

A Memoir in Praise of Public Libraries

At the end of a red dog road
up the mountain from Coal City,
the world started out small.
I used books from our shelves
like bricks to build walls.
Soon they opened up worlds.
We moved into town
with its county library
on the school side of the street.
It became "my new-found land."ⁱ
Mother took me there weekly
for a stack of children's books.
My first grown-up possession
was my *own* library card,
freedom to read anything I chose.
I didn't always choose wisely,
but the world became way bigger
than even a county seat town
with a two room library
that initiated one small girl
into a life time of libraries:
silent safety in noisy, roiling college
the only warm place that year in Oxford,
the only cool one that summer in D.C.
Readers' tickets from universities,
cards from a host of local libraries
clutter up my desk drawers,
mementos of an expanding life.
Librarians became best friends.
Mary, Anita, Cheryl knew how
to find everything about everything,
did so with generosity and humor.
The smell of old books is Chanel #5.
If bottled, I'd daub it on my wrists.
Heaven must be an enormous library
with perpetual Lunch with Books
(including lunch) in the basement,
an eternity of books to read,
no due dates stamped in the back.
Shabby or refurbished, no library
is just a pile of bricks and mortar.
In a democracy, always premised
on an educated electorate,
they are bastions of freedom,

places of expansive possibility,
thresholds to larger life,
tickets to time travel that
cost nobody anything and
offer everybody something.
Libraries help keep us human,
are a familiar face to the lonely,
a warm place to the homeless,
that precious, rare space
where everybody is welcome
and anybody can enter,
where big shots and beggars
are treated exactly alike.
Everybody's books
are due in two weeks.

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For "Grand Reopening" Ohio County Library, May 19, 2018

ⁱ John Donne "Elegie: Going to Bed"