

Structure

An Editor's Note

For many years as a young man, trying to understand the working parts of art and even philosophy, I often heard wiser folks refer to a work's "structure." I didn't understand the term and seemed unable to grasp any attempt at explanation. Naturally, I think about it all the time.

One dictionary of literary technicalities calls structure "a general and ambiguously used term." Well, I intend to end that ambiguity right here. A visual, nearly abstract representation of structural forces can be found in our cover photo of bridge trusses, by Cynthia Beard, and a companion photo on the back, of some comical building supports. Essayist Richard Rhodes, who was not my teacher but a kind of mentor to me, has referred to "architectonic structures," and added, "the kind you have to build that no one ever teaches or talks about." Sure, it involves unity, change, and variation; but most important for me, architectonics reveals what I think of now as the strategic placement of opposing forces. Auden would call it disenchantment; I take it as a source of hope.

The fate of the character Duc Nguyen in Sharon Goldberg's story here, "Interloper from Hanoi" is, as my teachers would say, to my puzzlement, structurally determined. Duc's love for a songbird intersects with an array of political and personal complications, coming at him from many angles. Such thematic trusswork might not support Duc Nguyen, individually, but the tension, internally, supports the art. It holds everything up.

As you might know, Chinese Nobel Peace Prize winner and poet Liu Xiaobo died in a Chinese jail hospital on July 13, 2017, while serving a sentence of 11 years in a Chinese prison for promoting human rights and democracy in China. He structured his life on a series of apparent contradictions, wherein he was a fighter for peace,

a leader from prison, an inspiration upon his death. "Tell the regime that deprives me of my freedom," he said just before sentencing in 2009, "I have no enemies and no hatred."

You might recognize the structural integrity of that statement, the force of oppression met with good will. The Chinese tried to censor reports about him, but one poem about Liu got to a reporter at *The Wall Street Journal*,

You want to bury him
bury into the dirt
but you forget
he is a seed.

"The term *structure*," says Edward Hirsch, whom I wish I had had as a teacher, "is sometimes misconstrued as the equivalent of *form*." Structure is, as Liu shows us, more defiant than form alone. Liu's life was built on the kind of paradoxes that allow artists to confront authentic moral dilemmas in art and in their lives. The hopefulness I find internal to a work of art is its daring, not only to change but to confront its opposition. Read B.H. Fairchild's "Kimonos" in this issue, and his "seamstress, / obedient to the task of love." You will not lose your way in the poem, but you will blink—being forced to refocus—because the path of love crosses another, opposite force, retracing itself again and again, which makes the art hold up. You can lean on it.

Liu or Fairchild or any artist in this issue takes the reader beyond a simplified single expression. I am embarrassed by the time it has taken me to arrive at that perspective, likely obvious to most of our readers and certainly not free of ambiguity. I see it, however, in the checks-and-balances structure that should govern us: In the process lies the power. One of our featured visual artists here, Calder Kamin, creates the shapes of natural, happy critters out of the trash that might be killing them. That's the process. Her structural device elevates how she thinks about existence, and how she lives. God bless her, she makes the planet stronger

—Robert Stewart