



'This Thing Called Life'

Poetry Inspired by the
Music and Spirit of Prince

Prince Rogers Nelson
1958-2016

Ned Balbo

Poem

Musicology

About the Poet

Ned Balbo is the author of four books. The most recent are *Upcycling Paumanok* (Measure Press, 2016) and *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* (Story Line Press, 2010), selected by A. E. Stallings for the Donald Justice Prize, and also awarded the 2012 Poets' Prize.

Balbo's poetry, prose, and translations are out or forthcoming in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Ecotone*, *Iowa Review*, *Rattle*, *Think Journal*, *Unsplendid*, and in *Measure's* upcoming music issue.

He currently teaches in the MFA program in creative writing and environment at Iowa State University.

Spring 2017 »

Musicology

by Ned Balbo

What boy or girl, standing at the keyboard
after class, hears music no one's playing,
caught in memory? The risers wait,
ready for chorus members to line up.
Sand blocks and sleigh bells lie at rest until
tomorrow's class, and yet this black piano—
electric, digital—pulses with power,
still plugged in, screen aglow. What girl or boy—
untrained, used to the old cacophonies
that classmates bang out when the teacher leaves—
resists the urge or heeds some other call?
Who hears something and has to let it out?
The period's over, everybody's gone—
Ethereal xylophones, their voices muted,
lie beside their mallets in a box;
stacked tambourines, untouched, produce no sound—
And so, because you gave so much to many
through your songs, sweat-soaked performances,
dance moves a blur, medleys falsetto-drenched
through funky breaks and shouted ribaldries—
and, more: an artist moved to charity
who shared his largesse with those most in need,
anonymously, you made sure this boy
or girl, or any classmate here, could pause
within the haven of his solitude,
keep listening, draw near the instrument,
and gently bring one finger to the keys
to capture what might soon have disappeared,
unheard: the fragment of some favorite song?
The scattered notes that, rescued, form a tune
brand new? The chorus soon to start rehearsal,
trampling down the halls, will bring their noise,
chaos, and teasing with them, though for now
this girl, or boy, persists in listening,
alone but changed, the overtones just summoned
with the last note ringing still, alive
in mind and ear, the world enlarged somehow
as all that you've awakened slowly stirs.

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