How We Are Changed by the Rhythms of Poetry

The most powerful poems take hold of us physically. They cause us to embody the emotion, the way an actor does, not just observe it or think it. A poem designed to evoke anger does much more than give us information about the triggering event; it shapes our energy into the very rhythms of anger. A series of words is chosen because it literally causes us to sputter and spit, stirring up memories and experiences from our personal past, reviving the emotion itself.

Even when we read a poem in silence, it is given voice. Sensors attached to the throat reveal that the musculature is stimulated as if the words were actually spoken. Thus, whether read aloud or not, poems are made of sound, and this sound manipulates us on the inside. We are—quite literally—moved. Muscles fed by the meal we ate a few hours earlier, by the oxygen we take in continuously, flex according to specific instructions. Physical energy is harnessed by the poem and carefully, exquisitely *expressed*.

How is the energy inside of us made to ebb or surge, to keep building or burst out, to rush and then catch, as the voice does when it's caught in a sob? Clearly, the flow is shaped by the sequence of words we're made to speak. I want to show how we're turned into puppets (willing and grateful). Our limbs are left alone, but inside where our vocal chords move, we're dangled and swung. We're made to dance—for grief, for joy…

You've probably heard this bit of advice: smile in order to stimulate the joy. Perhaps the idea was slightly repellent. Twisting your mouth into the shape of a smile felt awkward and false; shouldn't the feeling be spontaneous? Shouldn't real joy trigger the expression? Apparently, the reverse is possible. That's why all over the world, people kneel or bow their heads in order to pray. In a spontaneous access of humility and awe, one might find oneself dropping to one's knees, but if reverence isn't the starting point,

then going through the motions, conforming one's body to the shape of humility, can trigger the feeling.

Yoga and other physical/spiritual practices exploit this phenomenon. So does poetry. The voice is arranged into specific patterns of sound and intensity, and the corresponding feeling—whether of calm or elation, rage or confusion, expansion or fear—is generated. The movement is of energy through the body, not ideas through the mind. Associations are made not via thought and logic but via the body and its kinesthetic experience.

Think now of the stresses in verse. The heavily stressed syllable is a combination of three things. It is louder; it is higher in pitch; it is longer in duration. Listen carefully to the word *volume*, how the first syllable is louder than the second as well as higher in pitch, and how you even extend the sound, almost imperceptibly. The first syllable requires, quite literally, more muscle contraction to say it. You have to summon and release more energy: *Vol*-ume.

There's a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins that summons within us this energy in its rawest form:

> Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
> Not untwist– slack they may be – these last strands of man
> In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more.* I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
> But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
> Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
> With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
> O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?
>
> Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
> Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
> Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.
> Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod
> Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
> Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.[i]

It doesn't matter how often we read this poem. Each time, life claws its way through us—life insisting upon itself in a primal rebellion against death. Despair, that sinking into nothingness, is countered by an energy that starts from the gut. Life there revolts, bursting up through the oppressive lethargy. "Not, I'll not," the poem begins, arising low inside us with the deep *o* of *not*, which opens up the back of the mouth and throat, as if we were about to vo-mit. Despair, which has been the poet's feast, suddenly appears in its true form as carrion, and his violent reaction, both physical and spiritual, becomes our own.

The very first syllable enacts the upheaval, the animal revolt that precedes all structured thought and conscious action. The poem does not lead with *I,* unified and self-possessed, but with *not*, followed almost immediately by *not* again. A longer gap and then again: *Not*, gap *not.* It's the rhythm of erratic retching, repeated refusal. Listen again: "*Not*, I'll *not*, carrion comfort, Despair, *not* feast on thee; / *Not* untwist…" He's throwing it all up, and as we speak the words, we go through the same motions. We're made to reach down into our gut, and then we're made to bring the feeling to the front of the mouth, to emit/spit out, as we do when we vo-*mit*. All the *t*'s at the ends of words in the first two lines make us perform this spitting, make us recall the feeling if we've ever had it before ourselves: refusal, anger, revolt, repulsion.

