



Amy Bowers

The Elegiac Chalkboard in Jo Ann Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter"

Jo Ann Beard's seminal threaded essay, "The Fourth State of Matter," recounts a horrific workplace shooting at the University of Iowa that left many of her close colleagues dead. The essay goes beyond the shock value of the tragedy to complicate and transform the event into an exploration of impermanence, loss, and resilience. Readers follow along as the narrator cares for her beloved dying dog, often wishing she would mercifully put it to sleep. Even the characters in the essay try to nudge her to action. However, she is in trauma stasis and unable to make decisions or act. In addition to dealing with the dog, her husband has left her. Instead of a clean break, his departure includes seeding false hope by calling her several times a day and in the cruelest manner, asking her to make him feel better about leaving. Notably, Beard goes into work to "hide from her life" where her husband abandoned her, her house is infested with squirrels, and her dog is dying and in constant need of care. Beard writes that "I can take almost anything at this point" (75). What she means is she can bear anything, but she can not move on from the couch she shares with her dogs each night.

The story of a woman's life unraveling is captivating, but an inanimate object that shows up as frequently as her dog and husband struck me: the chalkboard at her office. She returns to the chalkboard nearly a dozen times throughout the essay, each time using the nostalgic motif in different ways. It acts as a tool to bear some of the tremendous emotional weight the author is carrying, especially around the theme of impermanence. The chalkboard also acts as a place to work things out, from scientific equations to personal relationships. The tangibility and physical nature of writing and erasing on the board tethers the narrator to reality when much of her life feels out of control and to be slipping away. Finally, the

chalkboard offers the tiniest glimmer of hope as it creates the space to imagine different futures and the ability to create them.

Chalkboards were invented and promoted in schools in the early 19th century. They were a revolutionary teaching technology because students shifted focus from individual slates to a collective space at the front of the classroom. Although the teacher led the instruction, chalkboards were inherently collaborative spaces where students participated by reading aloud from the board or working directly on it. For a century and a half, chalkboards have been a central space where nearly any subject could be grappled with in collective engagement. It is critical to note that school chalkboards were being replaced by whiteboards in schools rapidly by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the time of the shooting and essay. The idea that a group of cutting-edge university scientists was using a slightly anachronistic technology makes the office where they hung out and debated feel nostalgic and like a step out of time. Bill Brown, writing about Thing Theory references Walter Benjamin's notion that "...the gap between the function of objects and the desires congealed there become clear only when those objects become outmoded" (qtd. in Brown 13). The desires or meaning of an object is strongest when that object is not necessary and thus its use or presence in a text signals that it functions in a symbolic way. Beard's employment of the chalkboards works so well because it exists in Benjamin's gap. Simply put, change her chalkboards to whiteboards, and the essay loses its power.

In the essay's opening scene, Beard is standing in the kitchen doorway at night while her crippled collie goes to the bathroom outside. She looks up at the sky and remarks, "The Milky Way is a long smear on the sky, like something erased on a chalkboard" (74). She goes on to describe planets and space and "sulfur-spewing volcanoes" (75). It feels like a lovely metaphor until she brings it back to the "long smear" of erasure and reveals that the men she works with will soon be dead. In the brief and impactful opening scene, she captivates the readers' attention by revealing the shock of what is to come and introducing the

metaphor of the chalkboard. She closes the scene by returning to the mundanity of her dog arranging herself on the blanket.

The chalkboard holds the tension between the routine caring for her dog and her friends' impending deaths. It is the object that grounds the reader and offers a psychic resting place. The chalkboard can contain both the granular and the explosive parts of life. The men she works with, scientists who study interstellar plasma, use the board to debate and calculate things, she, a nonscientist, does not comprehend. However, when she works with Chris Goertz, the editor of the scientific journal of which she is the managing editor, they use the chalkboard to make collaborative doodles.

Her problem is expanded and triangulated in a scene where she and Chris sit drinking coffee together. On the chalkboard directly behind him is a sketch she made of a man who looks professorial like him. Chris functions as her workplace husband, a better version than what she has at home. While he commiserates with her about her husband who keeps leaving empty but frantic messages, readers imagine him as a spouse. But Chris is happily married so can not replace her husband. It is interesting to think that she is courting an audience of three men but really has no stable relationship with any of them. Her husband is leaving and Chris will soon be murdered. All that will be left is the drawing, which is nearly as real as the others, and in some ways is the only thing that will stay.

In a later scene, the scientists gather and use the chalkboard to work. Her doodles are erased and replaced with "a curving blue arrow surrounded by radiating chalk waves of green" (85). A shape that moves the eyes instead of eliciting a restful gaze, as her caricature might. Her colleagues are people of action, and their thoughts suggest movement and progress, where she is still stuck in the mire. She works to insert herself into the conversation to little avail. She and Bob, her nemesis, tussle over words, and she identifies him and Chris as important in the science world, but to her, "they're just two guys who keep erasing my pictures" (85). In this case, the chalkboard represents and holds power and knowledge and prestige and autonomy. All things she lacks: the things she knows she needs but is not quite ready to claim.

