

HUMOR



Philip Dacey

(1939-)

Amherst with Fries (1999)

When the bored cashier at Burger King
pauses as she takes my order to note
with at least a little wonder
how "Whopper" and "water" "sound alike,"
I say nothing except, "They do, don't they?"
but secretly rejoice to find alive where I least
expected it the spirit of poetry.

I want to kiss her, despite her ugliness
and nature so dwarfish she has to stand
on a stool to punch the register, for I'm thinking
of Emily Dickinson, absolute mistress
of the off-rhyme, her deliciously glancing blows
of sound, and know I'm talking to her sister.
If I'd add, "like 'pearl' and 'alcohol'," I'm sure
she'd nod and go all dizzy, one more Inebriate of Air.

I want to invite her to my poetry workshop
at the local college or even to conduct one
immediately in this place -- among the grease
and sickeningly sweet drinks tell her that
William Stafford said what she already
knows instinctively, how all words rhyme,
any two of them sounding more like each other
than either one of them sounds like silence,
that "burger" has an affinity, therefore, with
"Massachusetts," and language is always

and in any state the special of the day.

Beginning to feel as close to her as, say,
"Whopper" is to "water," I suddenly realize
that although few people full-rhyme
all people off-rhyme, that any one of them
is more at home with any other, or should be,
than either is with styrofoam cups or a plastic tray.

Of course I don't tell her all that I'm thinking --
some passions, ask Emily, are best concealed;
I only accept the fact that I'm order number five
and wait down the counter for what started all this
to arrive, thinking that here,
as the last years of the twentieth century
scrape America off the grill, shoveling it
into the stainless steel trenches
at either side, to be cleaned out later,
there's cause for hope in this minimum-
wage earner's surprising -- even to her, I bet --
regard for what daily commercial use
has reduced to near invisibility: our life-
giving diet of vowel-and-consonant clusters,
including the two she grasped in her imagination
like a customer delicately picking up
his fry and contemplating it momentarily,
disinterestedly studying the shape and coloring,
feeling the texture under thumb and forefinger,
before closing his loving lips over it,
the way Emily closed her lips,
and her sister could as well have, over,
"I'm Nobody -- Who are You -- Are you Nobody, too?"

And as I'm eating like any other nobody,
I realize I'm enjoying, more than my Whopper,
the thought of this cashier at her post
playing the role of an intelligent ear,
a kind of subversive national weapon,
a uniformed and smiling stealth poet,
listening with great discrimination
as a line forms all day in front of her.