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The absolute best of 'How Poems Work'

Misspent Youth

Pino Coluccio © 2002

Changing that to which and lie
to lay, striking out a dangling
modifier, once a week
I'd help her write the things she'd meant
to say, clamping sturdy brackets
on desire, and during awkward

pauses, studiously ignoring,
uh, the clauses in her top.
"Not 'to boldly go,'" I'd stiffly
cite (it wasn't sinking in),
"to go boldly." Her cocked head
was pointed at me coldly.

But knowing all your tenses doesn't
help you crack a joke. My lenses
fogging all throughout the session,
"June?" I'd start, but quickly chicken
out. For I was not a hockey-
playing someday engineer,

but just her English tutor—she didn't
even nod to me at grad.
And though it's sheer absurdity
to think I should have wooed her—I didn't
then and likely wouldn't now—
nevertheless I often wish I had.

Lynda Grace Philippsen

LOST CLAUSES

Here is a man of "words, words, words" quite lost in the game of action. Not a hockey player adept at stick handling, he remains shut out. And the rules of the game he does command—language and its grammar—imbue the poem with multiple texts: what the lines say, what is said between them, and what the loins say.

Coluccio's hilarious and sexually-loaded wordplay throughout the poem is underscored with pathos, established first by the varied nuances of the title "Misspent Youth." To miss is to fail to meet, take advantage of, or experience. "Spent" suggests a loss of original force or a purchase at some cost. An overtone of regret is immediately established. Readers expect some juvenile folly or guilty pleasure and anticipate its price.

The speaker, now an adult, recalls tutoring a classmate named June during his graduation year. He begins with editorial changes to her text. The relative pronoun "that" (a specific person or thing) is replaced by "which" (the more generic form used to ask identity or introduce the non-essential), a clear reference to the speaker. Following that he strikes out a dangling modifier, a metaphor for his own psychological impotence and direct contrast to his physical need. Clearly, "the things she'd meant / to say" are not only the clumsy ones she has committed to paper, but the dreamed of overtures the speaker longs to hear. This girl, like the month that shares her name, becomes all-consuming and ever distant.

While managing skillful rhymes, Coluccio imbeds the text with numerous gems to delight the reader well-versed in grammar. By "studiously ignoring, / uh, the clauses in her top" breasts are at once subject, object, or complement—elliptical, and subordinate. When the narrator corrects a split infinitive, "to boldly go" acts as a reproach for his ineptitude and his unrequited desire; in addition, it also alludes to that "final frontier," the longed for loss of virginity and sexual fulfillment. "Her cocked head /...pointed at me coldly" is the droll antithesis of his.

Except for the icy glare, in the war between the sexes he doesn't even qualify as an object. She doesn't deign to acknowledge him with as much as a nod at graduation, a milestone that, presumably, she achieved because of his help. Not even a glance, much less a gaze—power politics subverted.

In hindsight, the voice of a chiding adult speaks of his youthful self who missed the mark. He admits it is "sheer absurdity / to think I should have wooed her" then. The ambivalent "and likely wouldn't now" which follows, teases the reader and mocks the narrator. And why that old fashioned word "wooed"—with its etymology to make a woman of? The implication is clear—it would have made him a man. The reader senses that although he has grown up, that diffident nerd-boy continues to haunt his psyche. Coluccio hangs him and leaves the reader suspended with an incomplete verb phrase—deftly turning on words still wanting the action.