Her doodles are like conversations: tiny questions or starlit pricks on the material of the board. A tiny squeak asking, *what about me?*

Beard jumps back and forth in time and lands in a heartbreaking scene where the physicality and horror of loss are expressed through the chalkboard. After the shooting, one of Bob's friends comes in to visit the office. She breaks down after seeing the chalkboard where a palimpsest of scribbles and arrows and equations, the scientists' work, glows on the surface. Beard later erases the board one final time and sees the woman's handprints, an attempt to reach through and touch the past and her friend, "where the numbers are ghostly and blurred" (86). In this short snapshot of a scene, the reader is pulled in close to the chalky surface and feels the reliquary nature of the chalkboard. It is one of the last places the men were fully engaged in their passion and leaving marks. It is good that Beard erases it because if their handwriting and equations stayed on too long, it might be impossible to remove the preciousness of the last concrete connection. It would be impossible to move on.

After mass murders, the physical spaces are often erased to help people heal and continue. Twenty years after the University of Iowa shooting, 26 people, including 20 young children were shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The rhetoric of erasure in the headlines as the school building was demolished was powerful. They read, "No Trace of Sandy Hook Elementary School Will be Left" (*NewsTimes*) and "Sandy Hook school to be melted down erasing any trace of killing spree" (*NYP**ost*). The school was wiped from the landscape; rubble was smelted and ground up and used for the foundation of a new school. The debris was meticulously cataloged ensuring that no brick, stone, or piece of metal became a souvenir. Even views and memories of the building had to disappear. The demolition crew signed confidentiality agreements; they could not share what they saw in the school: the debris in the classrooms, posters on the walls, damage to the floors, or what was written on the chalkboards. But they must remember.

In a heartwarming twist, a mother of one of the victims was surprised to find a message written by her 6-year-old son on their family chalkboard shortly after his death. He had phonetically spelled out, “Noturing, Helin, Love (*nurturing, healing, love*).” On that chalkboard a message reached out like the hand of Bob’s friend reaching in. Loss is a certainty, and we are marked by it; the erasures leave traces no matter how dramatically they are removed. The chalkboard is a reliquary, containing the last holy bits. And whether or not it is preserved, the traces and memories remain.

After Chris and the other scientists work out their equations, Chris attempts to redraw Beard’s sketch of a parakeet that the scientists erased. He can’t do it and says, “I don’t know how it goes” (86). His drawings are composed of numbers, frames, arrows, and vapors. Hers are of birds, men, and dead dogs. The constant drawing and erasing of images and symbols have certainly left a cloudy nebula of chalk dust with discernible lines peeking through. An accretion of memory, mathematics, and artistic collaborations are left on the chalkboard which is the physical container of their friendship. It is a hub of their daily activity, where they congregated, entertained each other, and where their futures diverged.

Recently, contemporary artist Alejandro Guijarro has used large-format photography to record and reproduce life-sized chalkboards from the world’s most renowned science labs. Looking at the work, viewers feel an immediate sizzle of activity and motion. Guijarro says of his work that the marks and smudges are not objective truths; “they function purely as suggestions. They are fragmented pieces of ideas, thoughts or explanations from which arises a level of randomness. . . . They are arbitrary moments in the restless life of an object in constant motion” (qtd. in Garber). Megan Garber writes of his work that “the semi-erased chalkboard, in particular—its darkness swirled with the detritus of unknown decisions and revisions—compounds the nostalgia.” The unknown, the revisions, and the nostalgia are carried forward in Beard’s chalkboard too. If the surface marks function as “suggestions,” then readers find themselves continually filling in the blanks and working out the essay themselves on an imaginary chalkboard in the reader’s mind. When the location of the friendship is suddenly rendered mute and non

operational, Beard memorializes the work through the essay, as Guijarro does with his photographs. The ordinary chalkboard becomes a field guide to how we can lose and remember things.

After the Iiwa shooting, Beard offers the chalkboard to the reader as an altar, a holy space to figure things out ourselves. We could stand next to the ghosts of the scientists, pick up a piece of chalk, and make our calculations of loss as we try to tease and absorb the multiple storylines of devastation.

As the essay draws to a conclusion, Beard remembers the last afternoon with Chris. He encourages her to go home early, a decision that saves her life. She has drawn a dog, her dog on the board. His eyes are X's, letting the reader know that the end is near for the dog and the narrative. Right before she leaves, she stands in front of the drawing holding the eraser, noting that this moment is the "last day of the first part of (her) life" (88). As she stops drawing and looks at the dog, she threads in a scene of what the shooter is doing at the exact moment. He is in the next room writing a suicide letter to his sister in China. In his coat is the gun. In a flash, we are back with Beard as she erases the dead eyes of the collie and draws in almond-shaped eyes. Erasing in this case is a gesture of hope and a choice to live. Chris approves of her alteration with kindness, and she leaves through the doors that "(lead) to the rest of my life" (89). Something has shifted, and we get the sense that she is ready to start making hard decisions about her life. Luck and the kindness of her boss spared her, and she is ready to move on.

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