

1980

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Marvin Bell

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Recommended Citation

Bell, Marvin. "Pain and Fear: Something about Them." *The Iowa Review* 11.2 (1980): 133-137. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2602>

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Pain and Fear: Something About Them · *Marvin Bell*

MY REMARKS for the symposium consisted of a series of paragraphs and poems about the limits of our approach to fear and pain. But first I read the comics: two *Doonesbury* strips, reproduced in this issue, in which the irrepressible Cousin Zonker interviews the immovable Miles Potash. Only after the funnies was I prepared to say the following.

We tend to receive language as figurative speech, as metaphor, the more so if by so doing we can avoid apprehending the fearful or painful. For example, if I told you that this morning my wife and I played Scrabble and she whipped me, you would probably assume that she merely won the game.

Good poetry expresses the otherwise inexpressible. Its turf is the physical world, or may be, but its content is not physical sensation because, while we may involuntarily signal great pain and/or pleasure, and voluntarily talk round it, sensation itself is mute.

Kierkegaard, explaining the situation of the poet, tells of a Roman emperor who arranged the construction of a great brass bull on a spit. It was shaped in such a way and a hole placed in its throat in such a spot that, when two men were roasted alive inside the great bull, the screams of the dying men made, at a distance, a beautiful music. Hence, Kierkegaard was moved to say, "I'd rather be a swineherd in the hut, understood by swine, than be a poet misunderstood by men." To poets, he said, "Your cries make us afraid, but we love your delicious music." The poet Alan Dugan makes quick reference in one of his poems to "this 'life is pain' phenomenon."

There is a Yoga exercise which is terribly difficult, perhaps impossible, and which asks only that one sit still and concentrate, genuinely concentrate, on the most horrible thing one can imagine. The mind shrinks from the task.

And so the poems that come to mind today concern the linguistic and psycho-intellectual difficulties in articulating fear and pain.

The difficulty invites whitewashes and erasures, as in this sharp little poem by Emily Dickinson, #650 among her poems:

Pain—has an Element of Blank—
It cannot recollect
When it begun—or if there were
A time when it was not—

It has no Future—but itself—
Its Infinite contain
Its Past—enlightened to perceive
New Periods—of Pain.

The difficulty likewise invites simile and metaphor, as in Robert Creeley's poem, "The Flower":

I think I grow tensions
like flowers
in a wood where
nobody goes.

Each wound is perfect,
encloses itself in a tiny
imperceptible blossom,
making pain.

Pain is a flower like that one,
like this one,
like that one,
like this one.

We see in Creeley's simple poem, not only simile turned to metaphor, but two other strategies for attempting to apprehend pain in poetry: accumulation and insistence. Pain is a flower like this one, like that one, like this one, like that one. . . . They bloom in an endless wood.

And the difficulty invites research to the side of language, oblique peeks elsewhere for symptoms if not signs. I'll take a flyer on one by theorizing, or perhaps just wondering aloud, about the growing interest in distance running by people who have no talent for doing it well. Distance running invites pain: David Morris can tell you, and I can confirm it, that the last six miles of a marathon can be grueling and that even distances much shorter than 26.2 miles can hurt. I don't think runners are into S & M: it isn't that kind of pain, and it's not a show. Yet the simplicity of running, which does away with the complexities of teamwork and rules of most other sports, makes of the run a gradually lengthening road for pain that is easy to follow, easy to judge, and easy to get off of. It is also, no doubt, easy to get off *on*. In 1968, before the running boom, beginning what would be, I knew, a tortured and demanding book-length series of poems, I opened the series with a poem titled "Homage to the Runner." I should note that I was not a runner at the time. My admiration was directed toward others. From *The Escape into You*, "Homage to the Runner":

The form of this "sport" is pain,
riding up into it, he hurts to win.
These are the moments when death is really

possible, when a man can fit into
his enlarged heart all that is known
or was or shall be pumping fulfill.

The love of form is a black occasion
through which some light must show
in a hundred years of commitment.
By the time the body aches to end it,
the poem begins, at first in darkness,
surrounded by counterfeits of leisure.

Run away. Leave them to ease.
What does it matter you wind up alone?
There is no finish; you can stop for no one.
When your wife cries, you pass a kiss.
When your sons worry, you flash a smile.
When your women wave, you ignore them.

Finally, the question of the limits of language and logic, and the subsequent question of the modulation in art of the ugly and painful into the beautiful and pleasing, invite in the poet second thoughts about good behavior in both language and life and second thoughts about the audience. Much that happens to us is accompanied by sounds one finds in no dictionary, and which come up from our bowels or are squeezed out between taut, twisted ligaments high up in us, and which come out with a power disdainful of our conventional, prejudicial and self-deceptive distinctions between the ugly and the beautiful. Every so often, one has to put the language in its place. I'll complete my remarks by reading such a poem of mine, a poem titled "To No One in Particular":

Whether you sing or scream,
the process is the same.
You start, inside yourself,
a small explosion, the difference
being that in the scream
the throat is squeezed so that
the back of the tongue
can taste the brain's fear.
Also, spittle and phlegm
are components of the instrument.
I guess it would be possible
to take someone by the throat

and give him a good beating.
All the while, though, some fool
would be writing down the notes
of the victim, underscoring
this phrase, lightening this one,
adding a grace note and a trill
and instructions in one of those languages
revered for its vowels.
But all the time, it's consonants
coming from the throat.
Here's the one you were throttling,
still gagging out the guttural ch—
the throat-clearing, Yiddish ch—
and other consonants spurned by
opera singers and English teachers.
He won't bother you again.
He'll scrape home to take it out
on his wife, more bestial consonants
rising in pitch until spent.
Then he'll lock a leg over her
and snore, and all the time
he hasn't said a word we can repeat.
Even though we all speak his language.
Even though the toast in our throats
in the morning has a word for us—
not at all like bread in rain,
but something grittier in something
thicker, going through what we are.
Even though we snort and sniffle,
cough, hiccup, cry and come
and laugh until our stomachs turn.
Who will write down this language?
Who will do the work necessary?
Who will gag on a chickenbone
for observation? Who will breathe perfectly
under water? Whose slow murder
will disprove for all time
an alphabet to make sense?
Listen! I speak to you in one tongue,
but every moment that ever mattered to me
occurred in another language.
Starting with my first word.
To no one in particular.

That completes my remarks. The last word, however, arrived in my mail tray last summer in the form of the following letter:

July 25, 1979

Mr. Marvin Bell
Writers' Workshop
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA
52242

Sir:

I have been reading "To No One in Particular" in one of your volumes and have been thinking hard on the difference between song and scream. What I want to know is, and maybe you as the author of this poem can tell me, why is it that poetry never expresses fear?

Oh, it expresses anxiety and moral disquiet and metaphysical alarm and sublime terror, but when was a poem ever written out of fear? By fear I mean scared shitless.

Was ever a poet truly frightened as I am now?

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vernon Cudgel". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Vernon Cudgel