

James Nicola

“I found a stick”

I found a stick
a perfect stick
(I must have been eight, nine)
in our back woods
perfect as what I later learned
were called shillelaghs,
imposing branches picked, trimmed
and rented or sold by bearded men
at bases of holy mounts.
This one needed no trimming of renegade shoots,
nor sanding of knots
but lay in nature
a most apt staff
for someone my height,
the height of eight or nine.

I can say now I ‘loved’ that stick
though not in the same way I loved
peanut butter, family, friends, you, or my cat.
But only now can I say that.
Back then I had to keep my head screwed tight
as the world grew screwier and screwier.
Besides, I was not so obsessed
that I kept it under my bed at night,
though, yes, in a prized raised spot
in our back shed.

It was fine.

Nor did I take it with me everywhere
like Mary with her lamb
but certainly out playing, in the woods,
just about daily that summer,
and certainly for neighborhood benedictions of sorts—
but not for touch football, for instance,
what good would it have been?

Straight, smooth, it came to here, a small man's cane,
a little tinge of graying in the grain,
it glistened.

Then the day that Youknowwho
cracked it in two
I did not cry—who would have cared or listened?

Of course I knew that it was just a stick,
but also that there was no other stick
quite like it in the world. It was my stick,
with which I could, and did, perform magic,
when I was young, and of a certain mind
I've been unable, ever since, to find.

So, the Modern

When I call the sky, the ocean, the world, Life
or Being itself—when I call these my Teachers,
you call me on it and say that that's a lie
in that it's a metaphor. Nature does not want
to teach, but is, and wants only to continue—
But even that is imputing human desire
to the senseless sense of nature. This is much
like how we find an aim in modern art.
But to tell plain truth one can't use metaphor.

For if the facts are: I have learned so much
from looking at and flying in the sky,
from sailing on and swimming in the sea,
as from breathing in, walking on, growing up from the earth,
splendificating nature as my world,
it is also so that none of these teachers gave
a whit whether I learned a thing or not,
only that I continue—But even that
is something I can only hope is So.

Well so it is with a contemporary painting
or sculpture, or poem, or dance, or piece of music.
What it wants to be, what I want it to be,
more than it is, that is—is what I impute
to it, not what is necessarily there.
Of course I'd be hard pressed to say that jazz
or the jitterbug is sad. No, they simply must
have been born from joy, as Munch's *Scream* must
have been shrieked, at least the first time, from raw anguish.
(Later of course, from remembrance of that sound.)

So Nature's wellspring and purpose has to be—
Well, whatever you say, Sir, in the end.

And God must be a modern after all.