

Spring 1959

Just You and I Against the World

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Recommended Citation

Steele, Max (1959) "Just You and I Against the World," *Calliope (1954-2001)*: Vol. 5 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol5/iss2/17>

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JUST YOU AND I AGAINST THE WORLD . . .

. . . Max Steele

miss x (let us say) and i
sought a shelter in the mist
of dawns early swamp

as we drove
cars came toward us
their lights piercing night
and watching us
but no one was driving
any of the cars

lights glowed in houses
but no one was there
and everything was as it had been
and now we saw the trick
no one was really there

alone
we were drawn together
and in the endless night of infinity
life rolled back
and back

and now we were the only life left
and began to feel the great burden

we drove back through all the years
and at dawn
we were standing naked hand in hand
on a cliff looking over the sea
watching the sun come up in the west

life was ours now
and we felt the weight
of millions of years and tears
and crosses and nails
but somehow as the sun climbed higher
we knew that we could not fail

and we turned and looked at each other

and there
pinned to her left breast
was her sorority pin

and the clothes came back
and the people in the cars and houses

and i laughed through tears
at what could never be

A first look at Steele's poem reveals a lumped-together column of lines. There are no stanzas of equal weight; there are few lines of equal length. One may wonder if it is a poem at all if it has a visible lack of form.

Whether or not the poet does it intentionally, and I think it is probably an automatic procedure, he integrates the appearance of most of the stanzas and lines with their statements. Since I think this poem approaches integrity, I will consider one stanza at a time and attempt to show how the form and the words integrate.

The first stanza is introductory. It rates three lines. "miss x (let us say) and i" is a compact line introducing the characters. One is a girl, who may later become less important to the other, a boy, who is the narrator and not sure that he cares who she was at this time of recollection. The next is fairly clear; the poem develops immediately as a narrative about these two characters who sought a "shelter" in the "mist of dawns early swamp." Perhaps the lovers (we think they are lovers) wanted a refuge from the clouded and swampy American environment.

The second two stanzas present the problem. They are longer and they carry a weight of content. As the characters drive (down their road of quest) the other cars (going in the opposite direction) pierce the night and watch them. No one is driving the cars. The houses have lights but no one occupies them. They are tricked because the world may have offerings along the road but they are all empty.

To give the symbols in these stanzas definite counterparts is to overstep the boundaries of analysis, I think. Whatever the poet had specifically in mind, an impression is left. The characters are forced by the probing, empty, and hostile world which the title has already proclaimed them to be against, into a movement, and into the fourth stanza.

This stanza is the sharpest example of the poet's shaping of lines to fit their purpose. It starts with one word. The word "alone" quite naturally stands by itself. From this line the stanza moves into its function as the narrative's action stanza. It is here that real movement occurs. The couple, alone, draw together, then move into endless infinity in the stanza's longest line, then life rolls back, and back. This stanza has the characteristics of movement, which in turn is characterized by a flow from short to long, much like a sine curve or radio wave.

The next stanza, two lines, serves as the first turning point of the narrative. It is short but it carries all the weight of the previous lines. "They" are alone, and all other life has rolled back, and they are left with all the burdens. Since all else was empty trickery, they have escaped into the shelter of eternity and are ready to see if they alone can support the "great burden." They are quite confident.

They drive back through all the years (perhaps they try to learn as much as they can) and find themselves completely together, naked, hand in hand, standing on a vantage point overlooking everything, watching the sun come up in the west (because they are not conforming to the old empty ways). In the next stanza they feel the weight of what they have to carry, but the millions of years and tears and the religion and everything is not too much because somehow they know they will not fail. Together they have defied the world and proved that in their honest love they have unlimited strength.

Then with a crunch, the inevitable occurs.

Stanza eight is the shortest of all. It is the other turning point in the poem. With "and we turned and looked at each other" (and why not one word, each other, since they are just one up to now?), he realizes the crushing truth. The poem literally smashes into the last three action stanzas which bring the narrator down in three violent steps into the unwanted world of sterile actuality. First she betrays him; the world overcomes her: "and there pinned to her left breast was her sorority pin." The pin is the first thing to return. It is too important. The pressure is too much for her. This is all it takes to precipitate the return of all the other empty actualities: "and the clothes came back and the people in the cars and houses." All the elements that they had chosen to avoid come back, this time with the people that make the world too strong to escape. Finally, after this realization, the poet laughs through bitter tears at what can never be. In two lines, his nearly gained paradise crumbles at the poet's feet.

I think the poet has given himself an indispensable flexibility by choosing the totally free method of composition. Along with this

freedom, however, he has to accept a heavy responsibility, and that is to maintain the integrity of which I speak. To a large extent Steele has managed this. Even the lack of punctuation suggests the tone of the poem. When the reader sees the lack of capital letters, commas, and so on, he is prepared to read a poem that will deal with something not exactly concrete, with sense perceptions, near-pure images, and formless recollections. Such devices have become the tools of some modern writing and are now generally familiar. The subject of Steele's poem might never be explained in words alone because it is formless and mobile. It is only natural that the physical poem itself should be as flexible.

THOMAS A. DONOVAN

A COMPANION TO THE NIGHT

For only a touch of a match I create
A companion to the night. Oh so
Majestically forth from his bent heart
A shimmering veil spreads delight to me.
A slightest whisper is a joyful dance
To him who now seeks a hopeless escape.
His dampened cry fills and pours from
A thin and draped body. But now, scornfully
At my caress he spits black, heated words;
So I must return his tortured soul
First of all to smoke, last to birth ice.