

What Are You Of?

Instructions I ask all workshop participants at the first session is “tell us who you are, where you’re from and what you hope to get out of this.” The “where are you from” is not a loaded question. Chicago natives, (myself included) with perhaps an inordinate amount of pride about their hometown, or with a chip on the shoulder the size of a Second City, are conditioned to always say we’re “from Chicago.” But where are you *of*? It’s a fair question, answered once in verse by Sam Hamill, in a late poem so important, he ended his large lifetime collection *Habitation* with it:



Of Cascadia

I came here nearly forty years ago,
broke and half broken, having chosen
the mud, the dirt road, alder pollen and
a hundred avenues of gray across the sky
to be my teachers and my muses.
I chose a temple made of words and made a vow.

I scratched a life in hardpan. If I cried
for mercy or cried out in delight,
it was because I was a man choosing
carefully his way and his words, growing
as slowly as the trunks of cedars
in the sunlit garden.

Let the ferns and the moss remember
all that I have lost or loved, for I carry
no regrets, no ambition to live it
all again. I can't make it better
than it's been or will be again
as the seasons turn and an old man's heart

turns nostalgic as he drinks alone.
I have lived in Cascadia, no paradise
nor any hell, but both at once and made,
as Elytis said, of the same material.

A poor poet, I studied war and love.
But Cascadia is what I'm of.

Your task is to tell us in a poem where (or what) you are “of.” Sam gives us personal mythology, a bit of his history, some cedars, ferns, moss and at least one of his sources. Many people might use the word “influence” rather than source, but I am partial to the word “source.” Odysseus Elytis is the source Sam cites, a Nobel Prize-winning bard.

You can tackle this task in a couple of ways. The first one is that you already have a sense where you are going, what you are “of” and do not need a scaffold. The second approach might be a Cover Poem. Rhyming end couplets are not necessary, but ending a poem with the word “of” is not something you see every day.

This exercise gets to the core of who you are and why you are where you are. The poem will not settle for “cheaper housing here” or similar superficial reasons for one of the most important decisions a human can make, if they are lucky enough to have a say about where they live. Extra credit if you can avoid the above nine uses of the word “I”. (Ten if you count “I’m.”) Was it Jack Spicer who said you need to learn how to use the “I” then lose it? Is it possible in such a poem? Maybe this is the exercise that leads you to your own Saturation Job?

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2:41pm
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Casa del Colibrí

Work Cited

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/odysseus-elytis>

<https://paulenelson.com/workshops/cover-poem-rewrite-new-arrangement/>

<https://paulenelson.com/organic-poetry/saturation-job-charles-olson/>

