

“Your Body Everywhere”: Time and Forgiveness in Carl Phillips’s “Since You Ask”

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In her 2007 lecture “Is and Was,” Marianne Boruch talked about verb-tense shifts in contemporary lyric poems and included an extended discussion of Carl Phillips’s “A Great Noise.” Boruch was interested in “beautiful and terrifying” shifts into the present tense, which create a proximity to memory that “both releases and contains.” Many of her insights into the mechanics of poetic memory also apply to Phillips’s recent poem, “Since You Ask” (*Reconnaissance*, 2016), where even the title creates a temporal wobble. “Since” is probably a synonym for “because,” but it is also a temporal marker. Plus, the words “You Ask” are in present tense, but the whole title presents itself as a response—as something that implicitly comes *after*.

“Since You Ask” is a 21st century gem for many reasons, one of them being its slyness with time. We are sometimes asked to reflect on what it means to exist after modernity’s dramatic ruptures—and to the extent that “Since You Ask” places its faith in thinking, it is thinking about rupture and repair. The poem’s first sentence presents a rupture that feels personal because of the “you” the poem is addressing: “It’s as if forgiveness were, in fact, an animal—wild, / like animals, the particular wild of animals that have / lived domesticated their entire lives, when a hand, / a trigger, something small lets go.” The poem tries to explain forgiveness to itself—forgiveness, which conventionally seems like something gentle and yielding, but here is “wild,” a bodily impulse resistant to definition, caught only in movements, and registered as though through peripheral vision.

The poem’s opening is written as if some terrible betrayal has happened between two people, one of whom is left contemplating his or her own counter-intuitive response. I say *as if* because the poem drops us readers into the role of the addressee, but it doesn’t give us enough clues to piece together the literal story. Instead, we guess and revise based on tones, images, and fragments—particularly the bleak description of partial reprieve that the speaker admits is the result of avoiding a particular train of thought: “All I can hear / most nights

is the howling, even if, sometimes, sure, / I forget to think about it—if I don't think about it, / the dark's pieces briefly come back together." "Since You Ask" is a thoughtful working out of a core element in human relationships—but it's a slant meditation because it explores what happens in the absence of certain kinds of focused thought. The pauses and mid-course modifications signaled by the comma-separated qualifier "sometimes," the colloquial aside "sure," and the dash before "if I don't think about it," all make this sound dynamic—like it's thinking in progress, rather than a speaker relaying to us something that's already polished and completed. The mind is in motion, and it's troubled. As James Longenbach says in "The Sound of Shakespeare Thinking," that's the only kind of mind worth listening to.

The thoughts and feelings this poem describes bring to mind David Harvey's extended discussion in *The Condition of Postmodernity* of the affirmative revolution in sensibility called postmodernism:

I begin with what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism: its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity. But postmodernism responds to the fact of that in a very particular way. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.

Like Phillips's speaker, we readers are left mostly in darkness and uncertainty in "Since You Ask" as we confront a harrowing spate of narrative fragments.

In his chapter "On Restlessness" (in *The Art of Daring*), Phillips included this epigraph: "And I saw that restlessness was neither the problem, nor the solution. Was just the fact. A force. And though eventually it might break me, I would not refuse it." So: what does the past mean in Phillips's restless 21st century poem? How does memory happen, what does it feel like, and what does it contain? If Boruch is correct about the sweeping import of memory—that "everything we are is beholden to it"—what exactly is the poem saying about what we are beholden to? And what does that obligation bring to the fore?

Perhaps we are beholden to forgiveness. The body of Phillips's sonnet begins with a hypothetical proposition, the presentation or elaboration of which may extend for the length of the poem (its endpoint is unclear): "It's as if forgiveness were, in fact, an animal." The "as if" shows the speaker trying to grasp the elusive energy of forgiveness, as it retreats deeper inside the animal. But simultaneously, the "as if" also bends the present tense "It's" into a virtual subjunctive

where one sees both what is and what might be. In this case, the “if” creates a palimpsest of different relationships to time.

Not all of the poem’s key relationships are necessarily human, and that’s important. In “Since You Ask,” forgiveness is maybe “wild, / like animals” when “something small lets go.” The change of state is precipitated by “something small,” but the shift into wildness is hardly diminutive because of the violent potential of hands and triggers in the middle of the sentence. Here is the poem’s proposition: forgiveness is an instinctive alteration, an unpredictable release from a prolonged (and supposedly stable) state of domestication. Forgiveness marks a bodily return to something—perhaps to a deeply embedded memory about selfhood.

