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WHAT REMAINS WHEN RESEARCH AND ART MEET

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Abstract: This brief piece describes the author's experience of encountering art. After several initial claims about meeting art, the author offers a poem as an act of offering an artwork when reflecting about art.

Keywords: art inquiry; poetic inquiry; aesthetic response; audiencing; empathy

I move toward art, taking it in, allowing it to enter me. I engage it, heart exposed, ready for what might be present. I question it, thinking of the issues it raises for those of us in qualitative inquiry, and considering some of the unique demands of the aesthetic. I want research that insists on art's weight and promise. Its weight calls forward my empathic self who submits to the world created, a world where some person acts in ways that are and are not a person you know. And this empathic gesture makes me confront my own life, makes me wonder what role I choose to play, helps me see hope in the human capacity to make sense of the world.

I welcome the lessons art offers, the modeling it displays, the "equipment for living" (Burke, 1941, pp. 293-304) it provides. Life, I am reminded, is enriched by embracing what art enlivens. Art teaches me what I might be missing. I carry its signature with me. I see how artists work into and out of bafflement. It is the frustration and pleasure of creation. It is labor against futility. Another day. A few more aesthetic touches that might somehow matter. It is living in hope. Artists work to demonstrate the life they conjure before it disappears. It is essential.

Good art/research invites me to pause, to process what remains. Following Alexander's (1999) argument for a poetic response in the presence of art, I write the following poem. I hear it performed.

What Remains

After encountering art during life's daily dose
of mindless routines and necessary chores,
I become a sparrow swallowing fresh water,
vitalized; an ox harnessed to a plow, plodding on,
yoked to the possible; a goat on a cliff's edge,
each falling rock a reminder; a fox, well-fed,
standing over what's left, silent as snow.
I am a stone struggling to move beyond comfort,
stirring; a handkerchief, wet from taken tears;
open hands, unable to hold, and cupped, holding
it all; a brown bush, digging down into soil,
nourished; an urn, filled with ashes, floating
upstream; an ink pen writing this poem;
a changed man becoming someone else, better.

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