A VISIT TO WILLIAM BLAKE'S INN: POEMS FOR INNOCENT AND EXPERIENCED TRAVELERS

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BOOK NOTE

In her introduction Nancy Willard tells the "innocent and experienced travelers" for whom she has written the poems how she made the acquaintance of William Blake and his poetry: When she was ill with measles at the age of seven, her baby sitter recited "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright" and later sent her *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* inscribed with William Blake's best wishes for a speedy recovery and the dictum, "Poetry is the best medicine." The sixteen poems that follow the introduction constitute the structure and ambiance of the inn and the adventures it inspires.

The poems bring the visitor, via " 'Blake's Celestial Limousine,' " to the inn, where a rabbit is the bellhop and a bear is the bed. The guest, made wakeful by the twirling moon and dancing sun, is reassured by the rabbit, only to be wakened later by the man in the marmalade hat, come to "Call out the keepers/And waken the sleepers." The King of Cats eats a breakfast " 'on the house' "; the Wise Cow eats a cloud " 'raw/on freshly buttered bread.' " Two sunflowers " 'weary of weather' " request a room with a view; and the Wise Cow makes *"Way"* and *"Room"* for all. Blake leads rabbit, cat, tiger, rat, and visitor on a walk through the Milky Way and on their return lets them rest at the hearth before the marmalade man leads them, with other animals, in a dance. The King of Cats sends a postcard with messages to his wife and friends; and the tiger, who feels ill, asks Blake for a story. Blake tells "The Tale of the Tailor." The visitor advises travelers who reach "a lovely inn" where a rabbit makes the bed

and the bread is baked by two dragons to "rest a little for my sake,/and give my love to William Blake."

Newbery Medal Acceptance

by Nancy Willard

The Provensens and I would like to thank the members of the Newbery and Caldecott Committees for honoring our book and to thank everyone at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich with whom we worked. And we are especially glad for an opportunity to honor the remarkable woman who brought us together and who has seen me through ten books: Barbara Lucas.

When I was a child, I often heard it said that "little pitchers have big ears," and I knew in my heart that if I turned into a pitcher, no other pitcher in this world or out of it would have bigger ears than mine. I was luckier than many eavesdroppers. I spent part of my childhood in a house that had a party line. There were seven people on the line, and each household had its own ring. Ours was four short and one long. My mother made it clear to my sister and me that only very ill-bred people lifted up the receiver, when the telephone rang for somebody else, and listened in on other people's conversations.

One afternoon I was alone in the house, and the telephone rang: three short rings. The bell did not toll for us. A terrible curiosity overcame me. I lifted the receiver and heard a concert of clicks, like claws scampering over a bare floor: the sound of five other ill-bred people lifting up their receivers to listen in. I held my breath. Now I would find out how the world conducted itself when children were not keeping watch over it. A voice that sounded as far away as Australia exclaimed:

"And they had cloth napkins, with Briarcroft Inn printed in the corner."

"You don't mean it," purred the voice of Mrs. Johnson, who lived three houses down from ours.

"I could only get five of them in my purse," said the voice from Australia.

And then, with a flourish of chimes, the Good Humor man turned into our street, and both speakers and listeners hung up and ran out to meet him.

I did not know exactly what an inn was and supposed it was a place that had to take people in. If there was no room at the inn, you got the stable, which was guaranteed to hold a mother, a father, a child, shepherds, three kings, a company of angels, and a lot of animals. An inn was a place of great mercy and variety, where no one was ever put out.

That evening I asked my mother, "What is an inn?"

"It's a resting place for travelers," she said, "like a hotel, only friendlier. Your father and I stayed in a wonderful inn on our honeymoon in a very small town in Germany. I remember when we got off the steamer, the porter met us and put all our luggage on his bicycle."

I felt a flood of sympathy for the porter.

"Were you the only people at the inn?" I asked.

"No, indeed. A great many interesting people stayed there. And the rooms were over a hundred years old."

"How did you know they were over a hundred years old?"

"Because our guide said so," answered my mother, "and because there were so many cracks in the plaster."

A resting place for interesting people, cracks in the plaster—if this was an inn, then all my life I had lived in one without knowing it. Surely no other inn had cracks in the plaster to match ours. Finding pictures in them was like looking for creatures in the shifting shapes of clouds. Whenever a new crack appeared, I fetched my box of paints, and my mother and I discussed the possibilities.

"What do you think it looks like? A whale?" I suggest.

"Yes, but do we really need a whale in the guest room?" asks Mother. "Couldn't you turn it into an angel, like the one you painted over the crack in the bathroom?"

And so in guest room and bathroom and crumbling hall, the patient angels went about their bright business, and the cracks went unobserved, for who looks at plaster in the presence of angels?

