

ELOQUENT SILENCES: INACTION AS INVITATION IN EULA BISS'S "NO-MAN'S-LAND"

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Not every problem demands a solution. Some problems are so petty that to describe them and their self-evident explanations is trivial and unnecessary. Some are so abstract that any single solution would be an exercise in futility. But others, through the sheer force of their relevance, insist upon our involvement. They beg for resolution and entreat us to act, assuring us that we will not rest easy until something is done. In the essay "No-Man's-Land," Eula Biss illuminates just such a problem: the persistence of unfounded fear inspired by racial prejudice. In her essay, she demonstrates the prevalence of this fear and brings us to care about its harmful consequences. However, she does not attempt to remedy this problem or suggest any proposal for action, and so it seems we are left with no directives for a way forward.

The groundless fears that divide the residents of Biss's gentrifying Chicago neighborhood are exemplified by what she refers to in her subtitle as "the historically troubling attitude of American pioneers" (1). Tracing this attitude from the racially fraught prairie of Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic book to the urban frontiers of present-day America, she argues that the pioneer mentality has resulted in a culture of damaging paranoia. "This is our inheritance, those of us who imagine ourselves as pioneers," she writes; "we have inherited a ring of wolves around a door . . . inherited padlocks on our pantries" (24). This legacy is what has caused her white neighbors to feel "besieged" by the largely black neighborhood they have moved into (24). The prevailing idea in American society that fear will keep people safe, Biss argues, is "promoted by the government as a kind of policy" (19).

Throughout her essay, Biss deploys language and imagery that play upon our emotions, convincing us of the heartbreaking effects that cyclical paranoia has upon us all. She names fear a "cruelty" (14) and a "violence" (19), as we are told the story of a large man who cried at remembering the hesitance of small women afraid to pass him in the street (14). She writes of her own anger that "so many of us have agreed to live within a delusion" (13). By describing fear as a de facto act of brutality, Biss tacitly argues that it is not an emotion passively felt, but a weapon we actively deploy—an eradicable toxin that we unleash upon the world. It is all the more unsettling, then, to witness Biss shrug and return this weapon to her holster, where it chafes uncomfortably against her conscience.

Despite Biss's assertive stance against ungrounded fear, she is surprisingly ambiguous about how we should reckon with its presence. In an essay in which so much is said, it is the silences that speak the loudest, leaving us unsure of what is truly meant. "It is difficult to know what to be afraid of," the author writes, "when there

are so many imagined dangers in the world” (16–17). Biss never does tell us how to distinguish real fears from imagined ones. If imagined fear is the cause of so much damage, how can Biss—and the reader—be content with the explanation that fearing correctly is a formidable endeavor? Will we ever be able to discern the line between fantasy and reality? Similarly, there is no explanation for why she does not go to beat meetings to complain about the polices’ racial profiling of her neighbors, or why she allows herself to be conquered by her fear of the teenagers who challenge her and her husband (14–15). These instances are indicative of a larger silence that pervades the essay: the seeming absence of any concrete suggestions for how to make, out of all the disparate parts, a better world. It is unsettling to be presented with the painful details of a problem and then be left without a model for solving it, to see a narrator wrestle with a harmful issue only to accept its presence as inevitable.

However, upon closer interrogation, these unfinished gestures reveal themselves to be just as impassioned and deliberate an appeal as Biss’s description of groundless fear. Directly after stating that “fear is a cruelty to those who are feared,” Biss admits her own fear of her young black neighbors (14). We are meant to question the narrator’s behavior here, to realize that she is perpetuating the very cruelty she just denounced. After the emotional image of the football-proportioned man breaking down in tears, we are forced to comprehend the sadness that lies behind her neighbors’ joking call of “Don’t be afraid of us!” (14). Biss could have allayed the pain of this moment in a small way by responding that she wasn’t afraid, and yet she allows paranoia to get the better of her. She is on the precipice of breaking the cycle of hurt and fear, and yet she doesn’t.

Rather she lingers in terror, describing her fear of open water to further demonstrate the ludicrousness of unfounded fear. She writes that she was once caught by a riptide in Northern California, but it is not riptides that haunt her. It is her own image of “grabbing hands and spinning metal blades and dark sucking voids” (15). Although she has had dangerous experiences in open water, the unrealistic description of her fear undermines its validity. She claims that it is difficult to distinguish between real and imagined dangers, but she tacitly contradicts this argument through her own example. Though her fears of a world beneath the water’s surface are obviously imagined, she still allows these fantasies to influence her behavior, causing her to stay “closer to shore” (16). More than newspaper statistics or secondhand narratives could, her oversize descriptions in this passage demonstrate the folly of unsubstantiated fear and suggest to us how Biss could have chosen to move beyond it.

Similarly, when Biss watches the police pat down black teenagers without provocation yet does not go to the beat meeting to complain, we are presented with the humanizing imagery of the scene: the boys’ “IDs in clear cases,” the “bottle of Tide” set down on the sidewalk (33). These details paint a compassionate picture of the teenagers, exacting our sympathy and intensifying the frustrating nature of Biss’s inaction.

By forcing us to dwell in these irksome moments with her, isn't Biss doing something more than merely presenting a problem? Her tone—casual yet unsettling—and her deliberate omission of any reasoning behind her choices highlight how possible it would be to start pushing back against fear. For example, Biss writes that she considers making “some kind” of complaint, but does not (34). In the absence of any details about the kind of claim Biss would make, the reader is left to ponder. It is easy to imagine what she might complain about at the meeting: racial profiling, unprovoked police harassment, tensions between law enforcement and the community, the fear that causes police to suspect every black male of criminal activity—but even so, Biss could have defined her potential complaint in clearer terms. However, in leaving the complaint undefined and allowing us to easily generate its content, she is showing us how simple it is to take small steps against prejudice and fear. By causing us to fill in the spaces of her writing, she is inviting us to fill in the spaces left by all that she fails to do.

While it initially seems that Biss's lack of initiative or guidelines for abolishing fear is in contradiction with her intense aversion to prejudice, as the aforementioned passages show, these empty spaces in the narrative serve to further her purpose. They make us deeply uncomfortable with the issue she discusses, and to urge us to eradicate fear in our own lives. They are thoughtfully constructed appeals that highlight the folly of fearing without purpose, of witnessing discrimination and doing nothing about it. In enacting for us the painful feeling of not changing things that we know are wrong, Biss is paradoxically urging us to action.

When we understand these silences not as contradictions but as moments that help to define the author's argument, we start to have a different understanding of the text and the narrator. While Biss is flawed, she is not at all blind to the frustrating nature of her inaction. She understands that it is a crucial part of a larger problem, and challenges us to do something about it. We begin to see the essay not as a series of inconsistencies, but as a cohesive argument in which even the narrator's faults serve to suggest the small steps by which we might start to remedy the issue.

Perhaps Biss began going to beat meetings after this essay was written, or perhaps not. She may continue to accept the presence of unfounded fear in her own psyche, or maybe not. Regardless, she shows us a clear way forward through her shortcomings, through all that she does not seem to have the courage to do herself. The way forward can be found in the meetings that she did not attend, in the lingering response to the teenage bikers that was never spoken, in her failure to move beyond her fears about a fantastic nightmare world beneath the water. Even the Rawlsian final scene offers some hope, in its portrayal of a different kind of “no-man's land” where dialogue and diversity are embraced. Are we willing to fill the void left by her unrealized actions? In its lack of a stated proposal for eradicating fear, Biss's eloquent silence asks the most important question of all.

WORKS CITED

Biss, Eula. "No Man's Land." *The Believer* 6.2 (2008). PDF file.

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