

TURNING

Autumn is the time of year when I most notice changes around me. In the fall of my younger years, back-to-school shopping with my mother and sister turned my thoughts toward the coming school year, anticipation with hope and some trepidation of what lay ahead. I put away my summer shorts and sandals for wool skirts and sweaters, fall and winter clothes purchased during the waning summer days. At the end of summer, warm southern breezes turned around to become chilling northern winds. Leaves turned red and brown and gold. Earthy aromas rose up to meet me as I kicked through piles and piles of leaves fallen on damp ground. Long summer days diminished gradually until that first November Sunday when clocks turned back an hour, abruptly marking the end of daylight savings time and the beginning of long dark nights. Every autumn I experience that sense of those long-ago, beginning-of-school year expectations and hope.

November, 2016. It is that time of year again, and dark at 6:30 p.m. Soon night will come even earlier. But this year has felt like no usual autumn. Yes, here in drought-dry California we've had rain, but only one heavy, short October rainfall and promises of further rain that fell short. Weather predictions are like political polls, they stir hopes and deliver disasters. Now in this early November, bright sunny days follow warm overcast days. I'd like to believe heavy mist is indeed precipitation. But it is not. My garden tells me so. Nature acts confused. The maple trees are losing their leaves, yet tulip trees bloom. Hydrangeas have turned their bright summer luster of pink, blue and lavender to their typical fall drab browns as they die off. But just down the street spring narcissus are blooming. Putrid, dying leaves clash with the fragrance of new blossoms. Confused, I have to stop and think what month we're in.

Commented [LMP1]: You say almost the same thing middle of next page. Start there?

Commented [LMP2]: Interesting idea, but not backed up.

Commented [LMP3]: Much of this first page is very general information about weather and seasons. Too long a lead-up. Cut to the chase. Keep only significant details. Some nice memories, but nothing is happening and there isn't anything significant presented the reader hasn't experienced.

From our front window, I mourn to see our pepper tree, which has been maturing gracefully for the last 25 years, now looking sick. Soon enough it will die. Just as did the rhododendron last year. After a glorious burst of large, deep pink blooms the prior season, the rhododendron gave up. By the next blooming season, it was gone. The fig tree: this is the tree claimed to produce the best black mission figs in Berkeley. I know this via a dedicated fan who used to come from the other side of Berkeley to fill his grocery bag with our figs every year. After a few years, we told him to cease and desist picking our figs. Soon enough squirrels became the pilferers. We scrambled every year to beat the squirrels from decimating our crop. Still, with such a prolific tree, nearly every year we've eaten fresh figs for three months, and dried and canned dozens of jars. This year there are no figs, not for us, not for squirrels, not for guests nor pilferers. We will soon need to uproot another dead tree.

Commented [LMP4]: Fig tree is the first stand-alone detail that isn't part of a whole mix of things. It's specific and interesting...but it wanders off. Still, I would choose this or pepper tree to focus on and drop the litany of other vegetation except as back up support to your main example.

I feel my surroundings turning this year as I do every November. But it feels different this time. Something's not quite right, but I can't name it. Autumn is for life to slow down, turn inward, accumulate nutrients for the winter months and wait for spring to unleash its bounties. There may be no bounties next year. I sense a world shutting down, nature seeking revenge against intoxicating atmospheres, landscapes withering, oceans rising, weather soaking what was dry and drying what was and should remain wet.

Commented [LMP5]: I would start your essay here. It's a clear opening: things are the same but something's different. The reader will want to know what and will keep reading to find out. And I brought up "Something's not quite right..." line from below to support it.

Hope is turning too, falling away this season while anticipating, with trepidation, the new year. How to stop this crooked turn, how to prevent damage that has been and will be done? The long political season has ended. Now starts its aftermath: An undoing, a breaking down, a depletion of spirit for me.

Commented [LMP6]: This feels vague. Someone reading who follows politics and has the same political bent as you might feel your statement is obvious but doesn't give them anything fresh. Someone else might just not know what you are getting at.

Each morning while dream fragments hover in my awakening consciousness, I feel something niggling me. Something's not quite right, but I can't name it. It comes not from the

dream now fading away but from my emerging awareness. Something is pulling me toward what will become a new reality.

Commented [LMP7]: Also vague.

In the 2008 holiday season, hope announced itself in colored lights at the top of a large redwood tree visible from Beverly Place, in a nearby neighborhood. Barack Obama had just won the election. That fall we turned toward hope and celebrated its arrival. The lighted sign lived on beyond the holiday season and has remained there ever since. On any given night I could look up and say, yes, hope lives.

Commented [LMP8]: This is better. Specific image and symbol that help ground the piece. Plus you put yourself in the story here rather than the more general “we.”

The world is turning yet again, and this time it turns away from hope.

Commented [LMP9]: Good, but still too vague and non-specific.

And yet. I notice a change out about town. People seem more respectful, humbler, and more gracious. I too feel compelled toward kindness, more willing to acknowledge and return friendliness. Drivers—no matter whether they drive a Mini Cooper or an oversized truck—now seem polite. They stop at stop signs, let the other driver cross before them, cede to pedestrians and bicyclists. People are turning toward each other to give and receive comfort. I understand you, I feel your pain, it is mine too. We are in this dark, dry, confused time together.

I dare to drive by Beverly Place on a post-2016 election evening to gaze up among the tall trees. There the colored lights still shine, H-O-P-E. The “O” is now missing a few lights, and I wonder whether, in time, new lights will replace them, or more will be lost to darkness.

Commented [LMP10]: Good, though overstated.

Word count: 909

Editorial Notes:

This essay is seeking to draw a parallel between seasonal weather and climate change with the political landscape and 2016 presidential election, and the narrator’s loss of hope about both. “Something is pulling me toward what will become a new reality.”

Formatted: Indent: First line: 0.5"

What I would love to see is the narrator more grounded in this telling. Less vague details and reminiscing and more grounded, concrete details that reflect actual feelings. Less faceless “we” and “people.”

Things that stand out and work for me are the fig tree and the HOPE sign. I can see those. They have faces.

Things that feel vague are details about multiple kinds of vegetation, childhood memories, too much lead-up to your point, and a vague sense of politics that the narrator seems to avoid saying specifically.

Instead of a general description of people treating each other more nicely, how about a single scene between the narrator and someone in town. That would ground the conclusion of the essay and leave the reader with something to think about rather than a general, loose statement about people in general. Making it specific and real would also avoid the assumption on the part of the writer that “we (all readers?) are in this dark, dry confused time together.”

Think about your main point you are driving toward, and make the whole essay work toward that goal.

-Lisa Meltzer Penn, Editor