

An Exercise in Artifice: On Writing “See Me Slant . . .”

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What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing I could not now remember.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

CANNOT RECALL THE IDEA THAT PRECIPITATED MY TRESPASS INTO THE WORLD of the poets, to write an essay in which I assumed the persona of Poetry herself. I might tell you that the sky stretched out in one of those indigo swaths upon which the stars appear as scattered trinkets, or that I awoke on an autumn morning before the sun and heard the call of coyotes, or even that I encountered Poetry's mother while beachcombing and she was mud-colored, white-haired, wild-eyed, and as benevolent as hot cocoa. I might say any of those things—they all fit the conceit of “See Me Slant”—but none of them are true.

The truth: I was applying for grant money. Enough to keep me financially stable for two years while I wrote. The grantor provided three quotes from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, asking applicants to choose one of those quotes and craft an “artistic response.” In various professional incarnations, I had written many a grant proposal, only to discover that such endeavors drained my creative juices, rather like a moon snail sucks the flesh of a clam out through a tiny hole drilled in the shell. I had no desire to slip into the vernacular of fundraising, a language currently defined by nouns such as *outcomes* or *targets* and verbs such as *achieve* and *implement*. Such words, to quote a dear friend whose daughter reads Derrida as if it

were a recipe for brisket, “make my hair hurt.” I also felt unable to adopt a scholarly guise—not that I disdain the rigor of academe, just that in my writing, I had left behind the university. I wanted, in the words of Monty Python, to do “something completely different.”

I selected the shortest of the quotes, “Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father.” Why? The sentiment appealed to me. When I was younger and more ardently disposed to point out inequities between men and women, if I heard someone call Edvard Munch the father of expressionism, I would retort that Käthe Kollwitz was its mother—a remark that garnered me many a strange look, mostly from people who thought of Kollwitz as a graphic or documentary artist because she worked primarily as a printmaker and in black and white. I liked the pragmatism of Woolf’s remark—if one were to say that *something* was the product of a father, it would be impossible to deny that thing a mother. And yet that is exactly what had happened with art of any kind: many fathers were celebrated with pedestals and biographies, but the mums were strangely absent.

I could have written an essay naming all those forgotten mothers, decrying the bias-by-omission tactic of the academy and the lopsidedness of The Canon, but a surfeit of eloquent ripostes have satisfied Woolf’s invitation to prove that Poetry, indeed, has an infinite number of mothers. Not to mention some great-grandmothers, grandmothers, and godmothers, stretching from Sappho to Kenyon to Dove.

The other truth: I wanted to write something that proved I might be able to do what essayists *do*, which is to say, adopt a persona—to, as E. B. White describes it, “pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to . . . mood or subject matter.” Why not write a persona essay, conceived in the same way as a poet composes a persona poem? The form-matches-content serendipity was as delicious as one of Woolf’s moments of being: I would write a persona essay about the mother of Poetry, a craft renowned for fashioning speakers who hide behind masks. I would use one fact about life with my real mother (that she made me practice walking with a dictionary balanced on my head), one truth about what she gave me (a passion for language and poetry), but the rest would have nothing to do with my mother and me. Because I think of play as Poetry’s chief purpose—think rhyme, meter, language itself (indeed, the ludic behavior of nonhuman animals is considered a marker for intelligence)—the Poetry whose voice I

would adopt would be a self-possessed, curious, and somewhat mischievous woman, a raconteur-confidante, a trickster. Her shirt—were she to pull one on—would be made of oak leaves and crow feathers and sweetgrass, or, if trapped in some formal occasion, she would don a dress (plunging neckline, short hem) of violently pink organdy trimmed with mocha lace and orange satin ribbon. At the same time, I would make a game out of the enterprise, using as many citations as possible—from an array of literary mothers *and* fathers (my gal Poetry does, after all, have two parents and loves them both)—within the essay. I scribbled down all the wonderful lines or phrases I never had an opportunity to use as epigraphs or quotes or springboards in my own writing. The very first sentence was in homage to Phillip Lopate, a man oft considered to have godfathered the American essay into its current state of popularity, who wrote, in an essay that both delights and infuriates me, “I am a man who tilts.”

It turned out to be quite facile to inhabit the persona of a young woman named Poetry (I tried to think of her as coming of age) and allow her to reminisce about a mother so unlike my own, a mother who home-schooled her daughter by writing haiku on the mirrors and who made a game of finding hidden, inspirational objects; a mother who smiled a coy-as-a-coy-mistress smile for a man she both loved and was independent of; a woman devoted to art *and* mothering (proving, as Ursula K. LeGuin has said, that “the hand that rocks the cradle writes the book”)—the kind of mother any precocious child might desire. Easier still to assume the voice of this Poetry to narrate the essay, because I imagined her to be seductive (in the way that rain clouds seduce the farmer’s imagination during a drought) yet innocent (in the way that seedlings stretch toward sunlight).



I did not get the grant. The essay remained cloistered in a file drawer for several years. One day, in a fit of organization (an impulse inherited from my real mother), I came across the folder containing the grant application and I reread the essay. I tinkered here and there with it, sent it out, and months later was honored to have *AGNI* accept it as an online exclusive.

I did not expect that so many people would read “See Me Slant” and mistake it for autobiography. The Poetry-Considers-Her-Mother part of the title felt like an exceedingly clear announcement of my intent to deliver an essay

reliant on a fiction. Even friends who know me well—and who had heard or read painful accounts of my mother (in brief, though she was quite intelligent, she was neither playful nor happy)—commented on what a wonderful mother I had, or about how much they had learned about my mother and me. I was suddenly thrust into the peculiar position of explaining to readers that what they think they’ve read is not really what they’ve read—that the whole essay was an exercise in artifice, turning on the conceit of a persona, a mask, a necessary untruth in the service of some more abstract truth.

Is this essay then not better called a *fiction*? Should one precede the word *essay* with the modifier *lyric* when talking about it? Does “See Me Slant” belong to that category of writing called *creative nonfiction* (as if fiction or poetry are not creative ventures)? Had she been writing in today’s age of memoir, would Virginia Woolf—whose blouse I have attempted to wear while composing this dispatch (filling only a quarter of her post-Victorian sleeve)—have been called an essayist or a creative nonfiction writer or a novelist or, simply, and as I would like to consider her, one of Poetry’s many daughters?

Those, dear reader, are questions that you will have to answer.