

[A SINGLET: OCCASIONAL REVIEWS OF A SINGLE POEM]

SHE HAS BEEN ENLISTED IN THE CHOIR
UNDER COMPULSION

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FRIENDSHIP 3

Andrea Brady

We never thought that one was any good enough for:
no quote around that opening, no lie of transmission
as if we intended to save you to your face.
The socialist heart can organise its fidelities
in millimetre strips; we pay out greedily, your grace
and favour attainments, the bridge of your head. Mean
while forgetting that all our accounts are scrutinized
in the department stairwell, even ours. The cut-back
the baton-twirler of cuts back is a totally forgetful animal.
Synchronic faulters busy themselves throughout England,
the beam on which the eye vaults pure paperweight narcissus.
Until, that is, we are finally caught in the act
of introducing our own discovery, sip over, the bottom
falls out lets hesitancy flood into like lice the talkers.
Then it comes to our attention that nothing ours
like the fantastic. In that fantasy, you are wild on tablets,
lofted in spangled pants, the statue of our liberty:
we no more go to the parties, and have not protected you.

“Friendship 3” by Andrea Brady, published in the *Notre Dame Review* (Winter / Spring 2010), is addressed to “the statue of our liberty,” itself a “fantasy” of attainment for what “We never thought that one was any good enough for.” Funny maybe that I found this poem inside the poetic vector of an academic institution relatively unaffected by “The cut-back / the baton-twirler of cuts back is a totally forgetful animal.” Forgetful of the “fidelities” that “the socialist heart can organise [...] in millimetre strips.” Or are millimetre strips peculiarly adequate to “spangled pants” (what the statue is wearing), like confetti to the system’s baton-twirling? The statue stands so as to re-member what has been lost. Friendship is no bulwark, just as we “have not protected you,” nor have “we intended to save you to

your face.” Just because “we no more go to the parties” doesn’t mean there isn’t a stand-in, someone to twirl the baton after the fantastic has left “no quote around that opening.” What is gone is in truth irreplaceable. What is replaceable has always been there. Hence the flight from “Synchronic faulters busy themselves throughout England” to where “nothing ours / like the fantastic.” This fantastic performance of the disinherited is—batons in their *own* hands—the choir of lyric loss.

Lyric loss is a curious formulation to apply to Brady’s poem. I am not going to enlist Google to see if a “Friendship 1” and “Friendship 2” exist. While “Friendship 3” is part of a series of poems by Brady in *Notre Dame Review* it is *the* one I’ve become aware of, and for me is exemplary. I think my own choosiness as a reader reflects something that is in the poem. “Friendship 3” is peculiarly attentive to something that, if it exists, is dramatically fragile. Or what it is can only be attested to through its fragility. The fragility of the lyric subject is brought to the fore, for example, through certain enjambments: “Mean / while forgetting that all our accounts are scrutinized.” Is “the socialist heart” “mean” or, in coveting “grace / and favour attainments,” does it just happen to forget its encounter with the particularity of those who “are scrutinized / in the department stairwell”? This “scrutiny” is akin to those “busy” “fautlers”—both hanging over the poem in judgment. A judgment the subject has been enlisted against, by an elaboration of John Wilkinson’s striking phrase that serves as my title.¹ Yet this contrary “mean”-ness makes poetry. It is there in the line that falters and then picks itself up across the enjambment. What is made apparent is a telling ambiguity: that scrutiny is inside as well as out, and that what bestows grace may also be—in a “flicker of hesitation”²—mean. Mean forgetting? This potential passing over is there in the word itself that hangs, and reads seamlessly into “while.” “Meanwhile” it reads, if we forget the fault.

Loss is curious here because it is not clear what has been attained. What attracts me to this poem is a sense of its ethical impulse. What I mean by ethical is akin to attention, or being present for the particularity of an encounter, whether that be with the line, with grace, or with faults. I was resistant just now to putting “an” in front of “encounter.” In part through the elision of semantic expectations by enjambment, poetry is more dexterous than prose in brining the particularity of one encounter into direct relation with another—often more general—one. The general sense of fracture that

1. ‘Off the Grid: Lyric and Politics in Andrea Brady’s *Embrace*’ in *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007), p. 135.

2. Donald Davie, ‘Syntax and Music in *Paradise Lost*’ in Frank Kermode (ed.) *The Living Milton* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 73.

Brady's poem evokes is extraordinarily holistic in comparison with other Cambridge School work. The gist of her poem is not the fantastic flailing of a schizoid Id, nor the lament of a stable subject for its failure to comprehensively attain itself, but rather attends to its own fragility, and the happenstance of its own creation. What I was reading with "mean" is the way that this fragility is always-already there in the lyric self's conception and concomitant contestation. The point is that "Friendship 3" is explicit about this double-bind—that is its "subject."

There is the ghost of a Petrarchan sonnet at the poem's turn: "The cut-back / the baton-twirler of cuts back is a totally forgetful animal." Line nine ("the baton-twirler") is where the transition to the final sestet would be, if this were such a sonnet. In Brady's poem it is still the moment of transition to "England" and the moment of academic self-assertion and faltering ("hesitancy"). The sentence itself turns. The second "back" is what you get after the "baton-twirler" has turned, a unique sort of "cut" that breaks the line in half. What we see is the back of "a totally forgetful animal." The "cut-back" again is individual and institutional; the skin of the professional is worn on their work. (There is an unintentional, yet explicatory pun in "worn.")

I struggle with line eleven most. "The eye vaults" upon its own "beam"? After vaults a prosodic beat to "pure paperweight narcissus." Does it hold itself down, this eye?

Until, that is, we are finally caught in the act
of introducing our own discovery, sip over, the bottom
falls out lets hesitancy flood into like lice the talkers.

The "paperweight" of the "eye" maybe causes "the bottom" to fall out. The "vault" of this self, if it is a self, holds down its own narcissism. The "hesitancy" of self-assertion ("our own discovery") that was there in the double-backed encounter with institution and baton-twirler is what gets in the hair of "the talkers." Brady's utterance adorns those "talkers" in a cruelty that is theirs. The institution talks, the baton-twirler dances, this poet caps the movement off where "the bottom / falls out." To encounter this fall-out is to contend with the ethical presence of the poem; the fall of some of its lines calls forth an encounter that demands not only attention, but also a kind of self-elision that provides the possibility for new, substantial ground.

"Then it comes to our attention that nothing ours / like the fantastic." The final lines of "Friendship 3" are no less actual for being a fantasy. "Nothing" is substantially "ours" until, falling down to the next line, "ours" is "the fantastic." The last sentence inhabits the real force of fantastic projec-

tion, only to fall back at its limits:

In that fantasy, you are wild on tablets,
lofted in spangled pants, the statue of our liberty:
we no more go to the parties, and have not protected you.

What saves this from elegy is the pronoun “we,” rather than an “I” which has continually been figured as “nothing.” Through depersonalization the distance between “we” and “you” becomes all the more pronounced; each is at the opposite end of an irreconcilable equation. This is the nature of concretion, ethical or otherwise: one thing cannot be accounted for by another. Lyric honesty you might say, and if poetry has anything to do with singing the self, one wonders what else is worth rooting for. Strange that a statue would need to be protected, but this isn’t I think what is happening. Rather the mourning of the last lines emerges from not having protected an individual from becoming a statue. Through its own particularity of engagement Brady’s poem throws itself away as one of a number, anything but monumental, and so remains present.