Initially, the person in the grips of despair can't do much more than reject. From despair, the only thing that can extricate itself is the barely articulate cry *Not*. There's the burst of energy, not the leisurely approach of "I'll not." There's no subject yet, just the life force at its most elemental and unindividuated. Only after the initial rejection can the subject begin to be reconstructed, to rise up out of the rot. Listen now to the sequence of *can*'s*:* "I won't cry *I* ***can*** *no more*. I **can** / **Can** something." Our voices gradually rise in pitch because of the placement of each "can": in the middle of the line, then at the end of the line, then at the beginning of the next. Listen to how the stress is distinctly higher in each of these three positions: "I won't cry *I* ***can*** *no more*. I **can** / **Can** something." It's hope building. It's the will strengthening itself, insisting upon its power. It's the rising tones of a desperation that has become so acute that the speaker is forced to act. As we read and

feel our own voices rising, we trigger some combination of these emotions within ourselves.[ii]

In the poem as a whole, the strong stresses jostling each other, combined with the stop-and-go phrasing, express the poet's tortured state, his struggle with himself, his wrestling match with God. When the poet refuses to "untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man," he might be talking about the lines of his own poem, his word strands, which he twists together syntactically (clauses weaving in and out so the main line of the sentence goes in and out) and which he will not allow to go slack with an accumulation of weakly stressed syllables. If he lets the line slacken for a moment, he risks losing his momentum and falling back into despair. In the sustained stress, you hear the insistence, the energy in his fight to survive. Every surge in stress is a literal surge in life. It's physical energy, and it's the energy that it takes to speak, to shout, so that when you speak the poem, you're mimicking the same bursts, the same calling up of life out of the living body. Or you're steeling yourself physically for the fight to survive. Think of martial artists, how they use a strong grunt to contract the muscles in their gut and steel their bodies. We're made to act the poem, in spite of ourselves, to ready our whole body for the match. We get as close as we can to the experience of the speaker. We put ourselves in his shoes, which really means our body in his.

We share the same flesh. Poetry knows this, moving through our communal body.

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
> Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
> And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
> And every fair from fair sometime declines,
> By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;
> But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
> Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
> Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
> So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.[iii]

Why do we read this sonnet by Shakespeare again and again? If it were only an idea, it would get stale. With every repetition, the words chart a path through our bodies. Consider the closing lines:

> So long as men can breathe and eyes can see,
> So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

This couplet would not affect us so powerfully were it not for the easy, lilting rhythm that leads up to it and, to some extent, lulls us. The sonnet skips lightly and quickly towards its anticipated end—until the penultimate line. Speaking slowly and deliberately, Shakespeare presents us with his final equation: if *a* and *b*, then *c*; if *c*, then *d*. The flow of time changes into a flow of logic, a set of relations that transcend death.

What is so remarkable about the poem is this sudden transcendence, and it is largely achieved through rhythm. Because the final couplet is entirely monosyllabic, the poem practically skids to a halt. (Between individual, monosyllabic words, there's a pause larger than that between syllables within a word; a useful example contrasts *greenhouse* with *green house*.) Quite abruptly, the poet begins marking each beat as if each beat—each moment as it passes—were supremely significant. The very last line slows the poem down still more because the stress on each word grows even heavier. Almost all of the off-beats get an unusual amount of emphasis. "So long as" in the penultimate line is replaced by "So long *lives*": the off-beat occupied by *as* is now occupied by the much more heavily stressed *lives*. The verb *gives*, in the second half of the line, also gives extra emphasis to the off-beat. What further increases the weight of these syllables in the off-beat positions is the half-rhyme—between *lives* and *this*, between *this* and *gives*. The rhymes and assonance cause us to land even more heavily on these syllables since we naturally wish to accentuate the continuity between them.

The end result is that, except for the syllables *and* and *to*, all the syllables in the line "so long lives this and this gives life to thee" call for extra emphasis. Reading the line as a

whole, we charge it with a steady and intensified current of energy and breath. We find ourselves becoming insistent. The poet's defiance becomes our own. His desire that life overcome death becomes ours. It is we who must sustain the energy and focus, breathing the life that is our own into his words. And so we cannot allow the line to go slack. As long as our energy is channeled, Shakespeare speaks, traveling the continuum of our flesh. Together, we express our desire to see all that is loved defy death.

The word *this*—as it appears in "so long lives *this* and *this* gives life to thee"—is among the most beautiful I know. *This* is its own utterance. It's the utterance of the poem as a whole. Shakespeare has just referred to the conditions for reading ("so long as men can breathe and eyes can see") so that as I read *this*, I'm aware of the life I, as reader, breathe into it. At the same time, I know that Shakespeare spoke it and penned it. The voiced word is his and ours simultaneously. It travels through his and our body together, through the flesh we have in common, through the pumped blood carrying the oxygen that we breathe. While four centuries apart, our two utterances of *this* appear to be separated by no more than a single beat of the heart, that tiny conjunction *and* over which we skip so lightly: *so long lives this,* and *this…* It's the miracle of language allowing us to transcend time. It's also the reality of our conjoined life, which appears miraculous only because we are so often blind to it.

