



BACKDRAFT, SLEEPING LADY

SANDRA YANNONE

In the summer of 2003, I steeled myself to attend a math-across-the-curriculum conference at Sleeping Lady, a retreat center named after a range of voluptuous mountains resembling a woman in lush repose. She rests above Leavenworth, Washington.

As a poet and the Director of Evergreen's Writing Center, I was out of my league. Math and science professors from across the state had convened to discuss inspired ways they could teach material that fascinated them in the same way I find wonder in words. I marveled at their passion and knowledge, understanding all but the latter.

It wasn't always like this, my distance from math. When my family moved to the Connecticut shoreline the summer before eighth grade, I landed in the honors track for math, science, and English. I sat in the back row of Mr. Russell's Honors Algebra that entire year, holding my own against the figures flying at me from the chalkboard in increasingly complex combinations. I often assuaged my loneliness by dreaming of the girl in the front row to my left, five seats ahead.

During ninth grade that girl and I would become best friends when fate assigned us seats next to each other in Honors English. We'd gather in different combinations with the other girls after school to practice proofs and theorems with our geometry teacher, Mrs. Brockway. I loved learning how numerical sentences revealed the secrets of shapes and their dimensions and angles. Our collaborative space elevated my Bs to As.

In tenth grade, ten girls and ten boys enrolled in Honors Algebra II, easy math to do if you like to combine Xs and Ys. In class, Mr. Robbins humiliated anyone who could not master the problems he explained on the board and didn't believe in extra help. I struggled to do my homework, the figures in my book now looking like the twisted steel of train wrecks. I failed many units and cried almost the entire Memorial Day weekend in front of my next-door neighbor, an electrical engineer whom my mother begged to help me so I could pass my final in June.

I did pass, barely, while Mr. Robbins watched from the sidelines as the possibility of taking physics, which all of us girls had dreamed of taking together since Honors Biology, plummeted like the women who leapt from the blazing stories of the Triangle shirtwaist factory in New York, March

1911. Of the original ten girls, only Karen Kozma and Mary Kelly would survive the entire honors math and science curriculum with the ten boys through graduation in Connecticut, June 1982.

In the opening lines of “One Art,” poet Elizabeth Bishop writes: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster.”¹ For years, that’s how I lived, avoiding math and my interest in women, hiding behind my comfort with words, then convincing myself to attend law school and find a boyfriend. I took years to acknowledge the man-made disasters set in motion since high school, leaving law school, my boyfriend, then New England to pursue a PhD in poetry and finally relationships with women in Lincoln, Nebraska.

As I sat by the pool at Sleeping Lady in August 2003, I was out as a lesbian faculty member, but still passing. The Director of Evergreen’s Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning Center said that she noticed how I would gloss over numbers in the text we were discussing as if the words alone could complete the picture. That day while fires blazed on the other side of Sleeping Lady, I realized a whole world was lost to me, and like in the last line of Bishop’s “One Art,” “this was (Write it!) like disaster.”

I now vow to myself that I will retake algebra before I retire, the agony of those high school years having dissipated enough that I can attempt to revise my academic shame. And it isn’t shame, of course—it just feels like shame. There’s no shame in struggling to learn, no shame in seeking out support, no shame in not being able to do everything as well as the thing you do best. The shame comes from being shamed, from being told you are less-than before you’ve been able to succeed with many stumbles along the way.

Nearing the end of the conference, when asked to prove what I’d learned, I fell back to what I knew: writing poetry. While others created pie charts, parabolas, proofs, and theorems to reflect on their experiences, I wrote “Revision, Sleeping Lady” to quantify mine, used words to put out my grief that burned around Sleeping Lady for days and within me for years.

1. Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art,” *The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Bishop: 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 178.

REVISION, SLEEPING LADY

News of the fire spreads, revising the original paint-
by-number scenes. I have more questions
than answers, and I'm learning that language alone
can't fuel my curiosity. In the pool, I tread water
among mathematicians, fabricate equations
for my awe. The fire spreads.
I don't know the rate of speed
or how many firefighters will lose sleep
or life. To keep my mind off the news
I tread water in the timeless creek,
begin to allow figures to wash over me
like my comfort with words. What poet hasn't counted
syllables, beats, or lines in order to create
order? In the valley of the Sleeping Lady, smoke
rises around me. Everywhere fires are spreading.

WORKS CITED

Bishop, Elizabeth. "One Art." *The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Bishop: 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983.