

STRUCTURE WHERE THERE USED TO BE NATURE ¹

by Sarah Cook

1

At the eastern edge of our front yard stands a row of sunflowers. Sunshine, Radiance Hybrid, Strawberry Blonde Hybrid, Pike's Peak, Solar Eclipse.

In order to water the sunflowers, I must do the following:

Lean into them, through bugs and spiderwebs, occasionally between stalks that stand higher than I do.

Plant my feet on the ground while leaning. Usually I try to stay dry.

¹ Title borrowed from Caroline Bergvall's "Points of Pressure," published in *Feminaissance*.

Channel my upper body strength as I sometimes hold the watering can at a significant distance, arms extended.

Count to various numbers—20, 8 but slowly, fours again and again like music—to ensure that I've given enough water.

Part of the trick is understanding how much water to give, and the other part is recognizing when I've reached that capacity. They are two separate processes: empathy and identification. Our soil is waterlogged, or so I am told, and does not aid in the process of knowing. Water puddles, runs toward the north end of the plot, turns colors from gathering on top of itself as if it were foldable. In some ways I never know if water has reached the depth it's supposed to, if the ground is letting nature fill and squeeze and sponge like it should. I count to 20 but, based on what I witness, believe I could have stopped at 5 (this would have been a mistake). Watering involves trusting senses other than sight, which is confusing, given the aesthetic function that has traditionally defined the relationship between people and flowers. But there are things happening on a microscopic level, on a below-ground level, on a fungus and invertebrate and ground-dwelling level, which go entirely unaffected by my observation. Try as I might to be a witness to nature, I cannot sign off on all its moving parts. I am not always needed. So, apprentice of the garden, I lean, plant, channel, and count, trusting my efforts to be radical.

Like that which stems from the base, the origin. Radical trust: Trust without sight, without verification.

In some ways, I never know what's going on at the root of a problem.

2

In order to water the sunflowers, I grab our lime green 2-gallon watering can and fill it up in our kitchen sink. I do this every day—twice a day mid-summer, when the heat demands resistance.

In addition to the sunflowers we have four pots at the northern edge of our yard, separated from us by the sidewalk, sitting on top of bark dust that lives on top of black tarp that lives, blessedly, on top of goat heads. The pots are full of random flowers we collected and placed ourselves, chosen mostly for color and shape and with very little forethought given to things like need for space, need for water, need for light. I usually spend my mornings dead-heading these flowers and looking for new growth. There is only one type of flower—a fiery, velvet-looking thing—that hasn't done well. I've seen it elsewhere downtown in the city where I live, spaced inches away from more of its own kind but still in constant direct sunlight, thriving.

After the four pots come three sections of wildflowers, placed around the edges of our house, two in the very front, one slightly off to the side and bigger. And then, the sunflowers: grouped together in rows of three and four at the eastern edge of our front yard.

I water all the flowers daily, but I especially water the sunflowers, every single day. Sometimes I look for bugs. Sometimes I move my fingertips around in the dirt, modest digging. Sometimes I play doctor and make difficult decisions about which buds have become too rotten and which ones deserve more time, whether a bent stem is seeking the sun, leaning eastward of its own volition, or whether a cat or a deer or the wind have left their trampling marks. Sometimes I straighten things out, which sometimes makes me feel better, helpful.

3

It is odd, I admit, given such an extensive and varied amount of plants, that I still rely on one single lime green 2-gallon watering can, filled up at our kitchen sink, to do the watering. Inside then outside, shoes off, then back on again. But our outdoor spigot is broken, or the water pressure too weak, or we grimace at superfluous social interactions and avoid asking for help, or we define necessity in limited terms, or we are terribly scared of our rent going up. So we make do with what already is, an excuse for thinking about constraint and ritual outside the poem.

4

Recently, I enrolled in a series of classes that promised to transform one's voice into its most authentic state. I am not a singer, am barely a speaker, and yet I find myself a person in the world producing sounds to other sound-producers over and over again, at lengths and intervals that

seem to only increase. With age comes responsibility, plus I have a thing or two to say about _____. Because of my singing voice, I am thinking a lot about speech. And because of my speaking voice, fried with no excuse for being that way, I am thinking a lot about breath.

