



Else My Project Fails

On Overthrowing the Charms of Ego

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Recently I was asked to give a writing workshop for two classes of fifth graders in Telluride, Colorado, mainly a tourist town tucked against a range of breathtaking mountains along the Western Slope of the Rocky Mountains. For the children of Telluride, growing up must be a province of long, shadowy winters. That morning they appeared to me like characters out of some hip *Brigadoon*, relatively unscathed by the outside world, oddly lacking the standard inattentiveness and outbursts. By eight o'clock they began to wander into the classroom as if on their own time, little business-people ushered along by no one in particular, hanging up their jackets, relaxed and unaffected.

The two classes, as a company, had staged that year an abridged production of *The Tempest*, featuring about two or three actors per one character. In my first hour, I made the acquaintance of three Ariels, a Caliban, and a Prospero. We talked for a little about the play. Caliban enjoyed his role because, he said, he could walk around like Boris Karloff as the Mummy. The boy and girl Ariels didn't speak, huddled back in my peripheral sight, to the left and to the right, just barely in view. Prospero dominated. He said, "When I stopped doing magic, everything changed. Everybody went free."

I love *The Tempest*, for its attention to the role of the artist, the maker, the one who brings the trouble into the world, and who ushers it out, I've seen and scoured the play again and again. In the cosmos of his theater-world, Prospero is the sun. At the center of it all, he imprisons his leagues of fairies and devils and shipwrecked multitudes, then frees them just as quickly when the curtains fall. Like some Norse god, he's quick to punish and forgive. We talked and talked about that final moment when Prospero, the deposed Duke, is restored to his costume of social duty and commitment, and drowns his books. The sudden shift in power is undeniable:

Now my charms are all overthrown,
 And what strength I have's my own,
 Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,
 I must be here confined by you,
 Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
 Since I have my dukedom got,
 And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
 In this bare island, by your spell.
 But release me from my bands,
 With the help of your good hands:
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please.

The beauty of the moment, of course, has to do with Prospero's request that we free him, that he wake, as from a dream, and go back to his life in time, the life of drudgery and responsibility. Suddenly, it's we who become the magicians, the spell-casters, the forgivers, and that's exactly right; for without our consent, the dream of the play, with all its trouble and love and resolution, could not have occurred. Thus Shakespeare's Globe Theater in this context becomes the globe of the world, and, in a more profound sense, as Hamlet suggests as well, the globe of the skull, in which the whole fitful world is contained. Within it Prospero dreams the spectacle of the universe. And we dream it too; the space between writer and reader diminishes; we lock in that high moment of creation and pain.

In Telluride that day, we had an open discussion about our dreams, the "tempests" we invoke in our heads at night. Asleep, we are each a Prospero dreaming the dream of the world. Caliban, Ariel, the lovers, the conspirers and drunks, all the players become extensions of that central role. A dream: a girl described a war with Ridgeway, a neighboring town. A dream: a boy described a walk in the forest with that blind engineer from *Star Trek* (a scene reminiscent of Oedipus and Tiresias, to be sure). No time was given to the meanings of their dreams. What fascinated was the experience of dreaming, described in marvelous detail.

Normally, I spend my days teaching creative writing at a small university in Southeastern Colorado, some three hundred miles from Telluride. My students are teenagers, returning adults, senior citizens, and the landscape could not be more divergent. To the east, the Front Range is a prairie that stretches as far as the eye can see. To the north, the foothills are foggy and removed. Maybe it's the hard practicality of my region that colors the writing of my students; or maybe it's a fact of the aging process that they have come to yearn for the sense of things, hungry for good ideas to shape into stories and poems. Commonly, however, images and events become diluted by the abstract designs of these very conscious writers, maneuvering their hands frantically in the backdrop. Like novice magicians, my undergraduate writers often attract more attention to the trick itself, as if to proclaim, "I'm writing a poem!" Their moves are memorized and cliché. Few transcend the mere technical requirements of their crafts. Few cap-

ture the experience behind the trick: the curiosity for life, the wonder that first brought them to the page and which, at their best, they can communicate beautifully to readers.

This is what university students of creative writing have forgotten, to be gained again, if they are lucky, only after years of steady prompting from teachers and trusted readers. But how do they go back? To trust that part of themselves, that great intelligence that speaks in images before it speaks in words? Not merely to whirl about the edge, how to find the eye of the imagination where it begins? That tempest?

My experience with the ten-year-olds in Telluride renewed my need to ask these questions. I sensed that they held the answer. On that day, I introduced them to a poem from Charles Simic's collection *The World Doesn't End*:

The hundred-year-old china doll's head the sea washes up on its gray beach.
One would like to know the story. One would like to make it up, make up
many stories. It's been so long in the sea, the eyes and nose have been erased,
its faint smile is even fainter. With the night coming, one would like to see
oneself walking the empty beach and bending down to it.

Here, too, the old theme is present, the impulse to make up stories; here, too, the Shakespearean props—the sea, the pearls that were the eyes. But, who did the doll belong to? How did the doll get lost? What did the sea look like through the doll's eyes? I wrote these questions on the board. I gave them each about ten minutes to complete their responses. At the end of it, I asked them to erase the 1-2-3 demarcations (the sequential trail of the questions) and to look at their answers as a whole unit. Then I had them circle the best adjective they had written and to make that adjective, whether it had anything to do with their story or not, the title of their piece. Immediately, one boy, Victor, blurted out: "But it doesn't make any sense!" I looked at his paper. Here is what Victor had written:

Endless

A little Vietnamese girl. She lost her doll while she slept
in a tiny boat with her frail grandfather. The sea was like an
endless green field a boy played on, filled with allies and
enemies.

At least ten of the fifteen poems written in that hour possessed the same resonance as Victor's. Putting his emphasis on a word instead of an idea, especially not the idea of "making a poem," Victor had dreamed up a collection of endless contingencies: a doll that belonged to a small girl, a frail ancestor looming over her, and looming over them the sea, and over that an indifferent God. Somehow the little game (or play) I'd conjured had taken the pressure off the boy's shoulders. The result was an ego-less affair, a marriage of mind and heart, without the miserly presence of fear of failure. And, Victor's poem made plenty sense. In mythological language, he had articulated what the Hindus have called the *lila*, the play the world is, endlessly at play.