

Plume

by Ben Lerner

1

The arced shape of the white oak results from decades of seeking out the sun.  
It's hard not to see it as weighed down by that knowledge, but to see it that way  
would be pathetic, silver of young leaves.

I'm preparing an appeal to pathos. I can feel the onset of the process,  
an indeterminate emotion in search of its object.

I'm unsure if I want to preserve the emotion or destroy it, and seek an object  
in which that ambivalence is inscribed.

I am auditioning objects, such as the oak. I stand before it, or recollect standing, and  
attribute

traces of both choice and feeling to its form.

It's easy to see a tree as history of small decisions, an error it can stand for,  
opalescent changes in soft pink.

2

I cannot account for the welling of emotion.

I probably chose 'welling' because of the spill, but to say the spill was responsible  
for the welling would be

to confuse a figure for its cause. Until it is destroyed,  
built space has an emotional power for me natural space does not. I apologize  
to the friend who finds me unsatisfactorily moved by the view we hiked here to  
achieve, but am unsure

if my condition is volitional. Only when I imagine cracks on the rock face as penciled  
do I experience beauty in the history of small decisions.

I won't base my appeal on the beauty of nature, save insofar as its force derives  
from that refusal,

I believe my role is to address you, to turn away from the rocks and towards you,  
as though you could respond.

3

No one is pleased with the government's response.

Expressing anger at the company threatens its stock. I'm angry, but I might also be a  
stockholder,

like the government; I'd have to check my retirement portfolio.

One response is to open the live feed of oil pouring from the underwater well in a  
new window

while emailing a friend I fear is suicidal. The size

of the corporation makes it inextricable from the economy in general, so our interest in containing the anger is personal, unlike our interest in containing oil, unless you live on the gulf, dolphins floating among weeds.

The fear that our anger might devalue our future by harming our economy is easy to measure: open stock quotes in a new window.

Everyone agrees the environmental impact of the spill is immeasurable.

To take the immeasurable personally would be sublime, but sublimity cannot be volitional,

the contradiction of suicide. Let our fear of our anger be a figure,

4

however negative, for our capacity to bring what now appear

as impersonal forces within the domain of the will.,

re-describing them as historical decisions. This is why it's OK to find destroyed nature

beautiful, vast underwater fields of suspended oil, while remaining indifferent before unspoiled mountain views.

My friend sighs at the limestone sequence because he feels diminished,

but also restored. In this sense nature is bad art,

affirming our non-response. Good art, when it exists, will say: you have resigned yourself to an economy

wherein you exchange your ability to respond

for the ability to exchange your ability to respond, which is pathetic. The resignation you see in the eyes of the water bird is your own.

5

I carry my awareness of the catastrophe into the park, imbuing

flowering trees with human feeling so that nature seems to evoke the sadness I already possess,

one of my traditional roles. But I'm turning from that role, which transforms a social relation into a well. This is me

turning from that role to address you, which is also traditional, except I am refusing strategies of containment that misplace concreteness, thousands of spent catkins

inviting us to sigh.

Your presence is possible, but not actual, and yet it is material, driving futures down.

I know you are possible because of your collective anger is there, waiting to be incorporated.

Indeterminate emotion in search of its subject,

the specter of your volition haunts the underwater field.