The Goldilocks Zone

editor's essay

At a public event in Kansas City, in October 2013, the poet Martín Espada mentioned that the first poetry book he ever owned was *The Rubáiyát*, by 11th-century Persian poet and astronomer Omar Khayyám, given to Espada as a boy by his father. As an adult, Espada came upon an astounding collection of over 5,000 editions of *The Rubáiyát*, at the home, as Espada said, "of a doctor in Kansas City." That doctor was E. Grey Dimond, a great friend of this magazine's, lover of art and literature, who died on Nov. 3, 2013, at the age of 94. Dr. Dimond's Khayyám collection is housed in his former home, named Diastole, a reference to the normal, recurring period of relaxation of the ventricles of the heart, the pause between contractions.

News of Dr. Dimond's death coincided with publication by the National Academy of Science that at least 8.8-billion planets in our galaxy orbit their own suns, much like our own, and, much like our own planet, reside in something called a "Goldilocks zone"—not too hot, not too cold—conducive to life, to flow, perhaps to thought. I admit to having felt for a moment diminished by such news, the loss of one man's presence and the loss, perhaps, of earth's uniqueness. "How sad a heart," Khayyám wrote, "that does not know how to love / that does not know what it is to be drunk with love."

Dr. Dimond, I believe I can say, would not have felt diminished at the expansive possibilities of galactic life. He was one drunk with love. Witness the home he left for us, now used as a conference center by the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the location, for many years, of the *New Letters* Writing Conference, held in June. Diastole, which he and his late wife, Mary Clark Dimond, built in the mid 1970s, when Dr. Dimond arrived to start the medical school here, sits on a hill just south of downtown Kansas City. It is filled with art and artifacts collected from around the world, a dazzlement for all attendees when they arrive for our conference. I can hear them telephoning spouses, "When you pick me up, you must come inside and see this place." It is, as its creators intended, uplifting. It contains a third-floor library filled with light, a piano room, a lecture room called the Kiva, and two small apartments where I would house visiting writers before Diastole staff had to put a limit on residents. On travels through Kansas City, writer friends still call for me to set them up in that lovely home with the Japanese garden. If I can, I do.

I am compelled to ponder the spiritual value of such a "felicitous setting," as the Dimonds called their place, in the creation of art and writing. Dr. Dimond was no recluse in life, but ran the cardiology department at the University of Kansas, in the 1950s, was one of the first Americans to visit Communist China, in 1971, beating President Nixon by six months, and became a friend to Edgar Snow, the first Western journalist to interview Mao Zedong. Dimond's first copy of *The Rubáiyát* once belonged to a hospitalized prostitute, whom a doctor friend of his had treated and fallen in love with in Japan. The woman asked that the doctor read to her daily from the book, her solace, her respite.

In Espada's poem about *The Rubáiyát,* he hides the book inside a Playboy calendar, at age 17, so no one would catch him reading poetry. "Awake," Espada quotes Khayyám in his own poem, "For Morning in the Bowl of Night / has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight." I am connecting the dots, now, and there are many, a kind of star chart that illumines our exposures to art and writing, I think, and how they matter. The contractions I felt at the news of those felicitous planets has eased.

I return often to Wordsworth's definition of poetry, "emotion recollected in tranquility," and remember that tranquility, security, often—perhaps always—serve art in its creation and appreciation. Don't ask me to narrowly define tranquility, just to say we can't survive, as artists, without it. Find it at night under the covers, as did poet Brian Turner, writing in his journal after having engaged in a fire fight during the day in the Iraq war; find it more than 20 years after the war in Vietnam, as did a vet friend of mine, before he could, as he said, "negotiate some brokenness." Don't quantify the terms or time span, or the course of thought. Define it as joy, as does philosopher Rollo May, "the emotion that goes with heightened consciousness."

Take Edward Hoagland's essay in this issue, "Hippies and Beats," recollections not always tranquil that he could not have written until the time of tranquility had arrived for him. Likewise Paula Streeter's memoir of her life in Honduras, only possible after the settling of those events, years removed. Define tranquility, in Wordsworthian terms, as remission for Lewis Ellingham, but even then, I am guessing.

I am not guessing, however, about the joy emitted in the intensity of writing and art presented here in this magazine. The heart rests once more on "The Day After Sinatra Married Mia Farrow," depicted here in Joseph Millar's poem, under the dawnwashed sky of the Great Society. This, then, is the real moment of creation, when we pause to build our lives again, in words or deed, to welcome those lovely 8.8-billion planets into our society, waving them in, tired as we might be in the morning, happy as hell.

—Robert Stewart