

Power

Editor's Essay

Power twists and turns. Look down from the heavens onto the mighty rivulets. They reach everywhere. Harmony Neal, in her essay here, confronts the power of her own name—both her original name, Cocaine, and her redirected name, Harmony—and what type of control her mother might have wanted to impose by the first name. Credit, perhaps, the ideology of the times, the culture of the '60s. Behind each name, it seems, lies a great force.

A philosophy professor of mine at the University of Missouri-Columbia, years ago, said in class that he considered the first principle of the universe to be power, itself. We had been discussing the poem "Burnt Norton," the first of T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," which places us humans, says Eliot, "At the still point of the turning world. / Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor toward." Eliot's "dance," meaning the life we experience, takes place at the point between past and future. Power appears, as in art, in the moment; yet we're told, "Do not call it fixity." This was a philosophy class, after all, not literature or religion; and I was there in hopes, young as I was, of consolation, a sense of direction.

The professor's comment about power came as a flash and expanded in my thoughts, largely because I did not want it to be so. I wanted love or virtue, even justice, to show the way. Yet Eliot says, in his cryptic style, "Love is itself unmoving." Like most young people then, I identified with the sensitive, tentative Prufrock. Him, I could understand. I could understand, also, Eliot's position that only God stands outside of time's still point, raised as I was in the Catholic faith. I went to church, listened to the Jesuits, got lost more than once in South America, and, in short, kept searching.

Lately, power seems the prevalent message, physically in earthquakes and tsunamis, and in the affected nuclear-fuel rods, unsteady in our care, as they seem inevitably to be. Materialist logic intervenes, and, in Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker succeeded in stripping state workers of nearly all of their collective-bargaining rights (their power) because at this still point in time, he has the power to do so. That outcome seemed little affected by notions of workers' rights, justice, even economics, all duly debated. The U.S. House of Representatives can push to eliminate government support for public broadcasting for the same reason—it has the political power, right now.

Right now. We learn all we need from Orwell's police officer in the British colony of Burma, in the classic story "Shooting an Elephant," another tale of power. The police officer, representing the Empire, knew he need not shoot the elephant for any rational or just reason—the animal had calmed down from its episode of "must"—but the people, poor and normally powerless, expected him to shoot it. "I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly," the officer says. "And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East." He realized, moreover, the existence of the still point Eliot describes, in which, "at this moment," the world looked new, as if he and we readers were hovering above ourselves.

We offer in this issue, then, a way to view this still point, or, as F. O. Matthiessen once called it, "a timeless release from the outer compulsions of the world," in which art conquers time. Enter the dance of Wendy Barker's poem in which she submits, in all humility, to the truth of her immediate experience, which overcomes the power time tries to impose on her: "Since I haven't many springs left," in her words, she stops to examine the life she might choose over the one she has. "How can I leave?" she asks, rhetorically, near the end of her poem. Her speaker knows herself, and her answer resolves the impulses that could otherwise lead her away, off center, or at least to distraction.

Because Eliot had the audacity to introduce the notion of spiritual insight into his poem, I suggest it as a way of seeing Barker's poem, also, and other art here. The etymology of "holiness" derives from *wholeness* (*to be preserved whole*)—not split apart, not distracted, but grounded and authentic—as Eliot reminds us, "Evacuation of the world of fancy." The power of art lies in its integrity, giving form to what we often see as chaotic or random events.

At first, I did not want to look at Harmony Neal's life in real terms, being neither a drug person, as she calls herself, nor an advocate. The honesty of her voice turned me, however, as it turned her, to accept who she is, now; so she says near the end of her fascinating essay, "I've grown into my new name." But for her art, we would be left at the mercy of original, untested facts, unable to see, as Eliot says in "Burnt Norton,"

[that]
 Only by form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.

I have only to look at a photograph of one rooster by Terrie Wahling—how the high plains revolve around the amazing bird, much like Wallace Stevens' famous jar in Tennessee—or the horse, or the river on the cover of this magazine, to experience the still moment given form. As Albert Goldbarth, himself, says in these pages, "Surely / *some* things make a difference." Yes, they do. Power is not unattainable but is in everything, and in us. "The dust / of outer space," Goldbarth submits, "will continue to lay its annual tonnage / at our doorsteps," yet we are not passive. The only question is, how do we express our power? Do we encourage one another, build each other up? If the art on these pages holds its center, the answer should be yes.

—Robert Stewart