I have to count my breaths in order to let them build, stretching their little air muscles beyond what they're used to. I have to stand or sit or lie down in a room with an aggressively confident woman standing over me in order to get my diaphragm to expand with biological accuracy. Sometimes I have to sound like a cat, or a dysfunctional beep, or a very bad witch, in order to find my authentic voice. But first: breathing, which means counting and noticing.

I mostly forget to practice at home what I learn in class each week. But in the garden, I remember. So I grab our lime green 2-gallon watering can and start counting. I can write two sentences in the time it takes me to fill the watering can, depending on the sentences; I can count to 45, depending on how slow or fast my breaths are. I can expand my lungs or extend my legs or sound a private jingle. I can even be in my head one moment and back in my body the next. Mostly I lean forward, plant my feet, water the flowers and catch myself not breathing at all, so that I am then compelled to pull my stomach quickly into my body—rapid, forced exhalation—and, reminding myself that the flowers feed me, try to breath from my gut. It is both metaphor and reality: the bodily

location, the feeding. It is nature operating at its constant natural best, regardless of my attempts to understand it through language and artifice.

5

What I mean to say is that when I water, I pretend my out-breaths are benefitting the sunflowers which then, in exchange, benefit me, so that I breathe in while telling myself that the joy I experience in the garden is the result of objective equation and scientific transformational properties, in which plants reciprocate human obligation. I pretend to interact with the plants, to raise them, to have an impact.

Why all this make-believe? Through sun, water and CO₂, plants produce the exact nutrients they need while emitting oxygen as a byproduct, and they do so whether I'm hovering nearby or not. It is a fact of science and the natural world that humans, in this way, interact with plants. I can be shut up indoors, sitting on my laptop, inorganic and inert, and still the oxygen remains: plant and person exchanging opportunities for experience, if that's what you call it when something grows, or produces, or leans forward with nothing but a lime green 2-gallon watering can and a sense of purposeful breathing. If there is anything imaginary in my account it is the one-sidedness of how I describe influence, how easy it is to dismiss my own effect, my agency. Perhaps it is born of disillusion, a childhood of too much indoor play and perfect vegetables, too much distance from the natural world; or else it is born of gender, which

parades rampantly in the garden, pretending labor can be both essential and a thing to disown.

Or perhaps it is born of the tyranny of knowing—how I cannot see the flowers experiencing anything, can't listen to them describe in detail what they're going through, may not listen even if I could. And this is the problem with sight and speech: so many versions of life that they get in the way of, by demanding their consistent use. How they parade, all disguise and confidence, as the bulk of knowing.

6

Sometimes the things we tell ourselves are made up things—distractions, unnecessary. And sometimes we tell ourselves made up things to get past that which holds us back, real demanding not-real. Language: always holding more than it reveals, implying more than is stated. Language can calcify, but it can also highlight. Take the girl in the garden: meek, obligatory. Is she stuck in place, full of admission and poise? Without words, perhaps I am that girl, perpetuating her own dismissible work. But with them I may cleave some space between the girl and myself, between action and intention, discovering the person beneath what I have learned, beneath all I've ever been fed. Can a girl be bigger than her confessions? Sometimes you must acknowledge your history, must look it straight in the bloodshot eye; and by looking at it, by calling its name, you realize it isn't the entire story of you. Looking requires, and produces, distance.

7

Because of my leaning and my proximity, I am spending more time than ever before being calm around bugs. Sure, I'd once befriended a roly poly, ladybugs and butterflies—my lack of fear is housed right there in the names, friendly and familiar. But in the garden there are spiders and harvestmen, assassin bugs and things that bite, eggs that come in pouches and rows and white-capped tubes. Things primed for being gross, or ubiquitous (scary), or both.

