as I could tell, followed a line of windows that gave out onto the parking lot between the Center and the Museum.

I again positioned myself where I could see the commander, however narrowly, and hear his recital. He was saying, "I write poems about crime as a category and about crimes as something that happens to people. I think it a bit of moral kitsch to assert, as someone has, that all poetry after the Holocaust is obscene. One could say, though, that anything convincingly *noir* after the mass murders of the twentieth century is at best problematic and at times inadvertently laughable. I would argue that poetry is not only possible, but necessary in that poetry has as much to do with truth as it does with beauty. Or, better, what might be called the beauty of truth." He bent his head and read "Time."

They say
You can
Save time,
Find time,
Lose time,
Make time,

Keep time,
Waste time,
Do time,
Buy time,
Sell time,
Borrow time,
Kill time.
I say
Time is
A bomb
Ticking away.

Without thinking, I looked at my watch. And sure enough, there was time ticking away. I checked the stacks and the carrels. No one. I sat down and listened as the commander read several poems without pausing, starting with "Don't Worry."

Getting older
You tend to think
More about death.
You wonder when and how.
Will you go to bed
And not wake up?
Will you see it coming?
How will you react?
Then the ceremonies.
Who will show up?
What will they say?
Most poignantly,
You don't want
To be forgotten.
Though eventually you will
Unless you've done
The unforgettable,
Such as write
A great symphony,
Or the unforgivable,
Such as murder
A lot of people.
Until you realize that,
Being dead,
It won't make
Any difference,
Certainly not to
The no longer you.

"Green Gold"

Nothing gold can stay
Says the New England bard.
I would say
Gold would not be gold
If it could but stay.

"Sex"

If sex is nature's way
To get us to do
Our Darwinian duty,

Then what is love
But a kind of luck,
Not just finding it,
But knowing
You've found it.

"Keeping"

A murderer can
Take your life.
But he cannot
Keep it,
Anymore than
He can
Keep his own.

"The Moral"

Crime doesn't pay
Unless you have
A business plan.

It was right then that serendipity befell me. I turned on the hard chair that went with the carrel and happened to glance out the window. There he was, jacket, chinos, and all, striding across the Center's parking lot and then into the museum's, disappearing into the dark amidst the fringe of trees on the other side. It was he, I was sure. I considered easing my way out of the library and going after him. But I satisfied myself with a cautious sense of triumph. I had flushed the S.O.B.

I felt like I had vanquished danger, if not death, at least for the time being. Perhaps it was this small exultation that made me susceptible to the series of poems the commander had launched into. I caught the end of a poem about the relief of death.

. . .
The end of everything,
It's true.
But it should be a relief
To let others
Worry about others
And about the world,
Which will continue
To go to hell
The way it
Always has.

"Soul Addressed"

Don't be too proud
Of your fine brain
Or of your wonderful body.
They're only rentals.
You're not even
A tenant at will.
If it's any consolation,
They'll be torn down
Shortly after you vacate.

The commander paused as though mulling over what he was to say next. He said finally, "Death might well be called life's dirty little secret. We don't really want to think about it, much less wax poetic on its behalf. And yet our mortality remains at the core of our existence and is the driving force of our individual and collective creativity. How else to explain religion and how it has inspired everything from the literature of the Hebrews to the Gothic cathedrals to the music of J.S. Bach? The question is: would each life be the miracle it is if it never ended?"

"Been There, Done That"

Death is only
The non-existence
That existed
For an eternity
Before you existed
And will return
For another eternity
When you renew
Your non-existence

"To Cease"

Think of it as
An act of charity
In which you
Cede your place
At the feast of life,
Where, more than likely,
You've had more than
Your fair share

As I listened to these poems and others in that vein, my enthusiasm waxed into something more profound than enthusiasm. I experienced the kind of assent that happens when one hears one's convictions trenchantly articulated. He made me feel justified in my resistance to the project to prolong human life.

"Proud Death"

Death be not proud?
Nonsense, John Donne.
Without proud death
To sort things out,
We would still be
Archaea
Oozing gas
In the ooze.

"Presumption"

Life is
The presumption
Of the living
So that when
Someone dies
We say
He passed
Or he passed away
Or he went to heaven
Or he went to hell.
Would it not be
More honest
To simply say
He ended?
Or would that, too,
Be presumption?

"I'll finish with a poem that's my favorite in the collection, though I'm not sure why. It's titled "You Would Think."

You would think
That the rich
Suffer more
When they die
Than do the poor,
The rich having
So much more
To lose.
Or is it the poor
When they die,
Who suffer more,
Life being most
Of what they have?

The commander arranged his papers and said "Thank you very much."

I was surprised at the applause, which was loud and sustained. There was a scattering of questions. When did he know he was a poet? Who was his favorite poet? At the question, "Commander, where do you find your poems?" he smiled and thought for a moment. He said, "Some poems come to you. Some you have to track down. Others, ghost poems, I call them, flit around in the shadows just out of reach."

I stood aside as the commander patiently signed books. Presently, there was only Grimsby, myself, the commander, Detective Lupien, and Lieutenant Tracy and his wife. I turned to Morgliesh and introduced myself. "I enjoyed your reading very much," I said with the pleasure and enthusiasm of honesty.

"And I have taken much pleasure in your work," he replied. We shook hands cordially.

Lieutenant Tracy said, "Norman, Commander Morgliesh has asked to be assigned to your case, on an unofficial basis, of course."

"I see."

"But I thought, out of courtesy, we should ask you first, the commander explained.

"I would be more than honored," I said. "That is, we can use all the help we can get."

Lieutenant Tracy politely excused himself. "Another meeting with the federals," he said, glancing at his watch. "Otherwise I would love to join you for a drink."

Detective Lupien nodded ruefully, but didn't put the matter quite so politely. "The Feebs love meetings. They don't really accomplish anything, but they do provide the illusion of doing something."

When the others had left, the commander turned to me. "I feel like a good whiskey, a beer, and some bar food. Fish and chips. How about you?"

"Sounds good," I said. "There's the Pink Shamrock, not far from here. It's a gay pub, but with a mixed clientele, if that matters. More to the point, it has decent food."

He laughed. "We might get taken for a couple of old poufs. No, altogether the best. Lead on. Food is food."

Note

The above is a chapter from Alcorn's latest novel, *The Art of Murder in the Museum of Man*. It is available on *Amazon*.