

A SAME AND A SAME

Sophia Dahlin

I don't want to roll down the hill, I explain, because it will make me dizzy, dizzier than it makes you. Also, I am reading.

What are you reading?

It's a story by an author who says "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."

You're supposed to say a different thing, and a different thing, she laughs, and becomes suspicious.

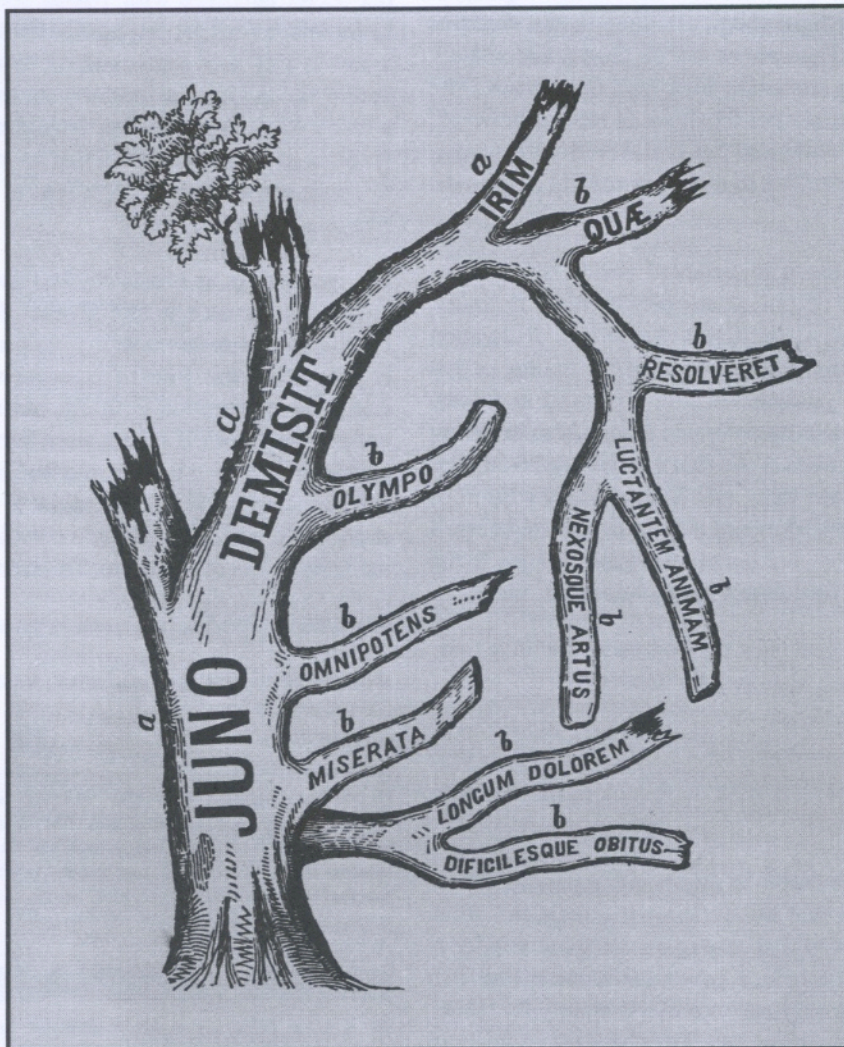
Yes, I agree. It's funny that she says a same thing, and a same thing.

My interlocutor rolls down the hill.

Pleasure and suspicion. That's how everyone seems to encounter Stein. She first appeared to me in a YA literary journal as a character, in an idiotic work of historical fiction, musily conspiring to throw away Hemingway's suitcase of early works to "free" him of attachment to his early style. Someone who cared had appended actual stanzas by Stein to the end of the story, in one of those text boxes that graphically represent a separation of realities.

*Sweeter than water or cream or ice. Sweeter than bells of roses.
Sweeter than winter or summer or spring. Sweeter than pretty posies.
Sweeter than anything is my queen and loving is her nature.
Loving and good and delighted and best is her little King and Sire
whose devotion is entire who has but one desire to express the love which is hers to inspire*

Did I allow myself to care that the text described loving a woman? I thrilled to the repetition, thrilled to "water or cream or ice" as a list—that with each noun the word "sweet" buckled yet triumphed, flooded the line regardless, sweet water, sweet ice. I read more Stein, but for a while I wanted all her work to be the stanzas that had first enticed me, and would often reread them after my attempts at appreciating her other works. I wouldn't read the end of the poem, or know its title, "The Watch on the Rhine," until



college—it's in *Geography and Plays*, a gorgeous collection, favorite of my undergrad years, *Tender Buttons* be damned.

*In the photograph
the Rhine hardly showed
In what way do chimes remind
you of singing. In what way
do birds sing. In what way are
forests black or white.
We saw them blue.
With for get me nots.
In the midst of our happiness
we were very pleased.*

I'm reading Q.E.D. today for the first time because my girlfriend is studying for some absurd exam for which she must read 200ish books. As a result of this and our limited shelf space, our apartment is chaotically scalloped with piles of classics, many of which I, in high school, fiercely applied to the problems of life. I wander her stacks, re-reading Woolf, Forster.

