

The Lyric Said Nothing

My professor said if you have something to say, you should write an essay.

It was the saddest day of my life.

I had written a poem about the Sudan. Or maybe global warming. Or maybe the drought. Or Al Gore. Or the redwood forest. Or sick babies or ex-boyfriends. A poem whose point and purpose were clear. A poem that said something.

It sounded, at the time to me, like she had the idea that poems couldn't be political, couldn't have a point, could be only lyric and imagistic and beautiful. But, in retrospect, I think she was saying, Nicole, when you write poems with a point, the point is so obvious, the politics so clear, the premise so easily regardable, that the poems fall flat. When I wrote urgent poems, I became earnest, nervous — trying so hard to get that something said just right. My more successful poems didn't try so hard. They were irreverent, playful. Not limited by wanting to say something I knew that I wanted to say. The better poems came up with their point while I was writing them, not before it.

All these lessons

The poems collapsed under a shelf of belief. They collapsed after listening to all the old poets and all the new poets and all the old rules and all the new rules. They buckled and they broke until they split in two; one took one as far it could take lyric as far as it could take sense.

One was the allegory. Short poems about birds in trees, birds without straw for nests who had to use dental floss, birds with guns and police batons, birds whose wings touched the either sides of buildings as if they were flying through canyons rather than city streets. I asked a well-published poet what she thought of allegory. She looked at me like I was a Spenserian knight, misplaced in time and costume. She said, I don't think anyone writes allegory anymore.

The other mode was the long line. The poem that kept reaching for something to say without saying it. Planets and Doppler effects. Lines that were trying to find Richard Feynman at one end and psalms at the other. The lines that wanted to enact stoichiometry. The lines that wanted to weigh a mole's worth of their undertaking. To be measured hard on the Mohs scale. To measure windy on Beaufort's. The long-lined poems wanted to know things and the short poems wanted to say things without being earnest or obvious.

The Lyric Said I

"So many poems are self-obsessed. So many authors imposing their 'I' all over me. If I wanted to read someone's memoir, I would." Said one of my grad-school friends who knew her Michael Palmer as well as her Žižek.

My poems from these years are mysteriously missing a subject. A subject as in a point and subject as in someone speaking the poems. The birds that dwelled in my poems didn't speak because I understood that speaking for the birds would be stealing their voices. The birds didn't speak because if they did, I would just be ventriloquizing for them, saying what I already had planned to say, earlier in the day, without any art or complexity behind it. There would be no math if the birds spoke. No higher physics. No planets reached. So nobody spoke and nobody said anything and my short poems got shorter and quieter and my long poems cobbled and combined and reached all over the page but resisted making a point.

What Should Be

The poem is bound. Bound up by tradition, by aesthetic, by graduate-student underconfidence and overreach. It is also bound by space. The line is geography, geology, and landscape. That binding can be good. The perimeter makes its sense. A long-lined poem is not a skinny poem. A long poem tells a good story. A short poem sings. Space wasn't my problem. I had adjusted the heft and hue. I'd planted bulbs in the corners and made trees into fences. I could

move across the page. A long poem about St. Augustine's love of cherries and his mother at his funeral resonated with the time I went to my ex-boyfriend's house when it was raining and knocked on the door. We sat by the fireplace where he had in a vase a branch of cherries, blossoming right in front of my face. And there was a part about a little girl, left at McDonald's. The sounds sounded right and there was some signification I was digging for but since I knew only spaces at the time, a web of interconnections that touched the nodes cherry to boyfriend to hamburger back to cherry but without something else, I couldn't make the web anchor its edges to sill or stairwell, tomato plant or wheelbarrow.

The apparatus of nodes needed something sturdy to make their significance clear without simplifying, reducing, or turning didactic. To do that, I needed to move across time.

What Could Have Happened

In my too-easy definition of narrative, I say narrative equals events over time. In the poems, I'd note the nodes, but the nodes were getting stuck. I needed them to move. It would take the machine of narrative to get them going someplace.

The problem with narrative is that things begin to blur. If a lyric poem is a moment blinked in space then the narrative is a running together of such moments, but going at such a pace that each individual unit is there for the movement, for the apparatus to get going, not in and for itself.

Somewhere, between the stopped-up intersections of poem and the barreling down the path narrative, I wanted to find a way to play with time — to get the story moving and then slow it down again. I wanted space to run long, all the way across and down the page, or quick stop it and change topics like I would with a stanza break. I wanted to say something but not the thing I thought I wanted to say. I didn't want to tell the world to drink less water or burn less gas or think how far away their tomatoes grew. I didn't want to tell them to drop their guns and fight for peace. I had thought, at the beginning of thinking of the essay, that I wanted to say such things. But in the understanding of the limits of form, I began to see the limits of speech, of a rhetoric or a language overused and clichéd. What I had wanted was not a genre in which I could

lay out argument but one in which the methodology of argument was unveiled.

The node does this. Take a node: take cherry blossoms. Associate like this: girls have cherries, cherry Coke, cherry on the top like a nuclear warhead, Cherry Garcia, cherry wood. If I repeat the node "cherry" after I told you the story about the boyfriend and the fireplace poker and how the next night I knocked again and this time I wasn't let in, I was told to go home, the cherry is not so cheery. Neither is Augustine as he sits in the cherry wood pew at his mother's funeral. She is buried in a cherry wood casket. Saints shouldn't outlive mothers. Boyfriends shouldn't kick their ex-girlfriends out. Or shouldn't let them in in the first place.

Mutation

What I want is to wrap around the node. I want to cocoon that puppy up and turn it into something else. Or more of what it already is. Or another version of itself. The *I* is here not for the witnessing or to be the affected-case but only as the spooler of cocoon juice, the *I* that thinks that the caterpillar-node is the cherry and the chrysalis is the Augustine time, the entered-the-house time, the time at the McDonald's and the not-allowed-back-in time. All these times swivel around the pupa. They turn the pupa into something thicker.

What I needed was time to stretch out. To wrap narrative around the nodes. And I need space: to write the prose line to the end of the right margin with the assumption that the line would continue at the beginning of the next left margin. That expectation of going forward let me hang the nodes for a moment and then expand around them until they were not webs but full-on chrysalises.

The *I* had wanted to find its way back. The *I* that's pretty sure she got it mostly wrong but doesn't mind revealing how doubtful she really is. The *I* that didn't bear witness — it wasn't the node she saw that mattered, but the way the node changed her mind when she saw it again. And then again. The way the cherry changed, the way the wood changed and the *I* changed until some sort of mutual understanding was reached between the moment as it blinked and the way the cherry, the wood, and *I* transformed over time.