Later on in this poem about forgiveness, the speaker asks “didn’t intimacy mean courtesy, / once, and force mean power?” We’re meant to think about the past-tense interchangeability of these pairs of words, and we’re also meant to connect all four because of syntactic association and proximity. All this, plus the implicit reminder of the importance of memory and time, *plus* the revelation that this is also a poem about denotative slippages. Memory (at least personally and temporarily) repairs the rifts between words. And perhaps these fleet questions about definition are an echo of the nighttime howling near the beginning of the poem, which remains mysterious because we cannot resolve what it is. Is the howling non-human, or is it simply a slip from domesticated language? Maybe, because of our uncertainty, it’s both things simultaneously.

The poem ends with the speaker making a declaration about the future (“I’ll shout”), then swiftly describing the action and setting of the present: “I’ll shout the starlings / loose from the pines again. I swim the field—stitches / everywhere, your body everywhere, blue cornflowers.” It matters that only at the end are we shown conclusively that this poem is a direct address. (There’s a “you” in the title, but the phrase there is so swiftly freighted with complexities that the interlocutor gets overshadowed.) The upshot is that the phrase “your body everywhere” in the last line brings a shift in perspective; “your body” is suddenly the largest thing in a poem that’s otherwise full of small things and qualifications, and it’s amplified even further by the fact that it comes seemingly out of nowhere.

The final image is also a palimpsest. Boruch argues that “‘degrees of remoteness’ is what our verbs enact,” and that this is where we feel “the give and stir of poems.” At the end of “Since You Ask,” the verb literally disappears, because the line doesn’t read, “your body is everywhere.” The implicit verb makes time seem to disappear, and also distance. In that instance of simultaneity, the body and the field of blue cornflowers may be one and the same.

Phillips's poem tells a story about how we live in time—in this particular time that sometimes feels deeply discordant. There is no neat couplet to sum things up in "Since You Ask." Not a couplet, but a couple—which the poem both displays and occludes with its accretive imagery. The poem's methods and declarations are subtle and supple. Humanity is always potentially wild and mobile, it implies. And to be lucky is to move through a dry field with fluid grace. To see the stitches that hold the pieces together. Also, to anticipate a future in which one's own loud voice will effect some change in the proximity and motion of other beings.

CODA:

In a recent *Writer's Chronicle* interview, Stanley Plumly considered Robert Hayden's influence on Carl Phillips. Hayden also treats the interplay of time and forgiveness (most famously in "Those Winter Sundays"). If "Since You Ask" is beholden to another poem, though, it's Hayden's 1970 "A Plague of Starlings," which is set at Fisk University, and is sometimes read as an allegory of contemporary campus civil rights and anti-war protests. The poem's opening image is sonic; campus maintenance workers are (again) exterminating noisy small birds by shooting them out of the trees:

Evenings I hear
the workmen fire
into the stiff
magnolia leaves,
routing the starlings
gathered noisy and
befouling there.

The poem ends with the speaker stepping carefully over legions of "frost-salted" bird carcasses, on his way to lecture about "what Socrates, / the hemlock hour nigh, / told sorrowing / Phaedo and the rest." Before being executed by the state of Athens for moral corruption and impiety, Socrates lectured his friend Crito about self-discipline and the proper responses to injustice. He explained how sacrifice could be a statement of belonging. He spoke at length about coming to peace with one's relationship to state power (a process which I think functions like forgiveness). Socrates also talked about friendship—its centrality, import, and counterintuitive requirements.

As a prologue poem, "A Plague of Starlings" teaches close attention to context and juxtaposition and implication. It also brings some aspects of "Since

You Ask” into sharper focus, particularly the ways the latter poem troubles the role of reason in human relationships—including the relationship between the individual and the coercive state. If Phillips’s poem is in dialogue with Hayden’s, in talking about forgiveness it also makes a declaration about virtue, and its own right to redefine it. Virtue is *not* distinctively human, and it’s *not* a product of discipline. Virtue is not mastered by practice—it lurches out from some untamed, unlocatable, animal impulse. But that impulse somehow both scatters and coaxes back what it has scattered. What Phillips presents in “Since You Ask” (as if it’s already a given) is a reflexive, deeply embodied, relational, and profoundly expansive ethics.