Consider the word *life* itself as it appears in the last line. Because an intricate pattern of overlapping rhythms takes hold of our bodies, we find ourselves pressing extra energy into this one word—we *express* life quite literally. *Life*, in "this gives life to thee," is the last in a row of heavily stressed syllables and is immediately followed by a lightly stressed preposition. The emphasis it thereby receives is further intensified because the phrase is the fourth in a series of such phrases, each of which is followed by a weaker syllable, over which we again skip lightly: "men can *breathe*," "eyes can *see*," "long lives *this*," "this gives *life.*" We slip into a rhythm of threes, landing ever more heavily on the last syllable. Finally, this particular syntactic pattern is overlaid by a third: the pairing between "So long lives this" "and this gives life." Guided by these converging symmetries, we land with great finality on the word "life," pausing audibly after we've

pronounced it, accentuating the moment of transfer "to thee." The energy that we've been steadily building is held—its full import felt—and then it is passed on. As the poem ends, we breathe life into the one who is adored. The prolonged *f* sound makes the breath's passage audible. [iv]

Both Hopkins' and Shakespeare's poems depend on the utterance that finds life in the body—of poet and reader together. Using language, the poems enact a conjunction of spirits in the flesh. It's the communion we crave and for which we turn to poetry again and again.

Here is a poem by Langston Hughes that also enacts a conjunction in the flesh, this time across racial lines.

DAYBREAK IN ALABAMA

When I get to be a composer
I'm gonna write me some music about
Daybreak in Alabama
And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it
Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist
And falling out of heaven like soft dew.
I'm gonna put some tall tall trees in it
And the scent of pine needles
And the smell of red clay after rain
And long red necks
And poppy colored faces
And big brown arms
And the field daisy eyes
Of black and white black white black people
And I'm gonna put white hands
And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands in it
Touching everybody with kind fingers
And touching each other natural as dew
In that dawn of music when I
Get to be a composer
And write about daybreak
In Alabama.[v]

From start to finish, the rhythm is carefully modulated. At first, the speaker's language is leisurely and repetitive: "I'm gonna write me some music… And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it … I'm gonna put some tall tall trees in it," he says, stretching it all out. Slow and deliberate, he gives each new addition its own line. Then, after the "tall tall trees" evokes "the scent of pine needles," the pace starts to pick up. The vision is starting to gather momentum, and the speaker, carried along by excitement, no longer has time to repeat *I'm gonna,* just the conjunction *and*. The phrases become shorter, further accelerating the pace.

Still, the lines remain end-stopped. Each item is an absolutely unique and wondrous addition, and only when it is properly observed and contemplated, does it inspire the next. A vision of "red clay after rain" leads the speaker to "long red necks," and these in turn inspire a vision of "poppy colored faces." The lines become shorter, but even as the vision gathers speed, the lines do not run over, for he is seeing it all as he speaks, each thing vividly distinct, not blurring into the next. After all, he's com-posing, "putting" these things into his creation one by one, just as God did when he shaped each new entity out of the red clay.

Visually, daisies (day's eyes) resemble eyes, black pupil surrounded by white, and the visual rhythm of a field of flowers mirrors the rhythm of his lines as the poet composes a world in which black and white jostle each other: "field daisy eyes / Of black and white black white black people." This line is remarkable for the way the stress bounces around within it. We keep expecting an off-beat which doesn't come, so we trip along, not knowing whether to emphasize *white* or *black*. Reluctant to land on one foot or the other solidly, we lunge forward; we're propelled forward to the end of the line. Then, even as we're lunging into the future, the repetition picks up. The *ands* come closer together. There's a cumulative effect, as hands—"white hands / And black hands and brown and yellow hands / and red earth clay hands"—hands of all colors—gather, and "they're touching everybody" and they're "touching each other," and there's less and less space between each repetition, speeding things up, till the vision has reached a pitch of idealism, a crescendo of racial harmony.

And we've been caught up in the excitement; we're seeing it all. We are even breathing life into what we see, into the clay, into the language that is the poet's clay. Speaking the words, we become breathless; we're made to feel the excitement and beauty. And what we see comes into existence *because* we see it, *because* we can envision it. And what is envisioned, what lies in the future, becomes present.

