

Off Key

by James Como (October 2015)

I could charm and speak compellingly,
and I did. I was athletic and
so moved gracefully. I was smart and
could write fluently, cogently,
so I advanced, more or less.
And yet . . .

I played ball but slid too hard,
was told to say "I love you"
but didn't know the rules,
or that there were any,
taught too seriously rich lessons
to insouciant students I really didn't get,
administered on behalf of
narcissists whom I thought worth
the effort only to discover there was no
"loyalty down, loyalty up."
What else . . .

Saved when the culture said kill,

but killed when the setting said cool it,
argued too strenuously for
truths with reasons irrelevant to most,
pressed for telling detail when generalities were in season,
listened to the Mills Brothers when the Beatles were strong,
wrote poetry that scanned and rhymed,
with internal sound effects, interanimated imagery,
and skilfull rhythmic richness, only to get it all wrong.

Therapy might help me hum along
and I know I could learn the melody
and words that go with that old song.
But in the key of thee not of me.

James Como is professor emeritus of rhetoric and public communication at York College (CUNY). His next book, *The Tongue is Also a Fire: Essays on Conversation, Rhetoric and the Transmission of Culture* is due out on New English Review Press in November. Biographical and contact information is at www.jamescomo.com.

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