

Dust in the corners

By Armand Russo

No ideas but in things,” writes William Carlos Williams in the epic poem *Paterson*. The phrase is almost a mantra in the five books of *Paterson*, which were written by the doctor-poet between 1943 and 1956.

The struggle to see poetically can be decisive, according to Williams. He writes in another book of *Paterson* that successful perception is “NOT, prostrate, to copy nature but . . . to dance two and two with him.” Poetry, he is saying, pairs sound and movement with emotion, an exterior with an interior, just like dance.

Poet’s terrain: A poet’s memory is his terrain—his dance floor, if you will. To ever be a poet, you can never relinquish this terrain. Williams might wonder, then, why little memory remains in me of the distressing time my mother and father had leading up to Mom’s breast cancer diagnosis in 2002.

I was young, a sophomore in high school. No things, no ideas. No memory exists now of the emotions, the uncertainty, or the furious planning to get the doctors together who were going to make my mom’s treatment decisions. It is dark to me, told to me through stories not my own. But reading William Carlos Williams has given me a framework for going back to revisit that time.

How to see directly, as Williams wanted? The language of poetry resides in the imagination, from which it must meet an experience. New Jersey’s idyllic Passaic Falls touched a chord with Williams, and he envisioned his protagonist, Dr. Paterson, walking toward the sea below the falls among the thoughts of *Paterson*, the sleeping city, in search of the complexity of the human mathematic—on the bus, on the sidewalk, on the blank faces of the houses.

I like to think that seeing his patients every day in his home in Rutherford, N.J., or in his patients’ homes, afforded Williams that journey across the poetic terrain. Such would be the life of the most astute doctor. Nothing would be lost. And so, Williams says, if the doctor and patient relationship were literally followed, it would afford every feat of the imagination.

The real thing: Williams’s imagination was wild on certain days, so much so that he would ponder a poem he would write after seeing the day’s patients, sometimes writing almost through the night. That imagination, that excitement to write of things of small or large importance, was always powering his seeing. “Say it! No ideas but in things.” To avoid making a poem simply a plagiarism of an experience,

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Williams might observe the dust in the corners of the kitchen or follow the feet that moved the dust and wore the cheap wood, figuring the lines of the black shoes as they went.

Williams was conscious to never use life for the sake of a poem. Rather, the poem was the material to bring life into art (not vice versa), to get at experience, which was the real thing. Understandably, then, Williams calls a poem “a machine.”

Living life to create a poem—to write about the meaning that you just experienced, or about the memory of accumulated experience—must give you the most exquisite antennae.

For a doctor, the creation of the poem humming inside of you

as you tend to patients—what a way to impart a meaningful touch. On rounds to deliver a baby in “Guinea Hill,” for example, predictably the Italian section of Rutherford, Williams might observe the dust in the corners of the kitchen and the worn tracks through the center of the room on his way to the birth room. Subsequently, he might embark on a journey to follow the feet that moved the dust and wore the cheap wood, figuring the lines of the black shoes as they went.

I remember now being confused one afternoon at school when I was called into the guidance counselor’s office. He was a kind man with large, silver glasses with a horizontal bar at the top. His tuft of gray hair was curly on the dome and somewhat straighter along the sides, long over the ears and neck where it touched his gray tweed collar. He was a nice man, but his concern was misplaced. He was saying that whatever I needed, I would get, that this must be a tough time for a young man. “I don’t need anything, thank you,” I remember telling him.

Just pictures: I also remember the morning of the surgery, the bilateral mastectomy. I remember it today as “the cure.” I remember some “things,” but they are unlinked to any memory of emotion. Things unlinked to emotion are just pictures.

I grabbed Mom’s hand as she was wheeled away. The touch of her hand is blank now. She had a cap covering her hair. Why was she wearing a cap? Surgeons wore caps. She wasn’t going to do the surgery, I remember thinking. Ridiculous thought. Her curly, dark bangs fell to her brow, and the long strands of her hair were spread under her head on the pillow. She was smiling, saying something surely, but I don’t remember. I didn’t speak, just took a mental snapshot of the moment, which I remember now as only just that.

My grandfather—my mom’s father—was right beside me. Later, Mom told me he was nervous that day, but I don’t recall being aware of it at the time. Yet knowing Grandpa, I’m sure as hell he was nervous. He loved my mother; he wanted her to get well. I may have been nervous, I may have felt that love between Grandpa and Mom, but I don’t recall. I don’t recall the dust in the corners of the waiting area (how long *did* we wait?) or the worn tracks to the OR.

But one day this poem *will* be written. ■