Then the onward progression is broken. "In that dawn of music when I": the line breaks dramatically. In the long series of end-stopped lines, each line building on the previous, a utopia had been steadily materializing. Now, instead of the natural pauses, there's an unnatural rupture. We're not prepared for it.

Actually, we've been led into a paradise of the future without realizing it. The speaker starts us in the present, with the mist and the tall tall trees. These are tangible and real. Then the poem steadily, gradually works its way towards a utopia, a garden of Eden where people live in harmony, based on the realization that their hands are all made of clay. The progression is hardly noticeable because the utopia is rooted in the natural facts of existence. It stems from the physical body standing among trees in the mist, the body that is composed of hands and fingers, arms and face. How easily the hands of different colors are joined or com-posed (which also means mixed together), forming a continuum of flesh.

Abruptly, however, we realize that all of this was only a vision. This is what the composer was *going* to do. In fact, he's not even a composer yet. As the poem draws to a close, we're jolted back to the reality with which we began: "In that dawn of music when I / Get to be composer." This time, however, the *I* is separated from his dream. *I* is left dangling at the end of the line, and into the gap drop, not visions of what is possible, but experiences of the past—all that we know of the history of racism. It's the same gap that enters the next two lines, separating *daybreak* from *Alabama*: "and write about daybreak / in Alabama." An ominous silence follows *daybreak*, and by the time we get to Alabama in the next line, the land has fallen back into darkness. Listen to the emphasis we give to

the word *break*. Because it is the last syllable in the line and follows an off-beat, we accentuate this syllable in the compound *daybreak* almost unnaturally. It resonates in our chests and throat, and other compounds resonate with it: heart-break, heart-ache. The cracking sound of the *k* is followed by silence. We hear and feel the catch in our own voice.

Returning to the opening lines, we see how the units are arranged in such a way that nothing is called into question. There is no pause or hesitation. Only now can we see how easily, how innocently, each line moves towards its completion. He will get to be a composer, that's obvious. Similarly, "daybreak in Alabama" is a single unit, as if these things belonged together—we take it for granted. Besides, "daybreak" has not yet taken on metaphorical weight, so it was quite realistic, even routine. We move on and, from one line to the next, are not required to make any leaps; the dream is composed in increments. Then, when the full force of the vision has overtaken us and the poem has reached its end, the abrupt drop back into present reality comes as a shock.[vi] The gap between what is and what ought to be is now obvious and painful. With time comes experience, and the youthful dream, the naïve excitement (the *and and and* of the excited child) seems just that—a dream that must give way to reality. The vision of utopia towards which we've let ourselves be carried, the life excited in our own bodies, makes us see our present reality in a different light—it appears suddenly much darker than we realized and the loss of our potential that much greater.

This is the effect of rhythm. Our life's energy, riding on beauty and hope, rises inside us only to be abruptly cut off. Like the African American child whom Hughes is presumably portraying, we find ourselves moved from innocence to profound disillusionment and grief, and it's not a vicarious experience. The truth is we are all crushed insofar as we're made of the same flesh and share the same dream of harmony. Poetry itself proves it, moving through our bodies without regard to color or race.

Again and again, poetry challenges us to live more fully. Taking hold of our bodies, it carries us past constraints that are arbitrary and that sap us of life. There are, however,

restrictions that cannot be lifted, and the challenge then is to live as fully as possible within them. Jane Hirshfield's *Salt Heart* leads us through an exquisite dance with the limits of our existence.

SALT HEART

I was tired,
half sleeping in the sun.
A single bee
delved the lavender nearby,
and beyond the fence,
a trowel's shoulder knocked a white stone.
Soon, the ringing stopped.
And from somewhere,
a quiet voice said the one word.
Surely a command,
though it seemed more a question,
a wondering perhaps—"What about joy?"
So long it had been forgotten,
even the thought raised surprise.
But however briefly, there,
in the untuned devotions of bee
and the lavender fragrance,
the murmur of better and worse was unimportant.
From next door, the sound of raking,
and neither courage nor cowardice mattered.
Soon enough that gate swung closed,
the world turned back to heart-salt
of wanting, heart-salts of will and grief.
My friend would continue dying, at last
only exhausted, even his wrists thinned with pain.
The river Suffering would take what it
wished of him, then go. And I would stay
and drink on, as the living do, until the rest
would enter into that water—the lavender swept in,
the bee, the swallowed labors of my neighbor.
The ordinary moment swept in, whatever it drowsily holds.
I begin to believe the only sin is distance, refusal.
All others stemming from this. Then, come.
Rivers, come. Irrevocable futures, come. Come even joy.
Even now, even here, and though it vanish like him.[vii]

The opening lines are short because she is tired, taking in the details of her environment one by one, scattered details without much connection; perhaps she dozes off between them. Slowly, she makes her way forward, pausing to rest. There's a sleepiness, a drowsiness to the rhythm that will contrast with the energy at the end. Most things are lost in the haze. Only a few things penetrate. And as we speak the lines ourselves, we feel we don't have the energy to sustain longer lines, nor the need. The environment is peaceful, too. Just the bee. The sound of a trowel. Each image or sound is isolated on its own line. No need to connect or make sense.

