

Regretting Silence
by Katherine Jordan

A Dried River Scars the Heart

A river scars the ground long after the water has dried
As loss scars the heart long after someone has passed.

A girl pauses on a bridge over a dusty river bed
Staring vacantly because her friend fought a current never talked about.

Her friend's laughter too has dried up
Laughter of a bubbling river flowing smoothly over jagged rocks.

Disguise something long enough and no one will see through it
Call harmful thoughts jagged rocks hidden by bubbling water.

Jokes told to a laughing girl who can't see past the water.

If we had talked of rocks and scars would you have
uncurled your finger?

Process Note:

First I read through all the poems in the packets we were given to find one that spoke to me. I picked the model poem "Seawater Stiffens Cloth" because the poem intrigued me the most. After reading it through several times and thinking about what the poem was conveying, it seemed that the poem was getting at a sense of regret due to the protagonist's silence with regard to a topic in their relationship with someone. The closest thing to that in my experience was when a friend of mine committed suicide. I felt as if had people at my school, including myself, been more open with our experiences with psychological illnesses and if it was not seen as a taboo topic of conversation, maybe things would be different. Based on that experience, I started writing the poem. At first I tried to stay very close in style to the model poem. However, as I realized I could have more freedom with it, I started to diverge a bit as the poem unfolded.

After writing the first version of the poem, I went back and wrote the prompt for the model poem based on the aspects of the poem I felt were important and also based on what related to mine. I then wrote another poem that was very similar to the first based on the prompt but with some different wording and a different scene in the third and fourth lines. I then combined the two poems taking what I liked out of each. I continued to work on my poem, tweaking it so it better fit the prompt and editing it so that it flowed better and sounded better.

Once I had the first nine lines how they are now, I felt it did not fully convey the feeling of questioning and regret due to silence that the poem was trying to get at. To remediate this I added the last two lines which break the style the rest of the poem is written in but for me they hit home at the emotion behind the poem and I think the shift away from third person and the shift from statements to a question increases the impact. The last change was breaking the poem into couplets. As I was reading through the poem I felt like most of the lines went in pairs, especially the first two and last two lines. I played around with the punctuation and spacing and I liked it in couplets the best. I considered trying to add another line to go with the ninth line since it was alone, but I realized I preferred it alone because it is one of the most important lines in the poem and having it alone emphasizes it and it is also the last line in before the major shift in the poem so it also emphasizes the transition.

Seawater Stiffens Cloth

Seawater stiffens cloth long after it's dried.
As pain after it's ended stays in the body:
A woman moves her hands oddly
because her grandfather passed through
a place he never spoke of. Making
instead old jokes with angled fingers.
Call one thing another's name long enough,
it will answer. Call pain seawater, tree, it will answer.
Call it a tree whose shape of branches happened,
Call what branching happened a man
whose job it was to break fingers or lose his own.
Call fingers angled like branches what peel and cut apples,
to give to a girl who eats them in silence, looking.
Call her afterward a tree, call her seawater angled by silence.

-Jane Hirshfield

Prompt:

Write a poem about pain, a relationship, and a sense of regret due to silence, using analogies, giving abstract things material names to convey an experience indirectly.

Analysis of “Seawater Stiffens Cloth”

“Seawater Stiffens Cloth” by Jane Hirshfield is a poem about a woman who regrets staying silent as a girl and not asking her grandfather difficult questions about his life when she had the chance. Hirshfield, through the use of metaphors, expresses how the woman’s grandfather would avoid talking about his life and the effect it has on the woman. Hirshfield’s careful choice of structure and diction also contributes to the themes of obfuscation and the unexpressed.

The core ideas of the poem are the grandfather’s unbroken silence about his work and the woman’s regret at not breaking that silence. The woman seems to echo the sentiment Audre Lorde expresses in her essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”: “[W]hat I regretted most were my silences” (41). Lorde says, “To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain” (41). As a girl, the woman in the poem probably also was scared of what might happen if she asked, so instead she sat “in silence, looking.” Like Lorde, the girl in the poem probably could not have anticipated that, later, it would be her silence in those moments that would pain her.

The absence of communication about the grandfather’s life affect the woman far more than the old jokes the grandfather would tell instead. This is very similar to an idea Jane Hirshfield discusses in her book, *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry*. Hirshfield says that “What is left unexpressed [in a poem] can affect the reader perhaps even more strongly than what has been explicitly stated” (18). Not only does this apply to the relationship between the woman and her grandfather, Hirshfield also implements this idea into the way the poem is written in order to enhance the poem’s effect. The speaker never directly says what the grandfather’s work is or how the girl feels. Instead the speaker uses

metaphors, giving things other names and using other words to indirectly describe their relationship. However, these words do provide some imagery; the way they allow the speaker to avoid directly speaking about anything has a far greater impact than the words themselves do.

Hirshfield is very careful in her choices around structure and diction in order to make the reader truly feel the absence of direct communication and discussion around the topic of the grandfather's work. The enjambment scattered throughout the poem forces the reader to pause mid-sentence. These pauses create a sense that something is being left out and that the speaker is pausing in order to make sure they are speaking in a vague enough way to avoid directly talking about that something. The speaker does this through the use of metaphors. The simpler metaphor is the simile comparing seawater to pain. The other metaphor, pain is a tree, contains other pieces, branches and angles which complicate and obscure the metaphor, yet also help tie the lines of the poem together. One way the metaphors are made more obscure is through the repetition of "call." By only asking the reader to call things by other names and never explaining the metaphors, the meaning becomes less clear. The repetition of "call" also makes the reader feel as though they are circling something without ever getting to the point, just as the conversations between the girl and her grandfather skirted around the topic of his work without ever discussing it directly.

Just like the girl is left with questions due to her silence and her grandfather's vagueness about his life, the reader is left without clarity due to the obfuscation of the poem's content. The reader's silence is forced because the reader cannot directly ask the speaker anything; they must instead continue to reread the poem and look between the lines. The woman had the opportunity to ask her grandfather about his work, but she was silent. Now that that opportunity has passed, her silence pains her, affecting her far more than the words they exchanged do.

Works Cited

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