It is an opportunity to be curious—to turn fear and habit and ignorance into a space for learning. So I check out books from my local library, and I read about phyla and orders and families. Implied in the dismantling of my age-old (gendered) fear is that what I am familiar with will cause me less harm, though biodiversity or common sense or dysfunctional households might remind us otherwise.

This essay is trying to do something here, plant a seed or else lean, strategically or instinctively, toward the light.

Is the “other” something that attacks, or something not given enough empathy? Does the latter create the illusion of the former? Does either situation preclude understanding or require familiarity to account for goodness? And is it not possible to know too much of something, how knowing can sometimes be mostly shape and gesture, claustrophobic

cape of faux expertise? Intellectual dress-up: If I (don't) know enough about you, I can (not) empathize.

8

I look at the flowers. I look at my mother. I look at my children (a metaphor). I look at the dishes in the sink, always tinged with waiting. I look at the doormat: crooked again. I look at my father (a lie). I look at my schedule. I look at my wallet but don't open it up. I look at my bookshelf, at my co-workers, at the clouds. I look at my phone and immediately forget what time it is. I look at Ricki, the resident praying mantis who lives in the biggest plot of wildflowers in our yard and who I once thought was dead, brought to our doorstep by a sneaky, intelligent cat, one who'd been paying attention as I watered the flowers every night and saw me speaking in soft voices at the tallest of the green plants, suggesting something lived there. We came home one day with a new indoor succulent and approached our front door only to shout, *Oh, Ricki*, and then bury him in a porcelain pot beneath some aloe cuttings. Later that night, I went outside for my evening watering rituals and spent a longer amount of time hovering near where he'd lived, looking at all the places I'd ever seen Ricki, as if looking were honoring. The plants seemed empty, and I picked that feeling up and planted it back inside myself like it had lived there all along. And then, right before turning away, the gasp, the smile, the shock of my calling out his name a second time in one day: there was Ricki, crawling to the top of the tallest

green plant just like he did every other night, as if to get above the rain that is our lime green 2-gallon watering can pouring down, as if to get above the rain like the god a praying mantis must surely think he is, all radiant and awful and alien. Enormous, intimidating Ricki, so much bigger than the small green thing we'd found on our doorstep earlier that afternoon. How could we have not seen the difference?

9

It is the act of telling that relates to story, to a made script. The trees don't have to tell each other their names—Douglas Fir, White Maple—in order to be what they are. What is the relationship between telling and knowing? Between knowing and being?

Do you see how the empty shape of telling can itself become a metaphor? Like a woman playing house, all floral apron and social capital and consistent smile.

Pretending makes my work in the garden feel safer; harder to believe; more special. All the things we ever want in life: illusion pressed flat into the ground of security, planted and perennial.

10

So many assumptions. Consider the pronouns, possessive and otherwise. In this essay, *we* and *our* exist without need for clarification or specificity or even a direct name. It could be two or many, platonic, familial,

romantic. In fact I could say “we” and mean nothing more than the wood panels and window sills that house my varied moments, the senseless objects that shape and influence my reception and ability. But it’s easy, as a reader, to assume partnership, to understand that gardens grow through a complex arrangement of commitment, desire, and seasonal strife. What more is there to tell you?

11

Q: Looking—yes or no?

A: Simply unavoidable, use wisely.

Q: Language—fashion or disguise?

A: What’s the difference?

12

And how my going to the movies affects the garden. And how my bean and cheese burrito affects the garden. And how my airplanes and my cars and my buses and various other instances and modes of transportation affect the garden. And how my choice of clothing affects the garden. And how my extra groceries and school supplies, appetizers and condiments affect the garden. And how my education affects the garden. And how my pardoning affects the garden. And how my peer-pressure affects the garden. And how my parenting affects the garden.

And how the ocean affects the garden affects my vision affects my scope.

13

“Dubious,” I said to the other part of *we* in bed last night, out loud like a foreign language. I was curious and I was also confident, and in a rare moment of the two combined I was not quiet. I did not take a melatonin last night. I sat in bed trying not to look at a single electronic screen, reading and running into words. “Remind me what it means,” I said to the other half of *we* last night. I spent the next ten minutes laughing about two-faced origins, how you can mean to express suspicion and inadvertently highlight internal unreliability; the way doubt spills more than it points. How the direction changes depending on where you put your face. How we can occupy two entirely dissimilar spaces and still be conflated through something as small and meaningless and arbitrary as a word.