In the midst of this sleepy immersion in the sensory, a much longer line appears: "the murmur of better and worse was unimportant." The line is extended because what all the scattered sensations add up to is a prolonged murmuring, the *er* of murmur repeating itself in "bett*er*," "w*or*se" and, to some extent, in "imp*or*tant" and "d*oor*." The shorter line that follows—"From next door, the sound of raking"—describes again the arrival of a single sound, the bare and unadorned physical detail. No verb, just the sound suspended on the line by itself. Then, the murmuring is resumed in the longer line that follows: "and neith*er* c*our*age nor cow*ar*dice matt*er*ed." Immersed in the continuum of a physical world, the poet lets go of distinctions and judgments and allows a languorous and uninflected rhythm to carry her. In the midst of this peace born of exhaustion, the possibility of joy presents itself.

Then without warning, the experience ends: "Soon enough that gate swung closed." Here, the quality of the line breaks changes dramatically. Phrases are broken off with a marked violence, beginning immediately with "heart-salt / of wanting." The abrupt *t'*s of "heart-salt," two in such close succession, accentuate the break and resonate inside us with the more familiar compound "heart-stop." "Heart-salts" is repeated in the next line. Then we hear the plosive *t's* of "at last." Of "Exhausted" and "wrists" and then "stay" and "rest." All of these have the *st* which evokes a stopping short, getting stuck, stake. In our mouths, we enact it: the flow of air stopped short by the tongue.

But after every abrupt stop, we experience once again the river which sweeps everything onward. “The river Suffering would take what it”: the line breaks off abruptly and then “wished of him” rushes in like a river to whisk us onward. Even the narrator cannot escape the ongoing flow: “And I would stay / and drink on, as the living do, until the rest / would enter into that water…” If she stays on, it is only briefly. While the poem stops at the word “stay” and then again at the word “rest,” it is only a moment’s pause, the brief rest of a piece of music. We may enjoy brief respites, such as the poem began with, but the continuous, exhausting, motion cannot be escaped. “The rest” will go the way of her beloved friend—towards a final rest.

But this is not where the poem ends. Yet another dramatic shift in rhythm occurs with: “I begin to believe.” Phrases once again sit decorously intact on each line. The lines no longer break off like a riverbank crumbling into the rush. This shift is accentuated by an abrupt change in tense. All along, we realize, we’ve been located in the past; now we’re thrust into the present and into the presence of the writer herself.

Why the change? Imagining “the rest”—all that will give way—the lavender, the bee, the labors of her neighbor, the ordinary moment—all swept onward, the poet feels the full force of the life that will end all too soon. This realization shifts her out of retrospection and into the present, and this is where we meet her. She is writing a poem and we are reading it. She is speaking to us. We are part of the same life, and if there are any distinctions, any judgments to be made, it is in our relation to life: “The only sin is distance, refusal. / All others stemming from this.”

Having decided to embrace life, the poet no longer separates herself from its flow. Her own voice, in its momentum and energy, has been at odds with the ongoing movement of the poem down the page. She kept trying to push past the end of the line, only to be painfully cut off. Now she no longer resists the steady march of time. Her own sentences conform to the line lengths, those limited time spans. Each line ends with a pronounced pause that is her own. Instead of letting “I begin to believe the only sin is distance, refusal” run over into the next line, she ends it with a full stop. The clause “All others

stemming from this" becomes its own sentence on the next line. The poet has accepted the brevity of the line, its finality. Finality is hers as well; it's in her tone. *Come*, she declares, and it doesn't matter what comes; she has made her decision.

