

Poetry Porch: Poetry

Leaving teaching . . .

By Richard Fein

Leaving teaching at 62, welcoming sweeteners for early retirement,
needing the time to write poems, to read poems, re-writing, re-reading,
I emptied out my school office of all my textbooks, my spiraled grade lists,
and ran to the barber to get a haircut and to shave my beard,
my post-Kennedy-to-Obama beard, learning again that I am
my only student; marrying my reading to my writing, or divorcing them,
I have returned to the writing I once taught to others,
so I could learn it all again or differently, as if for the first time.

I see even further Shakespeare damning the tyrants
through those very powers they so schemingly possessed.
How fresh the poems seem—Wordsworth exposing his bliss of belief
turning against itself as the tumbrels rolled, his consternation
at a deeper loss as he no longer possessed his touch for trees,
and now, as if for the first time, Whitman's rhythmical parallelisms rhythmmed me.
I studied Yeats hewing his agony of lost love into obsessive invention.
And I saw how Yeats came around to berating himself even
for his pride in his very ideals—something his lover pointed out to him,
and even his own loss of Maud Gonne shifted to my own failures.
And the admissions attending Whitman, alongside his longings,
showed me where I had to go in my own lives, I now having the time
and the persistencies to write, to face, to write, if only
I could find how to coax my perplexities into syllable and beat.

Oh, my books, how you shelved yourselves into me, teaching me
to turn fears into my own lines, I learning from you
yet also paying the price for residing within you too readily;
I, who wanted my books to put me in touch with life intensely
but protectively, saw Yeats, Wordsworth, Whitman reaching down
into themselves, reduced to the vigors of anxious truths. Oh, books,
I wanted to be exempt from life through you. But *you*, my dear, said no. No.