14

Caroline Bergvall: “Not I love you, but I love TO you. Now here’s a great use of a preposition... The phrase is grammatically awkward. It proposes a dynamic directionality, not fusion, nor emotive immersion, but a conscious separateness yet connection in the form taken by the lovers and their address to each other, and by extension their tentative

availability to the world. Love is direction, positioning. It is the apprenticeship of reciprocity.”²

15

Love makes you want everyone you love to understand your reactions to everything else you love. And love is foolish, and love makes you think synthesis and understanding are possible.

16

I want to know what the beetle-like bug with a yellowish “v” on its back is. I want to know what the 6-legged, two-antennaed grassy thing always on my sunflower leaves is. I want to know what the emerald-green globule, plastic and tough, perched on one of our Lantanas is. I want to know what, if not stinging nettle, the green plant that shot up in our otherwise curated pot of decorative flowers is. I want to know what the clear, cocoon shaped bug, without wings and covered with (or were they glowing from the inside?) red-orange spots that blazed almost as brightly as the crystals that appeared to mark every leg, the edge of every segment, this bug I spent an afternoon with and which looked as if born of fire and ice is. I want to know who you are.

² from “Points of Pressure.”

17

Susan Sontag: “Contemplation, strictly speaking, entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject...All objects, rightly perceived, are already full.”

In the extended space of sameness, how is one to tell whether the thing at hand is secure, is unchanged, or whether the experience might belong instead to the one doing the looking?

18

I learn to trust—diligently, enthusiastically—that I don’t know who I am. This trust is informed by every single woman (theorist, poet, storyteller) I’ve ever read. My lack of self-recognition sits cradled in my lap, I carry it on my back or shoulders, tuck it just above my ribs, hold it, press it into me tightly, I will not let it go, there’s no circumstance in which I will set down this defined shape that fits right into my hands, transmitted from my brain, where real things occur. The space between imagination and holding: I am certain about, I am reliant upon this loose, erratic self. She is in my pocket. She is the same every time I consider her. She does not change.

“What are you thinking?” My partner looks over, giving me that classic dubious look.

19

The problem with looking is that it gets old, is often destructive, that it limits the body to what is perceived of the body. Perception as social exchange. In some ways a body gets to be worth more when its appearance suggests value, it doesn't even matter what the body really is, so long as the body makes good suggestions. Unlike performances—fake it till you make it—appearances aren't bound to grow into their performed image, don't guarantee a body that reciprocates its looks. I communicate something to you with my clothes, my hair, my shape. I exchange what you see of me for good social standing. But approach too quickly and you're bound to run into cardboard and ink, curves and curls and cooing formed on flat surfaces alone. It is a trick of the imagination. It is a trick of expectation. You may never get to know a body so long as you subscribe to knowing first and foremost what it looks like, so long as knowledge—value—remains delineated by sight.

20

Location, location, location. When I love you, little bug, is the love in me or you? Can you love without consent? Or know about a thing without permission? Some bugs don't want to be loved, some people don't want to be known, some moments are calmly and casually outside the realm of recognition, and still they pass right through me or I through them. Can you ever truly tell where a feeling comes from or goes when the map only shows your own landmarks, personal, private,

full of all their own subjective starts and ends? When a feeling begins long before arriving in uniform at your doorway.

21

Q: What happens to your theory of “distance” when you look in a mirror?

A: How do I know when I’m not?

22

Excited by the prospect of charting my own dislocation, I panic when met by the thought of not being able to place you.

Some bodies see without wanting to be seen.

Some bodies sea, or C, or seam.

23

I’m getting better at listening to the sound of water as it almost fills our lime green 2-gallon watering can. At recognizing when I am not breathing. At distinguishing between “boundary” and “control.” At not mimicking what stands before me and causes harm.