Her utterances are dramatically punctuated by her command to "Come." It is a constant in all the flow, its repetition suggesting the stability which is achieved by an open acceptance of change and rupture. Moreover, the speaker's own life's energy can now assert itself within the limitations it has been given. While her life cannot extend forever into the future, it can expand within the moment, heightened now in intensity. Her answer is to live intensely in the present, to channel all her energy into each moment, as our energy is channeled into a single word. "Come" is surrounded by weakly stressed syllables. "Irrevocable futures" creates a slack and tired murmuring, and then "come" bursts forth as a challenge to this murmuring. Breaking through the exhaustion and helplessness is the life we feel pulsing in our utterance of the poem itself.

Now, at the very end, we reach a crescendo. Our energy surges with "Then come. / Rivers, come. Irrevocable futures, come. Come even joy." When "come" is repeated twice in a row, having leapt forward to become the first word in the sentence rather than the last, it is uttered with much greater force; when it is followed by the strongly stressed *e* of *even*, the vowel which is highest in frequency and intensity, the heightening of energy is prolonged. How few slack syllables there are now: "come. Come even joy. / Even now, even here"—for each weakly stressed syllable, there are at least two strong ones. The lethargy and numbness are gone. All her energy, and our own as we speak her words, is summoned. We, like her, give our life to the moment.

And then the line goes slack, as it must in approaching the end, diminishing as her friend's wrists diminished: "even here and though it vanish like him." "Though," with its low-frequency *o*, signals a turn to woe. The energy begins to dissipate, petering out in a series of more weakly stressed syllables. Only the *va* of "vanish" and "him" seem to take the same emphasis as the stressed syllables of the first half of the line. [viii] The line began emphatically with her invitation and invocation, with her willingness to give all her

energy to the present experience even if it is doomed to trail off, to be swept onward and away. When we speak the line and experience the burst of energy followed by diminishment, we're flooded with a complex mixture of defiance, grief, and joy. The flavor of salt.

In the silence that follows, it is appropriate to turn to Mary Oliver's *The Snowshoe Hare*, which, in contrast with all the poems I've considered so far, works to downplay the rhythms of human struggle within us, training our ears on the constant sound of the river instead.

THE SNOWSHOE HARE

The fox
is so quiet—
he moves like a red rain—
even when his
shoulders tense and then
snuggle down for an instant
against the ground
and the perfect
gate of his teeth
slams shut
there is nothing you can hear
but the cold creek moving
over the dark pebbles
and across the field
and into the rest of the world—
and even when you find
in the morning
the feathery
scuffs of fur
of the vanished
snowshoe hare
tangled
on the pale spires
of the broken flowers
of the lost summer—
fluttering a little
but only
like the lapping threads

of the wind itself—
there is still
nothing you can hear
but the cold creek moving
over the old pebbles
and across the field and into
another year.[ix]

The poem's design combines two extremes, joining the shortest possible lines (one word) with the longest possible sentence (the whole poem). It's one river of a long sentence, but it's also a broken series of fragments, accentuating the starkness of the landscape. Reading "the feathery / scuffs of fur / of the vanished / snowshoe hare / tangled / on the pale spires," we encounter, with each line break, the blankness into which everything vanishes, the snowshoe hare disappearing into a silence that fills with the sound of the cold creek. "Of the vanished" is on a line by itself, and while the "snowshoe hare" materializes on the next line, it vanishes just as quickly when we read "tangled" and once again see only scuffs of fur.

Each line is hardly a line but approaches a point, causing us to focus instead on the line of movement down the page, the poem elongated like trickling water. The onward flow tugs at each line, eroding it, often allowing just a single word to remain. "Feathery," "but only," "fluttering a little"—each of these phrases, ending in weakly stressed syllables, are signs of life disappearing into the wintry landscape. The scuffs of fur are hardly recognizable; they are more like "the lapping threads / of the wind itself." Ultimately, this is what we are asked to see. The poem is training our eye on the wind itself, separate from anything visible or substantial.

While the signs of life are minute, the stark landscape which they inhabit, and into which they die, is large, for the creek winds itself into the rest of the world. This wideness of the universe is evoked by the length of the poem's sentence, which, in contrast to the individual line, keeps on going. It doesn't work itself towards any closure but becomes identified instead with the steady flow of the creek and time itself. The words describing this flow—"there is nothing you can hear / but the cold creek moving / over the dark

pebbles / and across the field"—are steady and unchanging. "There is still / nothing you can hear / but the cold creek moving / over the old pebbles / and across the field and into / another year," we hear at the end. All other things make a single appearance and then vanish while the sound of water over the worn pebbles, which are all worn evenly without distinction, is a constant.

