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Jamie Leighton

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Jamie Leighton

My poems included in this issue all deal with themes of the “other.” “Entangled” deals with the image of a piece of hair caught in a spider’s web, but also with the paradox of wanting to stray from the other, even while wanting to remain. “Rings” is simply a love poem, acknowledging the other as non-essential to the world at large no matter how essential to the speaker. “Apologia” is both an apology for breaking a sculpture and also explores “her” search for her significant other, and the need we have for our brokenness to be, if not repaired, embraced.

In “On Choosing Your Topic,” the “other” is one’s own topic. The poem originated from my niece’s search for a topic for her college application essay. The Loren Eiseley epigraph came by way of Mark Salzman’s *True Notebooks: A Writer’s Year at Juvenile Hall*, an extraordinary book about teaching writing to youth charged with serious crimes and being held for trial. I highly recommend it. Salzman quotes Eiseley that we fall into error if we don’t keep our own true notebook “of the way we came, how the sleet stung, or how a wandering bird cried at the window.” In a world of standardized testing, where students are taught to write the formulaic five paragraph essay in blue examination style notebooks for assessments, students are not asked to write their own true notebook. The use of standardized tests in the United States originated with The Alpha and Beta Tests used in World War I to assist the army in placing a large number of recruits into the “right” job within the military, to place young people into the proper slot for training and deployment. The poem’s speaker seeks to let the students out of their classrooms, away from the blue examination books, and into a stormy day. Unfortunately, the students are still stuck with writing open responses in Massachusetts’ standardized assessments.

It gives me hope to learn that the editor of Loren Eiseley’s *Lost Notebooks*, Kenneth Heuer, found among Eiseley’s personal papers “blue-covered booklets used for writing examinations in certain colleges” in which Eiseley wrote early stories, rather than boring five paragraph essays. And also, my niece is currently studying biology and education at Harvard. She did find the topic of her college essay; it was about her family, and especially about her brother with Asperger Syndrome (or according to the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th ed. Autism Spectrum Disorder).

JAMIE LEIGHTON

Entangled

Strands of hair ensnared
suspended there in air,
strung between the spider's silky strands.
They swing within the wind.

So we too swing and sway,
in this frail stringing, this staying tangle,
like strands of hair ensnared;
wishing to stray, we sway and stay.

On Choosing Your Topic

“ . . . But now I think
the purpose lives in us and that we fall
into an error if we do not keep
our own true notebook . . . “
-Loren Eiseley

Sometimes it squeezes your ass and says
“This ass is mine, baby.”

You laugh nervously, move away,
then fall to its mastery, its sexy cockiness.
Try to get to the root of it, dig.

“Confidence” roots in “trust” which roots in “protection.”

Sometimes it flirts with you online
and never touches you,
inducts you into its umbrella protection.

“Online” roots in “directly connected to a peripheral device.”

But we are wireless.
Sometimes by unearthing roots
we find only lies.

“Ducere” means “to lead.”

Sometimes you are led,
and the leading and the being led
out of bed gets you someplace

and induces you to write,
introduces you to Fresh and New, and you
produce paragraphs for shaping,

then smite black metal, hammer away,
near the forge that holds your fire
and a source of air bellowing.

“Ex” means “out” and so “leading out” is “to educate.”

Let them out
from the dry water-tight buildings

where they rub their eyes
after boring passages
with number two pencils
and those damn blue examination books
into a stormy day.

But I digress.

*For the standardized examinations, you must write
a topic sentence and three details and then
the sentence of conclusion.
Two is not enough, and
you want the score of four.
This is the way to write
your personal response.*

Can you remember
eight facts about
the octopus?

Two eyes,
four pairs of arms,
one beak, three hearts,
intelligent—
its primary defense is hiding
but also a crawling arm
may detach and scuttle
across the sea floor

in arm autonomy.
Some have ink sacs
to eject black ink
and become lost
in its cloud;
some were videoed
using coconut tools.

Octopi,
all the males die
shortly after mating.

And isn't it fine
it wasn't eight or nine facts,
but more, the number, ten,

use suction cups
to taste and touch
brings us to eleven then.

A “drill,” “an instrument for boring holes” from “to bore a hole”
but also roots in “turn around and whirl.”

Also consider
the soldiers lined in drills
preparing for battle after
they have graduated
having conquered
*“Topic Sentences and
Open Responses”*

marching into
dry deserts of
resource-rich lands
and the children again
being drilled in poor writing
again and again, and

its pouring outside.

