

Whether Whither
by

“Whether whither or wither weather?” he asked me without looking me in the eye.

“I prefer the former from the latter,” I responded trying to catch his attention before anyone else could attract his consideration with something better.

“Form the former, lathe the latter, like a lather in your dormer,” he said and I knew right away that there was little hope for me. Working with a psychotic poet in a restricted group, only five participants in all, was not going to be the easiest employment opportunity for me.

I was still young then, green in the ways of therapy, and lost in the luster of having famous men and women facing off with one another in front of me. I felt the desperate need to be one with them, to get inside their heads and flourish within their imaginations. It was hopeless, or so I thought at that moment.

A scant second later the game was on and I was both pursued and pursuer pursuant to the passive subject he espoused. He had leaned forward, almost doubled in half before he spoke again and the rest of us sat in silence watching him manipulate space with his forehead, his

shoulders and his puny frame. My notes informed me that he had been on a hunger strike pending consideration of his release and that he had dropped almost forty pounds in the course of that long reluctant refraining from nourishment. I had nearly cried when I read about his attempt to alter physically in order to present an image of better mental health.

“Whither weather, then,” he said calmly from that awkward physical position. He was famous, the most famous person in the group at that time, so his name must not be mentioned here for his subsequent work, though founded in the grounded situation I found him in, has relieved us all of the pressures of shame concerning his treatment. “Although I don’t care for that as much, for the second word’s lack of an ‘h’ alters all perception and understanding.”

“Perception and understanding are the same thing, you redundant old pedant,” said the young woman sitting just to my right. Her first novel had been a wild success but nothing she had written since had approached its intensity or its public clamor. My poet, sitting opposite me, didn’t react to her slam. Instead he looked to my left at the man who sat, legs-crossed, on the floor in front of the chair next to me, now unoccupied.

“Can an ‘h’ be so important when the words are so utterly clear?” he asked my neighbor. He, the floor-sitter whom I shall call *Fred* looked at his questioner and after the lengthy pause that preceded any response from him, even to the questions of hunger and dinner, finally said, “Why, si!” He was often in the habit of providing a sentence that could be interpreted in letters only if you weren’t listening carefully to the conversation.

“I knew it,” said the poet. “I rue it, can construe it, and then stew it, since I knew it. But I’ll do it, move right through it, happen to it as I do it.”

“Pedant,” said the novelist to my right again.

“Leave my husband alone, you shrew,” shouted the older woman sitting to the poet’s left.

“What would you have me do?” said my neighbor. “Ignore the old bastard who uses words more to torture than to teach?”

“You want a teacher, or a torturer, tongue-twister?” said the last member of the group, an old, old man who rarely fought with the others but who seemed to have been prompted by this last exchange.

“I certainly don’t want you, anyway,” the novelist replied, pressing the back of her right hand to her lips as a final gesture. It wasn’t one that made any sense to me, but I let it pass without question.

This was my seventh session with this group and the first time they had interacted so completely. That pleased me but for one thing. They were avoiding the issue I had posited initially and I wasn’t sure why. When we started the group therapy session I asked them place on the theoretical table around which we sat one solid reason for needing therapy, one honest disclosure from each of them which we could then discuss.

My novelist had been here the longest, nearly three years and had, according to the notes, not made any progress with either her psychological problems or her new book. She had been protesting both of these things as senseless and useless. Her anger had caused her to be restrained on several occasions and denied social rights more than once. She has been calmer and quieter recently, but today was different. Today she was belligerent.

The other woman, the older woman, was a different case altogether. Once a well-known, and presumably well-loved, modern dancer she had flown into a rage on stage one night, mid-performance, and grabbed parts of the set - one chair, and one hat rack - and attacked four other dancers with these things, wounding one of them badly and injuring the others to the point where they had to stop performing for months. Her psychotic break had been bad enough to land her in

this institution for analysis and care. Once here and stabilized she had adopted the poet as her common-law “husband” and she made a grand gesture of protecting him from the others, just the opposite of her on-stage breakdown.

The old man was a renowned philosopher whose two dozen books had elucidated many unpopular theories in ways that made clear the odd intentions of their formulators. Considered to be an academic superstar he had started falling apart on his 55th birthday, a date he claimed was a curse, and he had slowly lost his hold on reality. He had been here for only a year and his therapy focused on that which he had lost: the simple understanding of who he was and where he was and why he was where he was.

