

SYD STAITI

The Note

As I walk home from work my head hangs, shoulders slumped. It is 2006
in Oakland, California and I walk everywhere like I'm rushed to get to
where I'm going
hunched and looking down at the ground
I see a note on the sidewalk
It reminds me of a note someone once wrote to me

There's a knock at the door. It's my neighbors who I've never spoken to.
I am in Portland, Oregon in 2001. A note hangs from their hand. Is this
yours? I take it and say thanks. The neighbors ask if I'm okay. I say I'm
fine / it was just a joke. They seem genuinely concerned for my wellbeing.

Seldom looks up from beneath a layer of sludge
I look down and try to catch his eye, but what can we say to each other, a
double vision intercepted by ripples on the surface of a pond, in different
worlds tethered by a thread?

I look down at the note in my hand. At the time my girlfriend had not
yet punched me repeatedly in the head, strangled my throat, or kicked
me while I was on the ground. She hadn't yet taken the alarm clock cord
and wound it around my neck, pulling the wire at both ends. I hadn't
yet called the cops because I thought she was going to kill me and had
no other way out.

Something in the neighbors' face held a warning to me from something
they had seen in the note. Something I didn't see in the note but saw in
their face, and then promptly forgot about after closing the front door.
It's filthy, Seldom, Venn says. But they want the filth and animals too.

Make it funny, a little pathetic, so they chuckle through the filter of your self-narration. They need to know your politics are in the right place. Is it 2018? Otherwise you can't be a star in your own reversed mirror.

Don't you wish to have been born of a different era, among mounting beasts of the web, cavalry raising dirt under their hoofs, beside those trenches where you lay? Venn asks with a smirk while looking up over her glasses. Seldom shakes his head.

Did I say that, did I ask how the text is like a slaughtered animal?

I wrote a book over the years of 2011 to 2015 that contained an "I" character that was never stable—sometimes a woman, sometimes a man, sometimes an ungendered person or a person with an unmarked gender, sometimes a person who was a different gender from the way they dressed or were perceived. The character finds themselves in a variety of environments and situations, carrying out experiments. The book felt continuous to me at the time but I can see now that it starts and stops a lot. The central character is pretty inaccessible and the changing landscape never seems to settle. It doesn't quite carry you through.

When I get home from work at the coffee shop, I say hi to my cat and quickly make some food to eat. Then I walk to the bar and start drinking.

The bar I mean is the White Horse Inn, the oldest continually running gay bar in the country, the bar where Jack Spicer used to drink. I go there almost every night and drink too much. It is 2008 and I'm writing a piece called "The line curves where you live" about living on the border of Oakland and Berkeley. It was also about my exploits as a person who drinks too much and sleeps with a lot of people, about the disintegration of a relationship and the desperation I felt and all the sleeping around, the drinking and drugs, the woman 12 years older than me who I was obsessed with for many years and who I started dating in Portland in

2005 just before moving to Oakland and how things quickly ended after I moved. I wrote about all that too.

I couldn't stand the piece. The writing was so direct, too vulnerable. I wasn't ready for sentences. So I decided to chop it up. For every three words, I removed one word. I had no idea how the piece would turn out but it felt cathartic as a practice. The piece of writing became much better, felt almost thrilling the first time I read it all the way through.

After Janice left in 2002, I spent a lot of time at the E-Room (The Egyptian Club, the now-gone lesbian bar in Portland), which you could say was like the precursor to my White Horse days. Both were dark gay bars with outdated décor, pool tables, karaoke nights, and a dance room. I would drink Jameson on the rocks and smoke Camel lights and wear a leather jacket and shoot pool. There was something very deep inside me that felt satisfied by this as my way of life. It felt destructive, but real, like I was accessing something secretive, like desire. I chopped off all my hair for the second time. I read *Stone Butch Blues* for the first time. I tried using a packer; it didn't feel right. I flinched when my new girlfriend would make a sudden motion. I smoked inside the bar. I kept my eyes on everyone.

Was it a book of prose that should have been verse? Or vice versa?

It was not so easy to decide to start taking hormones or get top surgery. Certainly not as easy as it was to remove one word for every three words and then the poem was better. Then the form held the content in a way that worked.