***“Forget everything they taught you
about writing”***

the college professor says
as he begins
the unteaching.

He says **“First you must choose your topic.”**

“Topic” roots in Aristototele’s “argument suitable for debate”
and in “matters concerning commonplaces” or “places.”

Vehicles transport them back home
in airplanes and caskets--
the humming hymn of youth
stirring up hot dust
on foreign roads in Humvees.

Humvee, High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle.

Primarily used by the United States military.
but also by other countries.

Created by AM General, a subsidiary
of American Motors Corporation

The armoring of hillbillies and farmers-
or up armored- sides protected,
but not from the acronyms of death:

IEDs, intermittent explosive devices,
EFPs, explosively formed penetrators,
attacked from beneath, and fueled

explosive energy, but
the doors jammed
on American ingenuity.

Sentences of conclusion,
flags waving like dangling participles,
military shots at the military procession,

the march, the March of Dimes,
the million man march,
the million more movement.

You could be building,
but instead, you ask me
how to choose your topic.

You might start with

“etymology” from “true sense” and “word.”

And see where it leads you.
You are the sounding board
for what is not boring,
for your own true notebook
of places where placed
you march in a time
not of your own choosing
you turn around and whirl
you flirt and shimmy

until you squeeze it by the ass and say
“This ass is mine, baby.”

Rings

Should you leave, the whole world
will not cave in. The nights will not
suddenly extend to fifty-five hours.
The days will not put a sign
on the door saying, "We refuse to open."

It is just that, should you leave,
I would miss the exactness of you—
your straw-colored hair and sea blue eyes
with golden rings, smoke rings from your
gentle cheeks and tongue, the ring
of the phone, and it answering.

I could care less for a diamond ring
or chains to put around my neck or yours.
I just want our arms around,
mornings and nights, each other.
It is the interlocking of desire—
hand in hand, arm in arm, the key

in the keyhole, opening up the doors
to find you there, open-armed,
naked, real.
I love the complete nakedness of you—
next to me—our privacy,
shutting the door sometimes, phone off the hook.

Still if you left, I would find another.
the firm world would rotate around the
sun. the moon would continue too—
like me, and you.
Love me. Love you.

Apologia

I

I'm sorry.
I did not mean
to break your clay figure

of the wrestlers
struggling
with the Tibetan bell.

I couldn't help,
but play the bell,
with its strange hieroglyphics

and chime it to
its long tinging tone,
like a wailing mother

crouched outside
a wall, the long trailing
away to silence,

or test it percussion-like
to stop the tone
in an abrupt end.

To end it you
just put them down,
and the sound ends.

II

I'm sorry.
I did not mean
to break the clay figure.

The bell knocked
the limbs
of your man off.

The parts took off,
arm toward cheese,
hand toward wine,

but foot still arched
to ground as if
he was about to run,

until the motion stopped,
in stuck restraint
within the cooked clay.

It looked like Achilles' heel,
but he was over her,
straining muscles to restrain

the one who might escape
but chances were looking grim
not one bit of wind.

The vessels were now
more than three quarters
empty I would say,

and in the bottle's sway
the edge of night began
softening to putty.

Still he pinned her
wholeness there,
Her strength strained.

He lost his right arm,
his left hand,
but she had stiffened

stuck in the same position,
and didn't sense
his weakness, or

her lucky break;
now it was conceivable
she could escape.

III

I'm sorry
I released your figure
with the Tibetan bell.

She could escape
except for the
apparition of nails;

perhaps she
fell in love
with the steel's rails.

She needs another
element to transform.
She stayed pinned

like a butterfly
stuck
beneath the broken thing.

IV

The night,
I broke your clay figure
with a Tibetan bell.

you placed the hand
on his strong back,
placed the arm

like a wing grown
off the leg.
It did not work for us,

too crusty and surreal,
without the torch of
spark, without

the spiritual shivering,
the God-like power
to heal whole.

V

Not broken clay
but a she
wholly complete

she still seeks the
diamond ring
in its spectacular cut.

The diamond cuts
soft surfaces,
scratches hard,

but when held down,
by a cutter it breaks into sparkles
into diamonds of Hope.

She too mourns broken shells,
speaking into crevices
with cracked lips.

VI

We just sat there
with our wine,
and they,

well they,
had already been
to the kiln that way,

and they
were insentient matter,
fragments anyway,

unaware as we
owners of clay
who may be

brokenness embraced.