

Zero at the Bone



Psychedelic Woman (detail), Lynda Bamford, 1960-70

In the 1950s, a small New England College. Miss Drexel, a professor, is about 50 years old.

There have always been students who seem to hang on my every word, would take notes rapidly, not wanting to miss a moment's flow of ideas. That's not *her* way. Naturally, I'm in favor of independent thought, but who doesn't relish being adored?

I used to imagine my opinion deferentially sought in homes of

understated elegance, among members of elite clubs. "What is your opinion of this year's Nobel Laureate?" That's finished now. Now, this genteel, traditional institution is home to me. I do what I can to protect my home against intrusion, post-war or otherwise.

In last night's dream, a kind of roasting, students and faculty both. Though no one in particular, is targeted, *I* am among those roasted.

"A major poet has to have a system. Note especially W.B. Yeats." I *have* said that because it is so. Roasting, though, changes things.

She was in the group doing the roasting. That confirms my feeling. If there is love at first sight, the same is true of its opposite. When she started to take my courses, I studied punishment and reward—even experiments with mazes and mice. I have some detailed copies in my files. I remember in particular this: an arduous maze; at last a door leads to a fine wedge of cheese; next time, same door, no cheese, a harsh thump instead; occasionally, an electric shock just strong enough to cause pain. It is impossible to master what is behind which door or to predict an outcome. Eventually some mice give *themselves* the thump or shock. Physical pain was preferable to repetitive hopelessness—never getting it right.

I meant to be adopting such techniques when I'd praise her work, then sharply criticize for even the slightest flaws: interesting idea, good potential, but you can't seem to fold a paper straight. Once though: this is not your best work, but it may be your worst. She was surely hurt, but took pains to revise and re-do. However I tried to tear her down, she'd try even harder to recover. She'd make the work better—much better sometimes, though I never let on. Could I, against my will, actually be helping her?

Sometimes, I think she has a self-repair gene—not grim

determination, something, quasi-botanical—like some greenery and sundry flowers in my garden not destroyed by pelting rain or fierce hail.

II

My friend's lecture on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was based on Virginia Woolf—you can't get much more unassailable. Virginia Woolf thought Tess was mostly unlucky: her little carriage *would* threaten to fracture, her horse very likely go lame. Are there questions? Comments? None forthcoming. She went round the circle; when she got to *her*, silence at first. Then: It's not that Hardy makes Tess clumsy. Her carriage *is* faulty, she hasn't a good horse. For her, no such thing as an *ordinary* setback, *any* setback means disaster. She can't help, mend, repair, replace, because she is *poor*. In seeing Tess as awkward, accident-prone, Mrs. Woolf seems almost to sneer. But Tess's un-luck is poverty itself. I don't think Hardy means for us to sneer.

My friend thanked her, shifted the focus. Talk seemed a cover-up for a deeper silence. A shadow was cast at the back of things. We all knew that the student was right and that she—and Hardy—were talking about poverty in a way that was beyond us. Not the poor we remembered at Christmas, but a stark fact—terminal.

Just simply, straightforwardly telling what she sees as a Truth, she is setting herself counter to a celebrated novelist and to my friend. She is more frankly at her ease than she should be. She thinks that being a student is a wider country than it is. In some way, my friend's intent and project were compromised.

I decided to investigate the terms of her scholarship and something about her background: very modest income, an urban walk-up, immigrant parents with, I'd guess, night-school English. She has the Club Scholarship. They assess where she

comes from, evaluate worthiness.

We at the college were her lottery win, her bright path—meagre savings and all high hopes invested here. She's had three good years; her scholarship won't be rescinded, but, a series of failures can add up to a version of doom. I could damage. I could condemn. Whatever drummer she hears, trip him. Smash the drum.

III

It's not merely custom, it's a rule. At their first class after a major holiday, returning students sign in. Mine is her first class past Thanksgiving; she signs in twelve minutes late. The penalty I recommend is confinement to campus for three weeks. She is distraught. For the first time, she *pleads* with me.

"I can't be confined to campus. We need all our rehearsals."

I learn that in an intercollegiate production of *Othello* she is cast as Desdemona. The Dean intervenes. "I hear that her work is valued. Please be lenient about the twelve minutes." I say yes to the Dean without letting on that this valuable creature stands, for work missing, to fail in my own course in Shakespeare. Though she re-reads the play daily, the paper she's had no time to write is what's required.

The intercollegiate production of *Othello* opens, is well attended and much praised. She loves this work and says she'd like to become a Shakespearean actor. Welcome news. For someone without money or connections, seeking a career in acting—let alone Shakespearean—is electric shock and harsh thump all at once. She's gone beyond anything I could have planned.

Larissa's a somewhat elaborate name for what's likely to be a humdrum fate. I see you returning ashamed and empty-handed to your parents' home. Your life was never your own. Your

immigrant parents give food and shelter so their children can become the real suppliers. Indebtedness for near deprivation is your legacy. You'll seek out job security: a dead-end job which will condemn you in equal measure as it sustains. You'll be old, a pensioner, untouched by distinction, the gleam of all longing now dim.

I dream she has attempted suicide, is in the hospital, outcome uncertain. Who is permitted to visit? Her list is requested; my name does not appear. A glimpse of her room: on the bed, alongside her, in black letters, this note: Please know, in case I don't recover, I've been the victim of a hate crime. "It's her medicine. She's delusional." But no one listens.

IV

One of the last essays of the year, departmentally required, has a question based on—Hardy, again!—*The Darkling Thrush*.

Some Hardy experts hold the view that the poem's last lines, which *appear* hopeful, are ironic and should be understood ironically. What is your own view? (She has written out from memory the last several lines or most of them.

"So little cause for caroling
Of such ecstatic sound . . .
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.")

Make your own case with examples and also cite from another literary work a reverse feeling or moment.

They want some discussion about tone. I don't suppose she's had much (early enough) exposure to fine distinctions of tone.

(*Reading the essay*) I can't *prove* this, but it seems to me that the reader feels, intuitively *knows*, that these lines are

straightforward. Here hope, for the thrush, that is moving through the air, does not linger or hover, it *trembles*. That somehow stirs the conviction of a serious, authentic event—a hope gracious and unmistakable, not to be explained away by someone who strains for a clever notion and becomes more attached to *it* than to the poem. The word “tremble” is special. Longinus says one must “tremble as one writes.”

(Looks up from reading.) He doesn't say it in *your* language, but in his own. Of course, you had no Latin *at all* until you came here. As for Longinus' *On the Sublime*, you make your own use of what I taught you just last week,

I see that your next answer is curtailed, spare, abrupt.

(Reading) Question two on an opposite feeling or moment—The reverse of the thrush with his blessed hope is a snake—and what Emily Dickinson finds he always provokes:

“. . . a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.”

END

Author's Note: This has been an attempt to grasp the mental life of a harmful, perhaps deranged professor I knew.