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Poem with That?

When I was a little guy, my way-smarter-than-me older sister, would come home from school and showcase her newly acquired knowledge...in all things. Most of which, let's be honest, meant little to me. But the literature? Fantastic. Her reading assignments soon became my reading assignments. When she was done with the books that would accumulate around her desk, I read them and came to realize that the world extended far beyond what was to be found in comics.

The books my sister brought home included all the literary classics, but her poetry books seemed outside the rules, conventions, and limits that governed the rest of the universe, and to me, who had often struggled with rules, conventions, limits, and the universe itself, they held special appeal.

Years later, listening to a lecture on western philosophy, I'm awake just enough to hear that in the first book of Plato's Republic he writes that poetry is the foundation of education because we must first be drawn to the imaginative and the emotional so that we can come to recognize truth and beauty. This is the foundation upon which wisdom can be built. Wow.

I stopped into the Green Mill Tavern on Chicago's north side recently, a jazz speakeasy once owned by Al Capone that still has a trap door in the floor behind the bar that connects to a tunnel running under and across the street. Handy for those times when the Feds inconveniently raided the place during prohibition. The afternoon I walked in happened to be the day of the monthly poetry slam.

The format of the poetry slam is simple: each contestant reads their poem in the opening round. The favored, as determined by audience reaction, moves on to the second, and then the third and final round. The prize, for decades, has been \$11, but the joy one finds in winning is truly priceless.

After attending a few more slams, I decided to jump in. I put hours into drafting my opening poem and an equal measure of toil into another two should I move on in the rounds. I put my name on the list with eight or ten others. They read. I read. I won the first round on the strength of a very supportive audience. I lost the next, and the \$11, but had a great evening.

As I sat at the bar afterwards, another reader came up to tell me he really liked my poem. He was someone whose work I thought was among the best, so I could not have been more appreciative. "But you're a page poet," he said. "A what?" I asked. "Your writing is good, but slam is as much about performance as it is about writing and you're a writer not a performer." I had stood up schoolboy stiff and read mine but was even happier that I won the first-round the way I had – on the strength of my writing alone.

I have taken many comparative literature and poetry classes over the years and can't get enough of Seamus Heaney who tops my list of favorites. To get another perspective

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on the unique value of poetry (other than my own and Plato's), read the transcript of Seamus Heaney's brief lecture from 1995 when he won the Nobel Prize for literature, or better still, read his poems. You'll understand why you should be reading more poetry; as well as writing your own.

Paul Basil