24

“The heart is so easily mocked, believing that the sun can rise twice or that roses bloom because we want them to.”³

I wonder how many essays are actually about love? And how we build little structures around confusion and joy. And how the things we desire most are the things we ache to know completely. As if knowing comes to an end, as if the everything of anything you love could ever come to a single point.

25

“At least we know,” we had said to ourselves when we found decoy Ricki dead on our doorstep, caving in on ourselves at the intersection of pain and knowledge. When he made his astonishing appearance later that evening, it was a reminder that not all forms of knowing are equal, how certain truths feel better than others. Ricki was a revenant, representation of the miraculous synchronicity between nature and need.

I spent the next few days desperately needing to see Ricki each night as I watered before sunset, and each time, right at the farthest edge of my wishing, there he was.

How many times would I be able to tell myself this story—about desire and fulfillment, about relationships and conjuring—and see it come

³ Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*.

true? Nature is need, and opulence, and hobby, and purpose. And it outlives its own benefactions. And it is comprehended fully only by losing track of what you came to it for. I expected to see Ricki each night, and there was no part of me interested in seeing things differently.

26

Do bugs have expectations? Do they get cold? Did Ricki want to step forward into my hand as if I were a heated plant, graspable?

Apprehension: to consider; to worry; to imprison. “They don’t want to be touched,” the other half of *we* reminds me when I see a squirrel or a sea creature or a praying mantis, living their lives with every right and reason to fear me. I am an intrusion. I am structure where there once was none. Building, logic, construct, fear; hurt feelings stacked like a foundation made of neglect. There are things in this life that I touch or speak to, only to never see them again. Who would turn down a second sunrise, a flower that responds to human touch?

27

It’s true that I did eventually apprehend that praying mantis in every sense of the word. The last time I saw Ricki, I knew something was wrong. He seemed discolored, even desperate. So I picked him up and thought about Petunia, a bird I once rescued and cared for, until one day she hopped onto my hand a little too willingly, woozily, a hint of desperation and inability in her gaze. She seemed like a tired bird, and

she seemed like a sad bird, and these are things generally difficult to witness, which should have been enough for me to register the severity of the situation. I didn't hold her for very long because it felt like an abuse of something, felt invasive—why wouldn't the natural world also have boundaries? I did nothing with my concern but hold it, like a rock in my stomach. And that was that.

What could I have done? It was the weekend and the vet was closed, or I knew the end was coming before I could understand it, or I was afraid of a gigantic medical bill, or I saw something with my heart sooner than my brain. She still felt like a bird when I picked her up off the floor of her cage a few hours later. Perhaps motherhood always contains a little regret, that frozen image of the best of what you saw.

Bugs, babies, birds. All we want is reciprocity, love that stays put. Then we go and fall for things that need to grow.

28

Morning, still cool. A scrub jay eats the seeds from the largest sunflower head, already bent, almost ugly, more function than luxury (remember: all nature). Our cat would never mess with a jay, they are too mean, too feisty. In other words, they would fight back, and this is something our cat knows, genetically if not socially.

I look for sunflowers that have become too heavy or too bright, the ones that look good but have looked better, now peeking downward and

about to turn, like an orbit, or an essay. This morning I find only one, cutting the stem at the deepest slant my wrist can manage and placing it, leaves and all, in a tall dark bottle. The sunflower looks beautiful on our front porch, away from the others, contained by the very distance that separates birth from purpose. Those spaces we remain in control of, the ones in which we craft our little lives. The sunflower lives for five days so long as I change its water daily, though not really: it has not been alive since the moment I chose it, moved by its potential for staying still. It looks exactly like it did the moment it shot out of the soil, proof of my effort, standing in for most of what I believe. Real things made pretend, pretend things made real: we're all making souvenirs and scrapbooks, telling stories to make it to another day. This one's about a sunflower, its short life made a tiny bit shorter, all the things I'll never know about it. The roots, born of dense soil with very few pathways, knew how to navigate a ground that might refuse them. However tentative, it one day managed to address the sun.



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