Seldom walks beside Hue. Hue drops back for a second and kicks Seldom's ankle to the side as he takes a step. He stumbles and jerks, they laugh. Seldom is startled to see Hue in this way, jovial and light-footed. They have a boyish look, pretty, with something heavy and dark in there

too. He feels bashful around them. They walk with their hands in their pockets, talking about a book they are reading. They are already on to the next subject but he's still somewhere before, not thinking anything specific, just an ambient sort of processing in the back of his mind that keeps him distracted from being present.

It wasn't the village they strolled through
On a path that led them back here once again
The story for someone to see—written once from above, then beside
From beneath the sludge he looks up, then back down to the page
Which ones are whose, which verses are the ones that caught you looking
Seldom signs his name at the bottom of the page.

Every five or ten years, I find myself thumbing through old journals. Usually it is when I'm moving. This is the day in my packing up of a place where I don't do any packing up; instead I read through all the old journals and notebooks, all the old folders stuffed with writing from my younger years. Sometimes I skip over the two journals that cover the nine months when I dated Janice. In these pages things go dark. The appearance of my writing changes, letters look more angular and sharp, written with a depressed and frantic energy, the pen impressions seem to be dug deeper into the page.

I look at the pages where we scribbled words and drawings together about her abusive behavior, as a way of talking about it. I see myself sitting next to Janice in the Red & Black Café on Division Street in Portland as I draw an image of myself with welts all over my head and she writes captions to explain why I deserved them.

The Red & Black was an anarchist collective coffee shop and gathering space a few blocks from where I lived in Southeast Portland. Morgan used to give me free bowls of chili when I was broke. I would use their computers to check my Hotmail account. It was 2002 when I was sitting

on the ground outside in a hoodie smoking a cigarette. Walt Curtis stopped in front of me and asked if I was a homeless boy. I said no. He turned and walked away.

I move back to the neighborhood on the border of Oakland and Berkeley at the end of 2017, this time South Berkeley. I walk to the coffee shop where I used to go when I moved into this neighborhood in 2005, in North Oakland. It is the coffee shop where I wrote “the line curves where you live.” Now I write here in the same coffee shop about that piece, how I cut one word for every three words and made it better. I walk on the same streets, but my head no longer hangs, my shoulders are less slumped. I walk a little less rushed. I am still the same person, same anxieties and fears, same delusions. But I have more presence and intention, more inner stillness. This is partly because I transitioned but it is also because I grew up. I did a lot of work. I mean inner work that’s invisible. When I get pushed on a stretcher into an operating room or start inserting a needle into my body once a week, I receive many congratulations.

My first book was an accurate representation of where I was at the time of writing it. I now long to tell another story—one that may jump around in time and contradict itself, that may draw from real and imaginary landscapes of people and environments, that has unstable subjects and speakers—that conveys my embodied state today.

Chase pokes out from a pile of leaves. Hue looks at him through the window as they wipe their hands on a towel. Venn comes up the stairs from the basement and stands in the doorway, tapping her foot. She is giving Samuel a call but he doesn’t answer. He is wading in the swamp, moving his arms around to catch pieces of the composition. When he brings them back in a bucket, Seldom will wash them off. I place them in my mouth one by one to feel out their potential. Chase rakes the leaves into a pile so he can jump into them again. Venn goes back downstairs.

I remember being particularly pleased to be mistaken for a boy. Not only by Walt Curtis but in all instances when it happened. I was just beginning to be a lesbian, a dyke in those early Portland years. When Janice brought me to the emergency room, a nurse asked her to leave the room for a moment and handed me some pamphlets. After one violent night, I went to work at the store that used to be called Natures and then was called Wild Oats and later became Whole Foods. I was working behind the deli counter when Janice showed up to say that she had packed her car and was driving to Los Angeles for good. In that moment I became free of her. But not by my own doing. This happened two weeks before we were about to move in together.

The building is starting to disintegrate. We are going to let it be so

Blood of a pig coasting through the streets in the village, after writing something that wanted to show up in a way and didn't. After I sat myself down on the curb and wondered. How I would ever come to write about myself in this way. And Seldom says

How the building comes to be the story / Seldom tells through your window

All along he had forgotten about the piece he was trying to write a few years ago in which the text was a body, a slaughtered animal.

A book to be prose. Or could it be *verse*?

The body / of work
holds its previous versions inside
— invisible and present —
building its aura out of them

I reach my hand into the swamp and pluck Seldom out, my wrist and

forearm dripping with mud and saliva, blood and gunk. The stuff of old writing, old bodies, old selves and thoughts, desire and trauma, the old versions of us, *every body's got them*

A note lying on the sidewalk