



The Perfect Life

Peter Stitt

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With irony and empathy, Peter Stitt takes us through his literary past, framing memories within the tropes and personal tragedies of canonical poets.

This collection of essays provides a glimpse into the mind of the founding editor of the *Gettysburg Review* and his search for the perfect life—a free, American life that allows a man to follow an uncommon path and time to reflect and analyze that path with critical empathy.

At times thick with irony, Stitt travels through his past, in first, second, and third person, framing memories within the tropes and personal tragedies of Robert Frost, James Wright, Edgar Allan Poe, John Berryman, and Emily Dickinson. Stitt concerns himself with the personal reputations of these poets, sometimes in the most intimate areas of their lives. He writes, “everything everyone thinks is a fact is in fact a fiction.” He suggests that “Emily Dickinson may have been a lively babe indeed.” Indeed, the third stanza of her poem “520” supports this, “But no Man moved Me—till the Tide / Went past my simple Shoe— / And past my Apron— / and my Belt and Past my Bodice—too.”

The most extensive essay is on Poe’s relationship with his literary agent and executor, Rufus Wilmot Griswold. Stitt grapples with the lies Griswold told about Poe, and Poe’s decision to remain loyal to him and name him executor. Stitt acknowledges that Poe was not a man to whom propriety was paramount, but also that he did not steal others’ work and pass it along as his own as Griswold claimed. Ironically, Griswold died alone within the walls of a rented room, on which hung three portraits, one of which was of Poe. In a final twist, Poe may have written these words about Griswold, which appeared anonymously in a newspaper in 1843: “he will be quoted as the unfaithful servant who abused his trust.”

In his quest for the perfect life, Stitt takes us across the bridge of his own depression, through losses, disappointments, and connections between his life and the lives of the poets with whom he has a physical and supernal (a Poe term) relationship. It becomes a tunnel where we hear the echo of the musicality of Poe, feel the wind of Wright’s words, and hear the screams of a terrified child who scratches us then reaches for our hand. The perfect life is the gift to “follow an uncommon path,” and the only way to see a life that, Stitt acknowledges, “allows me to sit around thinking about this subject” in places like the battlegrounds of the Cathars in the south of France and in the ragged, unfinished Villa del Mar near the Sea of Cortez.

KAI WHITE (Spring 2014)

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