

Kay Ryan, 'A Consideration of Poetry'
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I

POETRY IS FUNNY

I have always felt that much of the best poetry is funny. Who can read Hopkins's "The Windhover," for instance, and not feel welling up inside a kind of giddiness indistinguishable from the impulse to laugh? I suppose there has got to be some line where one might say about a poem, "That's *too much* nonsense," but I think it is a line worth tempting. I am sure that there is a giggly aquifer under poetry.

Right now I am thinking of something unlikely that I saw a few days ago, the morning after my town had experienced a major winter flood. In the middle of a residential street, a cast iron manhole cover was dancing in its iron collar, driven up three or four inches by such an excess of underground water that it balanced above the street, tipping and bobbing like a flower, producing an occasional bell-like chime as it touched against the metal ring. This has much to say about poetry.

For I do not want to suggest in any way that this aquifer under poetry is something silly or undangerous; it is great and a causer of every sort of damage. And I do not want to say either that the poem that prompts me to laughter is silly or light; no, it can be as heavy as a manhole cover, but it is forced up. You can see it would take an exquisite set of circumstances to ever get this right.

I would like to offer as an illustration a poem that has always elicited from me one of those involuntary *ha!*s that jump out when you've witnessed a wonderful magic trick. Maybe that *ha!* is the body's natural response to perfection: a perfect trick

(one has been utterly deceived) or a perfect poem (one has been utterly deceived). In any case, here is the poem, Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay:"

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

Where is the laughter? Don't ask yet. For now, please settle for a more generalized sense of amusement, of the high-toned T.S. Eliot variety:

Poetry is a superior amusement: I do not mean an amusement for superior people. I call it an amusement, an amusement *pour distraire les honnêtes gens*, not because that is a true definition, but because if you call it anything else you are likely to call it something still more false. If we think of the nature of amusement, then poetry is not amusing; but if we think of anything else that poetry may seem to be, we are led into far greater difficulties.

I love two things about Eliot's definition. First, the bedrock, indefensible truth of it: that poetry is a superior amusement. Second, Eliot's mess of an attempt to explain what he means. I am reminded by him that though we cannot be exactly precise or complete, that is no reason not to make gigantic statements, for there is great enjoyment in gigantic statements.

But to return to Frost's poem. I have chosen it because it's about as funny as the Farmer's Almanac. Had I chosen "The Windhover," there would be the obvious near gibberish that comes from Hopkins's supersaturated rhyming and his strange bulging liberties with sense, but Frost's poem couldn't be less gibberishy or less apparently nonsensical.

What could be more straightforward? The title is repeated as the last line—as though this little stack of an eight-line poem were a bitter sandwich with a filling compounded of evidence that nothing gold can stay. The gold that precedes green in new plants? Pfft! The way little new leaf clusters on trees look like flowers? Again, pfft! And notice that by the second couplet we have already moved away from the literal "gold" that exists briefly before the "first green" and are beginning our relentless slide into metaphorical gold—in the sense of something precious—with the flower's superiority to the later leaf. Now things speed up geometrically, as "leaf *subsides* to leaf." There is no doubt of Frost's meaning here: the early, the delicate, the golden—all go down, buried under the grosser, heartier, darker, more leathery giant repulsive leaves of maturity and stink.

But that's just in the natural world; how about humankind? Another pfft!: "So Eden sank to grief"—another ring of maturity and stink. Look at how Frost intensifies the sensation of falling (or being overcome) with his choice of verbs: first that unnerving "subsides" among the leaves, now full-out "sank" for man: something is always pulling the plug and draining the gold.

Well, so it goes for nature, and for humanity, but there's still the planet; how about it? Pfft!: "So dawn *goes down* to day." It is odd, this thought of dawn (a kind of gold) defeated by day. We usually say, "day breaks," or "the sun comes up," something to suggest a beginning, an opening, a rising and

spreading. Not here; here day is a corrupter, a violence that drives dawn down. No trick in this poem: nothing gold can stay.