In contrast to Hirshfield's "Salt Heart," this poem stimulates no surges in energy, no assertions of individual life and heart. From the perspective of the river of time, the individual life is carried off like fluff into soundlessness. We are left with the murmuring of the creek, without spikes or shifts. What interests me about the repetition is that normally when words are repeated in a poem, their connotation changes, as we saw so dramatically in *Daybreak in Alabama*. Here, however, one is struck by the inexorable sameness, for the rhythm of the creek is the very thing that does not change. The repetition has an almost mechanical quality to it, an immutability that feels inhuman. In the poem as a whole, any shifts in intensity from word to word are smoothed over or worn away by the onward movement of the sentence. Any rhythmic patterns that might get established are interrupted by constant line breaks, allowing the sound of the creek that is always in the background to dominate. The energy of our personal expression is streamlined into contemplativeness, the emotional up's and down's replaced by an apprehension of what lies beyond us.

But must the individual life be at odds with death? I'd like to end with Sylvia Plath's *Poppies in October*, in which the self bursts so entirely beyond its boundaries that we no longer know what death is. How is such a thing achieved? Energetically, through rhythm.

> Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.
> Nor the woman in the ambulance
> Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly—
>
> A gift, a love gift
> Utterly unasked for
> By a sky
>
> Palely and flamily

Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.[x]

What difference is there between the blooming poppies and her own mouth? The poet feels the bursting open inside herself, and we the readers perform the same blossoming. Even as we voice the words—"*late mouths*" and "*cry o*-pen"—we feel a sustained energy push up through our own mouths, opening us. Skipping across the two weak syllables that begin the line ("That these…"), we land with extra weight on "late mouths." A skip across "should," and we cry out again, with "cry o-," the two stressed syllables followed by *three* weak syllables. In fact, the next line has three anapests in a row : "in a forest of frost, in a dawn..." Surrounded by all these weakly stressed syllables, the cry to which we give voice bursts forth. The emphasis is underlined visually, for the poppies—flaming red—bloom into a landscape of frost, an expanse of blue.

In the last line, one word in particular works to sustain the opening. Look again at the word "dawn" (which starts with a plosive but then opens the mouth wide the way the word "yawn" does). Notice that "dawn" is the last syllable in the series of anapests, and therefore we land on it with extra emphasis. Syntactic parallelism—between "in a forest of" and "in a dawn of"—further reinforces the stress on "dawn" and is especially effective because the one-syllable "dawn" takes the place of the two-syllable "forest" so we're unexpectedly moved to prolong our utterance. We find ourselves taking two beats to say "dawn" in order to preserve the rhythm and as a result, the word becomes more like a cry, more of a sustained opening or yawning. Notice how the lengthening effect is lost in the following: "in a *forest* of frost, in a *dawning* of cornflowers." The second half is dead in comparison. It is sheer repetition, and we no longer experience the surging of our energy, the expansion across a threshold, that overflowing.

As we have seen elsewhere, the palpable manipulation of our energy depends not just on the establishment of patterns but on shifts within them. Then especially do we become aware of the life which infuses the words. Because this life does not always flow in the same groove but quickens and slackens inside us, we are able to feel its edges; we feel our own. If we know when to expect the next emphasis, it no longer bursts upon us; we lose our sense of the threshold, that edge between the cry and its dissipation, between the self and the environment into which it overflows.

The energy that bursts from our mouth and keeps pouring through the one-syllable "dawn," this energy that had been "dulled to a halt under bowlers," is allowed to spread through the remainder of the last line like blood through a coat. "Of cornflowers" provides us with a string of weakly stressed syllables that are essential to this expansion, which is also a dissipation of the contained self. Notice how the epiphany would fall short with a different arrangement: "In a forest of frost, in a dawn of corn." "Corn" here would get much more emphasis, rearing up like a wall to halt the flow, while the three-syllable "cornflowers," with the stress on "corn" itself diminished since it is part of a compound word, allows the energy to flow on and out.

If the epiphany is successful, if we experience a dawning, it is because Plath's poem does not end with the cry itself. The poppies cannot bloom in a vacuum but must open to what surrounds them, just as the blood from a woman's red heart must pass into the stuff of her coat. The raw life, precisely because it encounters so few strong stresses in the end, can flow out as smoothly as light suffusing the sky. Eyes are no longer dulled to a halt, staring. The expansion into cornflower blue is ongoing. In the end, the poet no longer knows who she is. "What am I," she cries, invoking God because her own self has diffused so completely. Because she cries from our own bodies, we feel the life that is "I" moving up and out of ourselves. We ourselves are dying and discovering, from the inside, how death, no longer the opposite of life, loses its definition.