Somehow I had never read Stein's *Q.E.D.*, even in college, peak of my steinomania, even after I pleasantly allowed myself to discover I loved women, too. *Q.E.D.* charms me. The first half is about a young Stein lying flat on a ship deck in the sun while a friend's girlfriend desperately tries to provoke a reaction from her—much as I lie in the first spring sun on this hill in our little neighborhood park, humoring the child who wants me to roll down it. The second half is about Stein picking fights with this woman pre

and post coitus, accusing her of immorality while maintaining her own blamelessness—*she* never promised the woman's girlfriend anything. I am touched and chilled by this candid tale of youthful hypocrisy.

The copy I've got has been available to let from the University since at least 1972, according to the card in the back of the book. I'd feel guilty reading it in the grass alas if a few of its past readers hadn't

already defaced it, bracketing and asterisking every other paragraph. The only legible notes are in loopy pencil, and they're vapid as they are scathing: "ugh" "bourgeois" "senseless."

I'm used to other readers hating Stein.* They feel tricked by her poems simple and opaque as spoons. I'm used to most readers' hostility toward any literary experiment that isn't easily explained. My college students, when I have them, are open to the weirdest conceptual art as long as its experiment can be clearly articulated. Stein's ambiguous, morphing sentences fuck with their heads. The many good reasons to hate Stein—her fetishism of black americans, which is everywhere in her work, and her collaborationist sympathies, which are obscured—seem not to offend as readily as her syntax.

"Senseless" shocks me because it is scribbled beside not a Steinian sentence—the sentences of *Q.E.D* are pre-Steinian, ordinary, commas and everything—but at the Stein-character's declaration "I always did thank God I wasn't born a woman," a statement that reads pretty sensical to me, perhaps because I'm used to Stein's man-ness, which she reiterates as casually and doggedly as anything else across her body of work, even in the first words I read from her: "delighted and best is her little King and Sire." In this edition of *Q.E.D*, Leon Katz claims in his foreword that Stein repeated herself not out of compulsion or artistry but out of a Buddhist-ish joy in the fact that reality is. A rose is a rose. She's being, he claims, literal.

The little critic returns. She scratches the dirt nearby with a twig. I'm writing my name, she says, and her twig breaks.

You need a thick stick, I say.

I know that, she says. She says thick stick thick stick as she searches. A rhyme is a toy.

I know things too. I know it's feeble to argue with a pencilled note in a margin, but the powers that be are throwing their full force behind the same claim—that to disavow one's assigned gender is "senseless." To destroy trans people, a government doesn't have to kill anyone, though it will. It only has to make it materially harder to transition. If it is hard to transition, and if it is harder to talk about transition, then trans people will seem not to exist, and a government can claim there *are* no trans people. At the same time, it can take credit for "saving" trans people from transition, because where it has in fact repressed a life it seems to have produced it: each person who does not transition is saved from the oblivion of transition, from disappearing into a nonexistent state. It's inquisition logic, a win-win: rob a Jew or Muslim of religious freedom, and you, god-like, produce a Christian soul.

If one's personal sense of gender does not matter, then Stein's statement, "I wasn't born a woman," is senseless. Surely she knew it was senseless. She repeats it anyway.

I'm not a scholar. I know what I know about Stein due to pure compulsive pleasure. I cannot explain her poems to you. I read them for the joy of sound and suggestion. Sometimes someone explains what one of her poems mean, and then someone else dis-explains

* Nonreaders hate her too, of course, for being gay and fat, sort of a woman, and sort of not. All crimes.

it. A "cow" is an orgasm no a bowel movement. It is moving to know that Stein loved Toklas with such passionate domesticity she worked and played to heal her constipation with poetry and letters and even (alas that we have seen them) sketches of fecal "cows," but I am hesitant to insist that everyone should understand the cows in her poetry as such, just because Stein's letters were archived and her secret language with Toklas decoded. It seems limiting to me to therefore read all her poems under the strict understanding that a cow is shit, as it feels limiting though tempting to me to with affected nonchalance inform my students that a cow is an orgasm, or a rose a cunt, seducing their attention but disabling them as readers. It seems to me more fruitful that we read Stein's poems and struggle to apply her verbs and adjectives to her nouns. It seems fruitful to imagine a cow.

I'm wondering, as I hand rhymes and repetition to a child in a park as her mother on a picnic blanket downhillock smiles at me, how the things that have made my happiness possible will reach younger people like me. I mean experimental poetry, lesbian domesticity, and gender liberation (I'm cis, but my life would look and sound nothing as it does if others were barred from transition). I do think that Stein repeated herself, mostly, out of pleasure in things as they are. Sometimes, though, she did it to effect changes in matter or perception. To heal her partner's constipation, for instance. To redden the faded roses of literature. To assert her masculinity.

What Stein says about herself is senseless if she has no say.

But she says. She says and says, a same thing and a same thing.



☐ SOPHIA DAHLIN is the author of *Glove Money* (Nightboat, forthcoming fall 2025) and *Natch* (City Lights, 2020), as well as many chapbooks. She lives in the East Bay of San Francisco, where she teaches generative poetry workshops online and in parks, runs Eyelet Press with Jacob Kahn, and curates the weekly poetry readings at Tamarack with Violet Spurlock and six other poets.

We would like to take a moment to acknowledge the passing of Alice Notley, on the evening of Monday, May 19th, 2025. Her poetic inquiries, syntax, and insight will never be forgotten. Our deepest love to all of those who knew her and admired her, may her poetry continue to be read, taught, and give a sense of what it means to dedicate one's life to the craft.

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