

Claire Bateman, the 2009 Forum Prize

Although in my attempts to learn how to paint, I've been told to make distinctions before I create connections, tonight I'd like to do the reverse, and begin by mentioning what these particular poems have in common.

All three are lyric narratives, slightly heavier on the lyric, slightly lighter on the narrative, with intimate, conversational tones. While "Storm Lesson" and "Sooner or Later" are relatively dreamy and meditative, "Note Found on a Bathroom Mirror," though driven by dream imagery, is humorous and even jaunty, with a shift at the end into a flavorful poignancy seasoned with a touch of bravado.

Most significantly, in each of the three pieces, the generative impulse is for the poem to become more than the sum of its parts, avoiding self-indulgence by conveying the richly paradoxical themes of struggle and loss primarily through the nearly seamless presentation of fine-tuned, original, and concisely-expressed images.

"Storm Lesson" is tonally as delicate and resonant as a blown-glass sea shell, a poem constructed of internal capaciousness and silences, informed primarily by negative space—that is, everything regarding character, plot, and back-story that the author has wisely chosen to leave out. I can't resist quoting Bachelard here, from *The Poetics of Space*: "All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without being able to tell the secret objectively. What is secret never has total objectivity." He goes on to say, "Paradoxically, in order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading," and indeed, we are immediately drawn into an interior and trance-like state of unknowing: Who is the speaker, and what is her situation in life? Who is the addressee—perhaps an emotionally withholding mother or some other such figure? What is the context for the addressee's ongoing emotional inaccess-

ibility to the speaker? Why was the speaker "wandering with no language," and how did language arise in or return to her? Is this a literal shack or a dream-structure, and why doesn't it have a door—or is the door, perhaps, present but inaccessible due to the shack's position? We are aware that a wind both entered and exited the poem before we arrived, but we are told only of its effects; in its absence, we can't help but experience it as an impersonal fullness that briefly inhabited, or rather, moved through, the hollow shack and then left it lying there as if uprooted, having disrupted that verticality that, as Bachelard states, is necessary to the archetype of house or building.

So after setting up the multiple displacements of structure, speech, and solidarity, the speaker then explains that the addressee's inability or unwillingness to offer any authentic listening or response has driven the speaker inward toward her own hollow spaces that fill themselves out in a prolonged compensatory labor of self-nurturing whose fruit is, rather than human intimacy, a wealth of dreams. One doesn't get the sense that the addressee cares to listen to this reverie—she or he remains an "ear turned in on itself." The speaker is simultaneously free and not free—free enough to see herself as a "person apart," yet, like the Ancient Mariner, who is also compelled to seek relief through narrative from the relentless internal pressure of loss, still finds herself recounting the story to the one who still does not listen.

Thus, the voice remains a voice-in-solitude nearly all the way through to the poem's close, and the tone remains trancelike with its triadic, repetitive phrasing and diction—however, the very last line feels somewhat disjunctively pragmatic to me, out of synch with the rest of the poem's dreaminess. If this were my poem, I might consider leaving off the last line, and instead, ending at "to what you couldn't give me," so that the breaking of the four-line stanza configuration would serve to mirror the sense of loss and imbalance in the speaker's life and in nature/

nurture-wind that upends the shack, and womanhood whose nourishment must come only from within.

Just as a preliminary overview, the speaker in "Sooner or Later They Ask Me My Age" opens with a kind of trickster-like playfulness ("I give a different answer each time") and then glides into fluid, shifting imagery that transitions without warning from the softness of sky and denim pockets to the stark and startling vividness of the torn crab claw, setting the reader up for the bold move of ending by "holding hands with death," a phrase that succeeds because of its conceptual triple-whammy-displacement—one doesn't normally think of "holding hands" during a beach stroll in terms of a severed body part or a claw, or, of course, death itself.

In lines five through ten of the poem, time is presented first as a force of contraction (the shrinking horizon) and then as a force of expansion (the trailing clouds and the stretching, sagging years)—the author handles this transition deftly, inviting the reader to more deeply apprehend the paradoxical and mutating ways we experience time, which is itself the trickster and shape-shifter par excellence. There are a few phrases in the poem that I might question, however, because I suspect that the same word pictures could be presented in fresher and more original ways: "time accelerates," "years stretch," and "clouds race." Also, in the third to last line, the author might seek to avoid the use of the relatively weak verb "were," as well as choose adjectives more vital than "alive and bright." One possibility might go something like this:

"How the other day on the beach/
I found a crab claw ripped/
fresh from the body,/
the blues and tomato-reds still burning
as if alive."

Finally, I love this author's portrayal of what might be called a personal relationship with death as an entity that is somehow like but not reducible to a lover or child, a talisman, and a pet—the complex-

ity of this image cannot be paraphrased or summed up, but overflows any explication that might be given of it, an achievement toward which all poets aspire.

Though the risk of "Notes found on a bathroom mirror" is that it might easily remain at the level of humorous anecdote, never getting beyond the Reader's Digest-like territory of genial self-commiseration, it actually transcends its own framework by moving through the nightmare-element into hyperbole that is kept from being merely bizarre by the down-home diction, the references to corn silk and the razor-back hog, and by the speaker's changing relationship with his own sense of agency as portrayed through references to the addressee, Liana—though the speaker would prefer to remain a wholly self-sufficient warrior, he must surrender not only to the growth of the hair, a process that is as out of his control as are the dream life and time itself, but to Liana's ministrations, as she is invited to tenderly and rigorously, even unflinchingly do for him what he cannot do for himself while he sleeps. Traditionally, the lyric voice tends to be a solitary, even a lonely one; of the three poems we're examining tonight, this is the most relational as well as the most humorous—if there were more time, we might want to explore the connection between those two qualities.

The author handles the poem's verbal prestidigitations with admirable adroitness by highlighting the raconteur-like qualities of the speaker's voice—I would question only some of the more predictable phrases such as "full bloom," "restful sleep," and "face a day like the one that's ahead of me," which may be re-worked. The poem succeeds because of the richness of the paradoxical tension between dependence and autonomy, as expressed through the nimble imagery and phrasing.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to make the acquaintance of all the poems in this year's Forum.