

Scouting for identity: interpreting bridget sprouts



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Life, in essence, is a search for belonging, purpose, and meaning. However, humans often do not possess enough wisdom to determine what is of worthy pursuit in life. While double-digit years of life experience may appear a period of time long enough to justify taking a certain path, nature has existed and provided for organisms for an incomprehensible amount of time. Although humans are inherently gifted with incredible cognitive and emotional capabilities, we are also born with many of the same flaws and temptations. Therefore, Bridget Sprouls calls for a stronger reliance on nature and spontaneity in her poem "Scout." Through the contrasting metaphors of modern and historic lifestyles, a reflective tone, and disjointed form, Sprouls recounts an individual's search for identity, suggesting that nature should be the primary guide of life.

Sprouls utilizes symbolism to juxtapose the conflicting lifestyles of modern reliance on material goods with historic dependence upon nature. "Old Austin" is an adage of nostalgia often used by longtime residents to express displeasure at the rapidly changing culture. The speaker respects and looks up to an individual enough to spontaneously adventure to this place of Austin that the man so often referred to. Austin represents the speaker's journey to a state of existence based around nature and reaction, a way of life which existed prior to urban sprawl and the societal fixation on technology. Ironically, the speaker did not foresee the extreme change that this "trip to Austin" would evoke, and therefore planned for a short journey, as she "packed a duffelbag, / overwatered the garden" (lines 3-4) with the expectation of returning soon, "and set out on foot" (4). Still a part of the current materialistic culture, she is enamored by "the flutter of engines," (7)

which represent industrialized, modern civilization. After experimentation and discovery, the speaker has become more integrated into Old Austin's call for coexistence with nature than modern culture, and tension arises when the two conflict: "I would wake to a sweet melody grinding like an ice-cream summons and stumble, half-awake, trying to answer the phone in the forest" (13-15). The speaker is tempted by her phone, which represents the all-consuming essence of materialism, yet she cannot successfully use the device while in the forest. This modern lifestyle of material prioritization, although sweet and tempting, cannot coexist in nature, our original home. The extended metaphor of Austin as the journey destination reappears in the final stanza, as the speaker is "eager to turn on the A. C." (24) to escape the heat and humidity. Reversion to historic living and spontaneity is uncomfortable, and is symbolized by Austin's extreme heat and humidity. She desires relief, through death and a return to Heaven, after an exhausting yet fruitful life of intention and meaning. Eager to cool off in the comfortable environment of Heaven, the speaker is prepared to give God a tour and recap of her life. Sprouls contrasts the images of "old" life in coexistence with nature to a modern, material based lifestyle.

Sprouls' reflective tone creates a sense of wisdom and experience, enabling the speaker to fully describe the process of discovery that she undertakes. The beauty of spontaneity lies in the unknown, which is a gateway to endless opportunities for self discovery of identity. The speaker is only able to reflect on things such as the "most awkward moment" (8) after she has absorbed everything from the journey as a whole. This style of writing contributes to the idea of completing her process of self discovery, as she speaks with a

tone of finality. This fundamental aspect of the poem is manifested in the title of the piece, as a scout is someone who is on a search, in this case for identity. Another form of reflection present throughout the work is her presentation of events in hindsight: " So what if I drooled into rock receivers?" (16). The speaker is suggesting that she has no shame in drooling into these " rock receivers," because she learned from the experience. The use of the phrase " so what" affirms the intentionality of a seemingly absurd action, and suggests that she disregards judgement that she knows she will receive, because she values her own personal discovery over the opinions of others. In this process, the speaker finds what she had been searching for is an existence which is reactionary to nature: " Someone needed to find a loft with flexible floors" (19). This use of the phrase " someone needed to" suggests that it was an essentiality, and one that she ultimately realized. This further contributes to the tone of reflection, as the speaker can look back on her experience with pride, a pride elaborated on when the speaker says, " Who better to memorize the acoustics of local venues, know which houses were haunted, which gutters led somewhere?" (20-22). In the first stanza, the speaker recounts that she " overwatered the garden" (4) before she left, which exposes her previous naivete in believing she would return home to her garden after the " journey." The tone of reflection enables the speaker to poke fun at her misconception of the subsequent discoveries and changes in her life. Additionally, Sprouls articulates the uncomfortability which inevitably accompanies a life led by nature and without the luxury of material items. This uncomfortability is shown throughout, by phrases such as " awkward moment," (8) " someone needed to," (17, 19) " stumble," (14) " tumble" (23), and " set out on foot."

(4) While the speaker admits her eagerness to get out of the uncomfortability and “ turn on the A. C.,” (24) she also very much appreciates what she endured, as she looks forward to giving “ the first tour.” (25) of her life. The speaker’s reflective tone enables her to describe the complete process of discovery that she undergoes from a finalized and wise perspective.

Sprouls utilizes a disjointed form to further the theme of spontaneity and natural instinct in the work. While the first stanza is structured as one fluid thought, which lays out context and setting, it is followed by a six word stanza: “ The flutter of engines enchanted me” (7). Sprouls sets this statement apart to emphasize her temptation to rely on material goods, setting the stage for later clarity in the juxtaposition of materialism versus nature. Very suddenly, the speaker begins a new stanza and shifts to her complete lack of money, which she says necessitated a period of prostitution: “ Out of cash, bartering my eyelashes” (9-10). This abrupt and unexpected confession represents the overall message of the poem which encourages relying more heavily on impulse and “ going with the flow.” The speaker then goes on to somewhat sarcastically thank the farmers for providing her with food, and the “ hounds” (12) for not attacking her, referring to some of the men that she sold her body to. By thanking these individuals, the speaker is appreciating a seemingly dark and low point in her life, as it is where she ends up through her choice to live spontaneously and she learns about herself through the experience. The next stanza jumps back to the contrast of materialism and nature, as the speaker attempts “ to answer the phone in a forest” (15). The phone, which represents

materialism, does not successfully coexist in nature, or the forest.

Materialism is rather a societal crutch which inhibits the pursuit of nature's calling for each individual. The speaker instead struggles in attempting to live without this luxury and attempts to seek similarities in nature to no avail: " So what if I drooled into rock receivers?" (16). However, she justifies this in stating that it was necessary for discovery of this optimal state in nature, for both herself and the benefit of others. The break between lines 18 and 19 serve to emphasize the need for someone " to find a loft with flexible floors" (19) being a more extreme extension of the idea of putting one's " ear to the ground." (18) Here, the speaker is suggesting that rather than foresee the future, as putting one's ear to the ground implies, she must go far above the ground in a loft to put her ear down on flexible floors. This means that she would have a much broader perspective from high up, and would therefore see the success of humans when coexisting with nature in the past, rather than only looking to the future. Sprouls' use of a disjointed form effectively captures the essence of spontaneity which underlies the poem.

In the portrayal of a journey defined by discovery of identity and purpose, " Scout" condemns modern reliance on material goods while encouraging coexistence with nature and a dependence on one's instinct. The speaker becomes fully equipped to enjoy life because she is not constrained or defined by human constructs, but rather lets nature dictate her actions. Nature provides all that humans need, yet we have centered our existence as humanity around our own man made creations. This arrogant human tendency creates a societal blindness to our true purpose, as we are now

born into a world which worships the creations of men who have lived under one hundred years, when nature has provided for millions. Our complete dependence on each others understandings and creations leaves little room for raw and true individual discovery of identity. Only by resisting societal and material dependency and recognizing nature as the true measure can we live into our individual and unique purpose.