



Sue Ellen Thompson

ment or so much as a hint of sentimentality. This was something I wanted to do: to use language to express the inexpressible, and, in so doing, to find some relief from the loneliness of deep emotion.

After graduating from Middlebury, I got a job writing newsletters for secretaries, construction workers, office managers, even company executives. I was 23, and I wrote all day about things I'd never experienced for people who had. Across from my windowless cubicle sat a middle-aged woman who complained to

## It All Began With Wordsworth

I was a sophomore at Middlebury College in Vermont, taking a course called The Pastoral Tradition in English Literature. One of the poems we studied was "Michael," by William Wordsworth. It's about a shepherd named Michael and his son, Luke, whom he loves more than anything. The shepherd and his wife fall on hard times and are in danger of losing their land. So Luke goes off to the city to earn the money that will enable them to keep it, leaving his father behind to finish building the sheep-fold that they had planned on building together. Luke falls in with a bad crowd, gets in some sort of trouble, and is forced to take refuge overseas. His parents never see him again.

Toward the end of this long narrative poem, there was a line that entered into my bones and my blood to this day. It describes Michael, the aging shepherd mourning the loss of his only child, returning repeatedly to the unfinished sheep-fold. The line says, *Many and many a day he thither went,/ And never lifted up a single stone.* The professor paced back and forth, pounding out the iambs with a fist in his palm and making me feel the full weight of each stressed syllable.

Of all the thousands of lines of poetry I read in high school and college, this one has stayed with me. All I knew is that I wanted to be able to write a line like that—so utterly simple, its rhythm embodying the shepherd's heavy footsteps as he climbs to the place that stands as a symbol of his loss, and deeply moving without a shred of unnecessary orna-

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her husband on the phone all day about how she had nothing to look forward to. I started writing poems on my lunch hour because I didn't want to end up like her—I wanted to write about what I knew and not about what I pretended to know. I wanted to write something that, like Wordsworth's poem, somebody would carry inside her some day.

At the age of 30 I quit that job, applied to Oxford University in England, and studied Hardy, Yeats, Pound, T.S. Eliot, and the World War I poets. I discovered the English poet Edward Thomas who had written the poem "Rain," shortly before he was killed by

a German shell in Northern France. I taped it to the wall next to my bed: *Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain/ On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me*, it began. Again the words lodged in my chest and became indistinguishable from the beating of my own heart.

The poet Stanley Kunitz once said, “If you want to know what it felt like to be alive

at any given moment in the long odyssey of the race, it is to poetry we must turn... poets spend a lifetime hunting for the magic that will make the moment stay.” That’s why I write. That’s what I want to do.

## The Blue Blanket

Toward the end, my father argued with my mother over everything: He wanted her to eat again. He wanted her to take

her medicine. He wanted her to live. He argued with her in their bed at naptime. He was cold, he said,

tugging at the blanket tangled in my mother’s wasted limbs. From the hall outside their room I listened

as love, caught and fettered, howled at its captors, gnawing at its own flesh in its frenzy to escape. Then I entered

without knocking, freed the blanket trapped between my mother’s knees and shook it out once, high above

their bodies’ cursive. It floated for a moment, blue as the Italian sky into which my father flew his bombs

in 1943, blue as the hat I’d bought her for the winter she would never live to see. My father’s agitation eased,

my mother smiled up at me, her face lucent with gratitude, as the blanket sifted down on them like earth.