



What Now, Mr. Miller? Musings on a Muse (or an Anti-Muse)

By Ken Seide

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Four quotations recur to me, coupling and decoupling in a Virginia reel, twirling with each other, then swirling away.

One. "Later Landon would remember that story and realize that she had been breaking up with him from the beginning." That's Skip Horack in his short story "The Gulf Sturgeon."

Two. "Henry Miller said the best way to get over a woman is to turn her into literature." Henry Miller almost certainly did not express that insight. It's attributed to him. The quotation is from "(500) Days of Summer," a movie that Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber wrote. Can we credit the insight to the scriptwriters? Possibly, although they may have heard or read the misattribution before passing it on and popularizing it.

Three. "There are only three things to be done with a woman. You can love her, suffer for her, or turn her into literature." Lawrence Durrell wrote that in his novel *Justine*. That's close to the Miller-attributed quotation, although Durrell didn't write about getting over a woman. He might have meant the three things as a sequence – and implied that turning a woman into literature is the antidote to suffering after love – but I doubt it.

Four. "Don't put me in a short story." That was Lisa before she broke up with me, well before she broke it off, when everything was headed in the right direction. And when I remember that quotation, I know that she had been breaking up with me from the beginning.

Now that it is over, how do I get over her? Miller didn't say what people say he said, but is what he didn't say correct? Does it work? I know that Durrell is correct, because literature includes poetry. Writing poetry about a woman is one thing to be done with her, but Durrell did not say if it works when she is done with you.

The first poem I wrote about Lisa was *for* her; it was a love poem and it's in print. I wrote the second poem about her three months after she left. It questioned whether her joyful tears had been sincere. It, too, is in print – in this journal. The third poem, also published in this journal, is about walking away from love with love – without striking back in anger, revenge, bitterness, or destructiveness. That's what *I* did: walked away with love. As for how Lisa ended it, well, that's not the point. I'm writing about poetry and its power of catharsis, not Lisa *per se* and what she did.

(By the way, is this essay an act of revenge? Does the poetry constitute revenge poetry? No. I'm writing this essay under a pen name; I write my poems under a pen name; Lisa doesn't know my pen name; and I'm not sending her any of my writing.)

And my final poem, awaiting publication, is about my realization that Lisa was callous – callous as she made her way in this world, not just in leaving me. You can see the progression in my poems. But my progress went only so far. Lisa was not right for me; it does not constitute sour grapes to say so; and I'm still not over her, much to my annoyance.

When I publish my chapbook, the four-poem Lisa Concatenation will be

in there. So will a fifth poem with a passing quotation from her. So, too, a sixth poem ending with “I love you” that I wrote as I was ending my pre-Lisa relationship, knowing that I was headed into Lisa’s arms. In one of my short stories, not yet published, a character, also in passing, utters some of her words. Seeing my words in print is of course gratifying. It is also empowering, not to invoke a cliché.

To return to the question: Can poetry and literature do what Miller supposedly gave it the power to do – to get over someone? Not in my case, at least not with Lisa, at least not after two years. Although Miller died in 1980 and didn’t say what he supposedly said, these words keep coming back to me: “What now, Mr. Miller, what now?”

Ken Seide is the pen name of a resident of Newton, Mass. His poems have appeared in *SN Review*, *Midstream*, *Poetica*, *New Vilna Review*, *Voices Israel*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Kerem*, *Whistling Shade*, and will appear in *The Deronda Review* and *Button*. His short stories have appeared in *Poetica* and *Cyclamens and Swords*.

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