In all of the poems I've discussed, we experience a contest of our life's energy with death. In each case, the rhythm and context are unique, as well as the outcome, but the

driving dynamic is the same. This convergence is not peculiar to my selection but stems from the very form of poetry, its truncated lines. The medium really is the message, for when the lines are deliberately abbreviated, one becomes that much more aware of managing the breath and the life it carries to the end of the line. In general, reading poetry stimulates a heightened sensitivity to our life force from moment to moment and to the forces that either inspire or deplete it. Literal and spiritual death start to converge; in both cases, life, that raw vitality streaming through us, is exhausted, crushed. This elision is one of the reasons poetry is essential to us. As we read, we reconnect with what we know to be true: matters of the spirit are a matter of life and death. We experience this truth viscerally, feeling the spirit die down or flare up in our own bodies.

We are opened to the fullness of our potential, and it is rhythm that performs this opening. In fact, the rhythm of a poem can be compared to a key. A key has a precise sequence of indentations, just as a line of poetry or an entire poem has a precise pattern of stresses. Like a key, the poem has been carefully crafted to slot into the lock that is your body. The rhythm turns in you, sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly. There's an access of emotion, a flash of insight, the release of grief or joy or awe. It is both instant and cumulative. We go to poetry for this opening.

Without you and me, the key is meaningless. Think of the keys you've gathered over the years of changing homes, cars, bikes—there they are, in a bowl or in the corner of a drawer—that miscellaneous cluster. You're reluctant to throw them out even though you no longer know what they're meant to open. There's something intriguing about them. Maybe you pick one up and stare at the indentations, so precise and purposeful and at the same time utterly meaningless since the lock is gone.

What is a poem on the page, unvocalized? Also without meaning, a pattern of black marks. The rhythm of the poem needs our bodies. It needs the life's energy we channel with every breath and heartbeat. It asks us to pump this life into our throats and out through our mouths. Then it can circulate among us, with total disregard for the distinctions that otherwise rule our lives.

[i] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p.153.
[ii] The incremental rise in pitch is beautifully accompanied by the voicing of nascent hope: "*I can no more.* I can / Can something." Look at what follows each "can": "*no more*" is replaced by silence, and then, emerging from the silence, barely articulate is—"something." It's like witnessing a birth.
[iii] Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* (New York: Penguin, 2001), p.20.
[iv] Notice another symmetry around the connecting *and: "*lives this and this gives." Fold the line down the middle and you have a mirror image. Even as the words march forward, they describe a mirroring back which defies time. This is the mirror of art, which succeeds, not by showing us a static reflection, eternally preserved, but by opening the channels between us. We reflect each other backwards and forwards in time; we are inspired, and life's breath moves between us quite literally.
[v] Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Random House, 1990), p.157.
[vi] The dissolution is all the more devastating because it is so unexpected. When the poet starts to repeat the opening lines, tacking them on in a last prepositional phrase, we think the poem has ended and he is simply creating a frame for the vision, closing with a final flourish. It is here, however, that the dream falls apart. The vision that was expressed so confidently in the beginning and that served to launch the poem is voiced now in broken fragments that trail off. Within a few beats, all the life drains out of the poem, and it gives way to silence. The dream's disintegration is all the more heart-breaking because it is implicit, taking place entirely in our own bodies.
[vii] Jane Hirshfield, *Lives of the Heart* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p.14.
[viii] Notice also that the high-pitched *even,* which we've heard twice and half-expect to be repeated a third time before *though* (as in "even though"), instead becomes a ghost of a sound; it is elided in the glide towards nothingness. At first, we think a new clause has begun: "and though it vanish like him" seems like it will be followed by a main clause. This is partly because the rhythmical pattern that has been established from the beginning of the line leads us to give "though" as much emphasis as "now" and "here," the kind of emphasis that it would receive if it were in fact the beginning of a new sentence. The main clause does not arrive, however. Instead, the sentence ends when the last word "him," referring to the friend who was lost, abruptly gives way to silence. We have to quickly reevaluate, regain our metrical footing. With a pang, we make the adjustment and lower the pitch. Having started with too strong a "though," we adjust the volume as rapidly and smoothly as we can in order to fade-out by the end. In the slight awkwardness, we get a visceral experience of the adjustment the poet is making, the dovetailing of her own energy with the rhythm of time.
[ix] Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems, Vol.1* (Boston: Beacon Press,1992), p.48-9.
[x] Syliva Plath, *Ariel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p.20.