

Speculative Solutions to the Political Poem: Ann Killough's "Statue of Liberty"

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Out beyond the familiar solar system of poetic forms and genres, there are other undiscovered, undreamed-of forms. There are poetic structures that have never been branded or codified or made into conventions like the villanelle or the rhymed couplet. New things, new species, do indeed appear under the sun. Frank O'Hara's "walking around" poems, only invented around 1959 ("It is 2:20 in Manhattan I am / walking down Broome Street thinking about the purples of Joan Miro . . ."), established a distinctive new poetic mode that has been accepted and incorporated into American poetics. For us, the walking-around poem is readily recognizable as a genre—though it did not exist before 1959.

The real function of poetic forms, of course, is to configure consciousness, to enable the poet to expose reality in a fresh and powerful way—think of the haiku, for example, as the "quick glimpse" form.

The poem I want to showcase here, Ann Killough's "Statue of Liberty" (*Beloved Idea*, 2007), is, to me, remarkable in part because it manages to break through the tired, self-righteous conventions of the political poem. It does so by invoking, personifying, interrogating, and reconfiguring our conception of the national icon of the poem's title.

The poem would be impressive for its inventiveness of method alone, but I find it has remained memorable to me for its keen critical relationship to the large geologies of political reality and experience. "Statue of Liberty" brings political and historical worldliness to the mortuary table and utilizes the faculty of fantasy to dissect it. Few poems are as relentlessly curious and challenging as Killough's to both speaker and reader.

Here is the opening of the poem:

And yet we suspect that our relationship to the Statue of Liberty is not simple.

That we are expecting something from her which she is secretly no longer providing.

That she is actually undermining our entire sense of ourselves, not only collectively but individually.

What do you think?

I mean really.

No fair coming up with that stuff about the symbol of our nation or our nation's delusions about its own saintly welcoming qualities or anything to do with France.

Think in terms of if aliens had already contacted the Statue of Liberty and she were receiving transmissions across the whole surface of her copper body which she were greatly enjoying after all those years of nothing but runny condensations.

Think in terms of what the aliens might have in mind.

Would they care that she was hollow and full of stairs?

Would they care that she was too big to be happy?

Prose-like perhaps in vocabulary and tone, Killough's poem is fresh in its personifying conceit; even more important, the poem's quickness of intelligence is distinctly poetic. The large ambition of the poem, once we are persuaded of it, also grabs our attention: what is the ideal of American liberty *NOW*? This aspect of poems—ambitiousness of intention, so rarely referred to in the world of writing workshops—is rare and surpassingly important, and Killough's poem has intellectual chutzpah, a dogged persistence that drives it past easy opportunities.

One formal feature of Killough's poem is the way it hides one mode inside the appearance of another. In this case, the poem's serious interrogations are hidden inside the clinical vocabulary and dry tone of socio-psychological speculation: "she is [. . .] undermining our entire sense of ourselves, not / only collectively but individually," Killough writes. In this disguise, the poem conceals both its seriousness and its passion.

It isn't just the clever device of personification at work. What makes "Statue of Liberty" compelling is that the reader soon realizes that this inquiry is not merely whimsical, but a sustained and progressively developing exploration of fundamental civic values and longings. Killough's persistence evolves into increasingly more complex, entangled, and challenging propositions and understandings.

Is the original meaning of the symbol endangered for us? the speaker asks. What have we replaced it with? Is our negligence irreversible? Is the statue itself disappointed in the citizens whose responsibility was to uphold the pragmatic actualization of the ideals symbolized by its giant figurehead? Is the symbol no longer in accord with our old interpretations? "Statue of Liberty" could be said

to be about the relationship between the symbolic and the actual, the human and the ideal: the way we have expectations of our symbols, and the way that we also quickly forget them.

Killough's genius is to depict such facts as an intimate, fluctuating relationship, in which the two parties—"we" and "the statue of liberty"—have undermined and betrayed each other's expectations. We are mystified, on the brink of a different future, nervous and depressed while still harboring hope.

The theme of disappointment would probably be simplistic by itself as the core of the poem. Too easy to say that we have been disappointed by American liberty. But whimsy saves Killough from being didactic as her speculative narrative goes further and further afield. The poem's richness is fed by an infusion of brooding, creative speculations; for instance, what does it imply to be told that the statue is "hollow and full of stairs"? What are we to make of the idea that it is possible to be "too big to be happy"? Or that symbols might have a sentient lifespan of their own and a hidden life of internal transformation?

Yet whimsy never runs away with the poem for very long, and often, in fact, proves useful as a tool for opening the topic further. The poet forgoes the easy temptation to make her poem a litany composed entirely of ingenious metaphors, and instead finds new, plausible dimensions of Lady Liberty, examining psychological and mythological hypotheses, i.e., "that she is in the tradition of the enormous destroyer," or, that she "has found out that she can move / and is only waiting for the right moment." The poem surmises that the relationship between Americans and their symbol is intimate, increasingly unstable, and ominous:

That she is a kind of Pole [. . .] and draws the magnetic fields of the earth toward herself like shiploads of huddled immigrants and reads them like ticker tape inside her spiky head.

As the speaker's speculations accumulate, the relation between speaker, reader, and symbol progressively erodes, into mystification and antagonism, and Killough imagines a kind of omniscient Statue of Liberty, insisting

That she feels what you feel but much more of it.

That she sees what you see but the backside of it as well, the side you will never see.

That she has already begun to change something even in you, even in me.

That we already know what it is.

In its originality of conceit—metaphorical, conceptual, and formal—Killough’s poem leaps forward in time to what should be and is our worst nightmare about the imperial power we Americans belong to: we have the potential to pillage and wreck the entire world. Killough’s poem harnesses the great strengths of poetic art—speed and vividness—to awaken us to our own dark historical moment. It effectively converts the Statue of Liberty, that sentimentally cherished national symbol of benevolence and welcome, into an apocalyptic figure of wrath, the four horsemen, an Avenger rather than a Savior:

So now picture what you think the Statue of Liberty might destroy
and realize that you are not right.

That whatever you thought of is not it, or at least not quite it and
certainly not all of it.

That you have no idea what she is thinking, or at least not a complete
idea. [. . .]

What is it she is becoming convinced she must destroy?

The power of Killough’s poem is its innovative rhetorical format of speculation and interrogation, rather than the pronouncement we’ve come to expect from lesser works. In that way, the poem skips over self-righteousness, punditry, and blame—the temptation and pitfall of all political poems. That is why, for me, “Statue of Liberty” may stand on a footing with some of the great American political poems, like Ginsberg’s “America,” or C.K. Williams’s “Tar,” or William Carlos Williams’s “To Elsie.” Killough’s poem, like those others, troubles us with big troubles, and makes those troubles feel authentically personal.