

Divine is Mine: Poetry's Reckless Declarations

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In poetry, all bets are off. You don't have to be heroic, and it's probably best if you're not. You needn't be good, or wise, or holy. In fact, the best poems about holiness are the ones which involve wrestling (Hopkins) or being ravished (Donne). Likewise, in poetry it is probably more interesting to be unreasonable than reasonable, to practice injudiciousness rather than diplomacy, to perform assertion rather than to hem and haw, to declare rather than suggest. Whitman doesn't recommend you join him in his self-celebration; he demands it: "And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Not only will you share his assumptions, you'll share his atoms. This claim is audacious and authoritative. Through the 52 sections of "Song of Myself," Whitman owns you.

Where Whitman sprawls, colonizing both the page and you, Dickinson digs a deep but narrow well: "Area— no test of depth," she writes in a letter. Her assertions are lean but emphatic. She doesn't suggest that maybe the brain is wider than the sky, she declares it, and not only is it wider than the sky, it is "just the weight of God," a heretic moment if there ever was one, especially from the pen of a woman in 19th-century America. Let's take a mini-tour of some of her first lines. "Much Madness is divinest Sense—to a discerning Eye—," "This World is not Conclusion," "Beauty—be not caused—It is," "The Bible is an antique Volume," "Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue," and "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." There is the assertive imperative: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," and the cheeky claim: "Title divine is mine." Dickinson's poems, it has been said, begin where other poems end. "Beauty—be not caused—It is" sounds like a final flourish and not an opening gambit. Where does one go, from a Dickinson first line declaration, but into uncharted territory?

In my own work, I sometimes use declaration, frontloaded into the titles of poems, on subjects with which I feel most shaky. "Beauty is over," for instance. "Either everything is sexual or nothing is." These declarations are performed with a surety I rarely feel in life. In a sense, I set myself up to have to follow a claim like a voracious dog whose leash I must hang onto for dear life. It is not a useless exercise to stick an anemic poem on a wooden chair under a bare light bulb and demand of it: what is your thesis and where is your evidence? It is often true that the best thesis is nearly ludicrous, almost impossible to prove. That way invention and madness lie.

I can think of no more crucial use of this approach than William Carlos Williams' "so much depends upon" in his poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." Imagine the poem without that rhetorical strategy. There would only be a scattering of objects, witnessed and transmitted to the page. He raises the stakes with those four words—so much depends upon—that frame the scene as mysteriously, wrenchingly essential, a declaration rather than a description.

Fast forward to now, and Fatimah Asghar's "Pluto Shits on the Universe," whose opening lines proclaim, "Today, I broke your solar system. Oops. / My bad." Like Whitman, like Dickinson in her way, Asghar is performing a version of the self via the marginalized planet Pluto that is undoubtedly less nuanced than the self she walks around with. There is grandiosity, a flamboyance that is thrilling in its lack of dimensionality, its full-frontal attack. "Your year? Your year ain't / shit but a day to me." When a poet is willing to forcefully proclaim, all hell—literally—breaks loose. In the artifice of a less dimensional self, there is theater, archetype. There are systemic realignments. Words lose their practiced banality and are brandished with a potency that is political, transformative. Chaos is un-nouned, becomes kinetic, a verb that affirms the cosmic power of the marginalized self. Could it be that declaration is a crucial mode for those who, in one way o