“*Fred*” wasn’t like the others. He had given his life to religion, celibacy and prayer for peace in a non-religious sense. While he spent many hours a day devoted to religious practices from Hindu to Judaism, his single burning quest was in formulating written prayers to deliver to politicians around the globe insisting on a more moderate behavior providing their neighboring countries agreed to the same thing. There wasn’t one head of state he hadn’t approached in letter form. He had met none of them and had only received three replies to his letters.

The poet, of course, appealed primarily to my own interests. I was a writer as well, and my basic form was poetry though I was not in his league, not nearly. My best work had been published in a psychology journal and it received a great deal of praise from other practitioners which gave me hope for a future piece though it had not materialized as yet. There were two lines in that published piece to which I often retreated when sessions became too hot:

“Remarkable the day / In any social way.”

Those lines seemingly summed up my philosophy about the work I do. They were concise and precise and said what I believed about the process: Iambic Tetrameter was my thing and the

words performed in that form and stayed with anyone who read them. They were not the summation of the poem, but remarkably sat in a midway spot, lines 47 and 48 of the whole piece. Forming the words with my lips and tongue, but not speaking them I returned to my group.

“I have a question,” I said loudly and soundly. They turned to look at me, each in his or her peculiar way. “Why whither? Why not something less archaic? to what place or state? Or what is the likely future of. . .whatever your subject will be? Or to which or to whatever place? Why ‘whither?’”

The poet regarded me with darkening hostility, an emotion I knew would never become violent on his part. His *wife* stared at me as though I had jumped into the tank ring holding a whip, a gun and a chair. The philosopher sighed and leaned his head far back not able to look at either me or at the poet. The novelist turned a cold shoulder on me and stared off into space.

“You love definition, don’t you?” Fred said quietly enough for me to hear him but not with enough assertiveness to alert the others to his participation in the discussion.

Then the poet spoke. “Whither works wonders when we wander while wondering. You use your usual yen, yet you yank your usefulness yonder. English language lets losers let loose. I say, what’s your excuse!”

I wanted to reply instantly, but felt that nothing I could say would ever sound right after that display of technique which just emerged from his lips like a litany. Also, he had demanded an explanation and I hadn’t one. I hoped that someone else would jump in and happily, the religious left, the man to my left that is, spoke up fairly quickly.

“My friend, there is no war among us here. We are world neighbors and we share our load with equanimity. Never attack when you can conciliate. Never embrace the violence when the victory goes to those who equate timidity with familiarity and bring out the best of both in

others.”

“You’re a madman,” said the novelist to my supporter. “Your story wouldn’t take ten pages to tell and then the print would have to be over-large, 22 point perhaps.”

My personal philosopher, *Fred* looked at her, nodded twice and then said, “You should write it and not speak it out loud. Call it a comedy and let the tragedy of this life play through the lighter words.”

“All is foreign here,” said the old, old philosopher. “Nothing has resonance in this white, white room on this un-designated floor.”

“Madmen, all of you wordies are mad men, even the dark one over there who claims to be a woman but who has never danced a day in her life,” shouted the Poet’s faux-mate. “My husband is the only one who knows the world as I do. We have danced the dance of loving and made the music in our heads reverberate off the rafters of this dense den of non-deliverance.”

“I have not,” the poet said, but she ignored him completely.

“You all must rise off your derrieres and live with the rhythms that control us all,” she continued. “Once you do what all humans must do at least once in their adulthood, and that is revert to childhood’s freedoms, then you can talk with us who live with inspiration and the soul of life, the dance of poetry, the poetry of dance.”

She stood up and at once began a veritable Isadora Duncan progression of movement that was, I was startled to notice, extremely sensual but not at all risque. She performed for nearly fifteen seconds before she paused, looked at all of us, sitting still and not moving, and said, “fake people who cannot submit to the music in your own heads.” She spat, sat down turned silent.

My watch beeped and I knew I was approaching the final few minutes of our session.

'Fred' heard the beep also and he reached up to touch my wrist.

“You make sounds that only animals make,” he said calmly, sedately. “You create noise where no noise should originate. Are you going to explode, the bomb of a man who cannot mean to harm us?”

“It’s my watch alarm,” I said simply. He hesitated, nodded and returned to his inner silent place. I turned to the poet who had started this entire exchange. “Whether whither, I think, is better.”

“So you cherish the ‘h’ then,” he responded.

“I do,” I added.

“Those two words bring happiness,” he said smiling, “as they always do. . .”

“At least until the ceremony ends,” the dancer amended.

“Until the ceremony has ended and the honeymoon has past,” the old, old man insisted.

“Until the collaboration of lovers loses its importance as it must,” the novelist hissed between her closed lips.

“Until tomorrow. Same time,” I said simply rising from my chair.

I left the room, but not without wondering “whither. . .?”

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