



Contagious Magic

Cody Walker July 28th 2009

I'm sitting, for what I guess will be the last time, in a tan recliner in a [house](#) that once belonged to [Amy Clampitt](#). I've spent a lot of evenings in this chair — tweaking essays, dismantling poems, checking baseball scores. And I've hesitated to write about the experience. What does one say about a gift that can't be quantified? And how does one express gratitude — for the books on the shelves, the cups in the cupboard, the wild turkeys in the backyard?

Amy herself only lived in Lenox for two years. She purchased this house in 1992 after winning a MacArthur Fellowship; she died of ovarian cancer in 1994. I've been reading some of the [letters](#) she wrote in those final years — letters that are full of charm and wisdom and quirky enthusiasm. Here's a passage from one to her family, dated July 2, 1992:

The thing about apartment living that maddens us is having no attic or cellar to stow things in. Well. That situation, in a manner of speaking, seems to be about to change. Part of the turmoil just now has to do with what Hal and I have just done: WE HAVE BOUGHT A HOUSE! More precisely, we've made an offer and it has been accepted, but of course there turn out to be some hitches, having to do with zoning and variances, which a lawyer is dealing with (we hope) at this very moment.



Amy and her partner Hal became interested in Lenox because it was (and still is) the home of two friends, poet [Karen Chase](#) and artist [Paul Graubard](#). Karen recently told me about meeting Amy at the Rockefeller Foundation's [Bellagio Center](#) on May 24, 1991: Bob Dylan's 50th birthday. "She was wearing a red linen blazer with white buttons, and she was dancing really comically. 'Like a Rolling Stone' was playing — the bootleg version." A [poster](#) of Dylan hung in Amy and Hal's West Village apartment. This spring I've been playing *Together Through Life* — sometimes quite loudly — on the couple's compact Sony stereo.

Does it seem strange to keep calling her “Amy”? I’d feel odd calling her “Clampitt” – though I’d readily say “Bishop” or “Lowell” or “Berryman.” Living amidst a person’s manuscript drafts and straw hats and flatware breeds a kind of familiarity. It’s always difficult to know how to address poets with whom you feel some kinship. As Amy says in her poem “Amherst”: “I thought of writing her (Dear Emily, though, / seems too intrusive, Dear Miss Dickinson too prim).”

Have I mentioned that the many, many bookshelves are chockablock with contagious magic?

Amy’s ashes are buried beneath the beech tree nearest to her back steps. It’s a lovely tree — branching, from its base, in three directions. I took a picture of it earlier today. We had, at last, some sun (the weather has been berserk, of late, in the Berkshires). And I thought of one of Amy’s poems — the first poem she published in *The New Yorker* — “The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews.” After some Hopkins-level description of the “wetfooted understory” and the “spruce-tamarack horizon,” Amy tells us that the sun

underfoot is so dazzling
down there among the sundews,
there is so much light
in the cup that, looking,
you start to fall upward.



Mary Jo Salter’s marvelous foreword to Amy’s *Collected Poems* begins like this:

Her earliest memory was of blue violets. At the age of seventy, in an essay called “Providence,” Amy Clampitt retrieved with remarkable clarity her sensations on the day of a younger brother’s birth:

It is the twenty-sixth of April, 1923, I am not yet three years old. . . . My father’s sister Edith . . . is leading me past barns and through feedlots to the outermost grove. What holds these details in place is the sight, out under those trees, of a bed

of violets whose hue I cannot reach except by way of a later metaphor: the contained intensity of a body of water. It is as though I became in that instant aware of edges, shores, boundaries, limitations. The shell had cracked: an exodus, an expulsion, was under way.

What holds these details in place: it's a quintessential Clampitt touch, implying that even our memories have their physical home, and could lose it.

In the mid-'90s, at the end of a teaching stint in South Korea, I was approached by a student on the last day of class. She told me she would always "memorize" me.

I've been memorizing Amy's home — and all of the home's associations — all night.