

Study with Crape Myrtle

Say “Once there was a crape myrtle tree...” and right off, it’s a tale, a story with shape, and it moves toward an end. I know there are other ways of saying, like:

“What the hell *happened* at that moment...?”

“Let me never...”

“Still Life with Thing Indifferent to Me”

“To You Who Do Not Need My Eye to Complete You.”

I’ve racked up here, as approaches go: inquiry, petition, title, dedication. A simple letter, though, might be best, a form that both leads and wanders, weighs and allows for thoughts come upon. In the receptivity it assumes—a reader, you, settled in a comfortable chair, unsealing the envelope, unfolding the pages—a letter’s a space where presence extends.

Dear (if I may),

A few weeks ago, walking home with the dog, I took the street off to the side of the college. At the bend is a grand, one-story house, and in its front yard, a spectacular crape myrtle. (The spelling varies: you’ll see “crape” and “crepe”—though neither the flowers nor leaves are particularly crinkly or ribbon-like.) A crape myrtle’s deep pink, hardy blossoms cluster up like fat bunches of grapes. Maybe you know that sketch by Picasso, “Hands Holding Flowers,” popular in the ’60s as an emblem of peace?—that bouquet-in-fist captures exactly the blooms’ angle of flare. The trunks are as smooth as the arms of a girl, sleeveless in summer. But none of these images came to me then—and none of this chatter.

There it was.

What filled that very long moment unfolding?

I should’ve been able to think *something*—to say “what a beauty” or in stopping short, at least emit an *Oh* of surprise. But it would not come forth as a specimen. “It” isn’t right at all—and therein was the immediate problem: the tree would not be *called* anything. Not “crape myrtle.” Not even “tree.” The simplest, singular names weren’t working. I stopped and looked and heard just my own breathing. And being reduced to standing and breathing produced a wave of something fearsome. Cliffs rose, the air sharpened and chilled between us. In the steepness, I was unshimmed, root-cut, insubstantial as pith. The tree sealed itself up with—what? Solitude? A presence so insistently *here*—being, ungrazed, unsnared, stripped clean—while I really wasn’t anywhere.

The tree in its quiet unspecialized me.

To have been pinned and bored into, gnawed back to a core, to have felt myself splintering into something with edge would've helped. But there was the tree. And there I was not. Not at the fringes. Not in a web. Slipped from sight and in nothing's arms.

I hadn't expected this at all. I hadn't expected anything. Certainly not to be dissolved by a tree. I was just out for a walk with my dog.

Yesterday, nearly a month after this walk, I took down from my shelf Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, and when I opened the book—I haven't since college; the pages were crumbly and I had to endure my marginalia—it was to a sentence so absurdly exact, "I contemplate a tree," that I laughed out loud. (What a coincidence like this might mean is another issue altogether.)

Buber writes that while he could have, he did not "assign to it a species and observe it as an instance with an eye to its construction and its way of life." He did not overcome its "uniqueness and form so rigorously that [he] recognized it only as an expression of the law." He did not "dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers and eternalize it." The crape myrtle was, as he says of *his* tree, "no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood," and as I, too, felt, "it confronts me bodily..." Certain modes of apprehending, seeing, or contemplating (a taxonimizing of forms, for example), aren't *wrong*, Buber says—just that it's not necessary to move through such intervening steps in order to be in relation to a tree. It's just that *relation* is something different—a commodious state, disordered even.

And there was this, too: I felt if I didn't make something of the moment—the sight of the tree, the sensations it conjured—the moment would be gone, and the fearsomeness would evaporate (though I didn't exactly want to stay close to the not-being the tree kindled up). The impulse to respond was powerful—but also very fully resisted. A gap opened up—as quick and sharp as a safety pin sprung. As much as I might have wanted to, seeing-and-making was not sufficient. Not adequate-to. A puny gesture. On a wind scale of 1–10, I was a gnat in a Beaufort 8, where, the chart reads, "edges of waves break into spindrift, foam is blown in well-marked streaks; walking against wind becomes very difficult..." That's what it's been like this past month whenever I recalled the scene.

How accustomed I am to being emplaced. To fashioning a place in words.

The height of the tree was not imposing. Nothing about its blossoms was weird, like flushed and pouchy orchids beckoning *come close, dip a finger in*. To have felt a constituent part-of would've helped: to be the beetle evolved to feed on the aphid that lives at the heart of a crape myrtle flower. To be a thing suited to its singular task, and built to participate in the mechanism of crape myrtle. But I was outside the composition. I had nothing to offer the closed system-that-was-the-tree. I remained unniched, not of use, not needed.

Just recently I received a postcard from a friend (imagine, just as I've been wrangling with the difficulty of making things—but I am growing more comfortable with extended forms of conversation with those I cannot see) on which he wrote: *I could spend my life making stuff no one cares about, not even me, really—except that I like making things. And walking down to the hardware store, I was thinking how much I really liked that—just walking, being in the sun, alone. Just being in the sun alone. You know? How nice that is? How you can feel that's the whole reason to live. And it's enough.*

I, too, have had, at other times, that same experience: that *I see a thing* is steady; to look on it is precisely *enough*: Rome, Via Appia, those dusty, resinous pine nuts on cobbles and lines of dew drying in chariot ruts; while ironing, the wrinkle in the landscape of a sleeve lying down like a time-lapse geological event; a just-picked fig, warm in the hand, heavy as an egg, with a sweet milky bead at the stem-tip. That day, though, when I angled toward home, when I turned and stopped looking, I could sense the tree going on being. And that made my seeing equal to ceasing, and the tree so much more than my speaking of it. Before that walk, in another life, the moment might have been very directly received, *oh, beautiful tree!* as sustaining and proper, one exhalation all that was needed.

The initial emptying out of the form I knew myself to be, the bright indifference of the tree was shattering, but let me say (and how good it is that you're there on the other end), this impulse to make something of it reconstitutes as I write to you.

I'll get to work, then, on a word for “the shattering calm that being formless brings.” Or “the fear that accompanies invisibility.” Or “a recognition that causes one to slip while standing still.” “Absence digging out a core in one's presence.” “The bright air of ceasing, its watery savor...,” which, if I had to name more precisely still (I'll write again, soon), was something like a vein of iron, one I located in that moment deep in me, as if banded in rocks once lodged at the bottom of the sea, formed back at the beginning of the world as we know it—and which tasted, when swallowing hard, as one does when frightened or moved: uncorrupted, raw, free.