As for guests, nobody could ask for a greater variety than ours. On the third floor lived my grandfather, whose room held his clothes, his chewing tobacco, and the books he counted among his special friends: the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, treatises on beekeeping and osteopathy, and the works of Edgar Allan Poe. When I came home from school, I could hear his voice rolling through the house, breathing life into the raven, Annabel Lee, and the tintinnabulation of the bells. The room opposite his stood empty until one evening my cousin, a sophomore at the local teacher's college, dropped by and told us he'd had a fight with his mother; could he please spend the night with us? He stayed six months.

A week after my cousin moved in, his best friend had a fight with *his* mother and moved in also. Unlike the rest of us, who enjoyed our creature comforts, they converted their beds to pallets on the floor and atoned for their sins with loud prayers, which started at six in the morning and stopped when the two penitents left for their eight o'clock class. Scarcely had the door closed behind them when my grandmother began humming and stirring in the room below theirs. From morning till evening she talked to herself, to the quick, and to the dead.

"Get the ladders ready, I got five men coming to pick cherries," she would call to the hired man, who had died fifty years before, but who once sowed and slaughtered on her father's farm in Iowa. At night her English slipped away, and she recited prayers in German and dreamed herself back in that country church where the women sat on the left side and the men on the right and heard about the wages of sin, while an occasional wise cow waited outside like a visitor from a more peaceable kingdom.

Reading, drawing, doing my homework, I listened and noted in the margins of my books and math papers and class schedules whatever seemed worth the saving: a fragment of speech, a line of poetry. Years later, I was reading the poetry of William Carlos Williams and suddenly felt that he was speaking directly to me. "What do I do?" wrote Williams. "I listen. . . . This is my entire occupation."

And I would add: The poet writes poems for people to listen to, poems to be heard as well as read. Skipping rope or trading taunts on the jungle gym, children know the importance of hearing and

saying poetry. But do we ever really outgrow that wish to hear a story, to say a poem? The babysitters and teachers who read to me have gone the way of all flesh, and I have had to make do with recordings of poems and stories played on a small portable phonograph, which I move from room to room while doing my housework. Scrubbing a floor is child's play if you can listen to Ralph Richardson reading William Blake.

One night, after laundry was folded away and the floors swept, I stacked half a dozen grocery cartons in the living room and started to build a house in which wishing did the washing and magic did the mending. Here nobody kept house. The only thing anyone kept was the secret.

I knew my handmade house was going to be an inn when it started attracting guests. Every afternoon our plump cat climbed into the cardboard dining room and quite literally brought down the house. A friend who earned his living building real houses witnessed this awful spectacle and said, "Let me copy the house for you in wood." He took the measurements and a month later appeared with a tall wooden structure on his truck.

"Now paint it," he said.

Was it this habit of mixing poetry with homework that made me take the inn for a subject when Barbara Lucas asked me to write a collection of poems for children? Although I had been listening to Blake's poetry, I knew two editions of his poems from my childhood: *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, with Blake's pictures, and a selection of those songs called *The Land of Dreams* (Macmillan), illustrated by Pamela Bianco. What interested me as much as her drawings was her letter to Blake, which opens the book:

Dear Mr. Blake,

When I was first asked to make these drawings, it made me very happy because I had known and liked your poems for a long while. . . . yet when the opportunity at last presented itself, I began to get scared. . . . For, since you had made your drawings so well, I knew that nobody had any business to attempt to make different ones. And then I consoled myself by thinking that if I wrote and explained the whole thing to you, you would understand, and perhaps, after all, you wouldn't mind so very much.

Since Pamela Bianco had written a letter to Blake, then surely somewhere, somehow, Blake was alive and could read it. Many years after I'd laid her book aside, I was attending a panel discussion at Princeton on the state of the arts and was startled to hear one of the panelists, Allen Ginsberg, quietly remark, "The last time I talked with William Blake . . ."

And now I find myself making the same statement. The last time I talked with William Blake, I was wrestling with the problem of how to move the inn to Philadelphia for this conference, and I had just lost my glasses.

"You can get a new pair of glasses," said my son.

"No, I can't. Those frames belonged to my father before he died. They're irreplaceable."

That night I dreamed myself on a country road, driving a horse hitched to an open wagon. On the wagon rode my homemade house, William Blake's Inn. All at once the heavens opened, and the rains came, and when the air cleared and the sun returned, I discovered to my horror that the inn had vanished. And who was this small man on a bicycle, gliding toward me? He was, I was sure, none other than William Blake. In my dream I burst into tears.

"Oh, Mr. Blake," I wailed, "I've lost your inn."

He pedaled more slowly, but he did not dismount.

"You haven't lost it," he assured me. "You've just lost sight of it. Be good to my guests. They're irreplaceable. Birds, beasts, air, water, flowers, grass. Me. You."