Except wait a minute! Has gold ever been more manifest than in this poem? Nothing makes us treasure something like feeling we're right then losing it. This poem is *all* trick; Frost spreads before us (like a magician's deck) the gold of the first green, the early flower, Eden, and dawn, one after another, snatches them away, and still the gold remains; it's suspended within the poem shivering between being and being palmed.

And that's poetry, this impossible pang, which seen another way is a tremendous bullying job to which we submitted before we knew it. We're done for so fast we can't stop to think, "Who *says* leaf *subsides*—rather than *advances*—to leaf, or that dawn *goes down*—rather than *expands*—to day?" Too late; we're stuck in Frost's little house, shingled-in with the overlapping arguments, nailed down with the tidy, rhymed couplets. It's the strangest thing; the poem is a trap—that is a release. It's a small door to a room full of gold that we can have any time we go through the door, but that we can't take away.

Ha!

At about nine months, a baby starts to laugh when something is suddenly taken away from her. One of a baby's first games is peek-a-boo, where someone repeatedly disappears and reappears (the enjoyment of which is, incidentally, considered a key indicator of later language acquisition skills). Frost's poem could be thought of as a kind of peek-a-boo. The rhythm of its repeated take-aways may go all the way back to our deep early enjoyment of loss, which we register with laughter.

If this strikes you as nonsense, it is. Something nonsensical in the heart of poetry is the very reason why one can't call poetry "useful." Sense is useful; you can apply things that make sense to other circumstances; you can take something away. But nonsense you can only revisit; its satisfactions exist in it, and not in applications. This is why Auden and others can say with such confidence that poetry makes nothing happen. That's the relief of it. And the reason why nothing can substitute for it.

II

GOSKY PATTIES

Now would be a good time to think more about the elements of nonsense when it sails under its own colors. And where better to look for them than in a small nonsense recipe by Edward Lear:

To make Gosky Patties

Take a Pig, three or four years of age, and tie him by the off-hind leg to a post. Place 5 pounds of currants, 3 of sugar, 2 pecks of peas, 18 roast chestnuts, a candle and 6 bushels of turnips, within his reach; if he eats these, constantly provide him with more.

Then procure some cream, some slices of Cheshire cheese, four quires of foolscap paper, and a packet of black pins. Work the whole into a paste, and spread it out to dry on a sheet of clean brown water-proof linen.

When the paste is perfectly dry, but not before, proceed to beat the Pig violently, with the handle of a large broom. If he squeals, beat him again.

Visit the paste and beat the Pig alternately for some days, and ascertain if at the end of that period the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties.

If it does not then, it never will; and in that case the Pig may be let loose, and the whole process may be considered as finished.

Many of the nonsense elements that animate Gosky Patties animate poetry as well:

1 AN INVENTED GOAL. Nobody, previously, wanted Gosky Patties made, just as no one wants a poem made. There is the occasional requirement of poets laureate to memorialize a bridge, but that hardly counts. In general, one does not "find a need and fill it," as Henry Ford urged inventors to do. There is no need which precedes either nonsense or a poem. The creator is entertaining him or herself.

2 COWBIRD TECHNIQUE. Just as the cowbird lays her eggs in another bird's nest, nonsense is built inside the nest of some traditional form. It isn't just shapeless. Here, in Gosky Patties, Lear takes over the recipe. Sometimes it's a botany or an alphabet. Or, on a smaller scale, a nonsense word may be fitted into the nest of perfectly good sense. Take "Gosky Patties" here, or, in "The Owl and the Pussycat," "runcible spoons." Nonsense's habit of taking up residence in something formal creates a feeling of order and propriety. Similarly, the poet occupies some sort of form. This may be the traditional form the poem takes, a sonnet or a villanelle, or simply a rhyme scheme. Or it may be a type of poem—say an epithalamium. Or it may be something else—perhaps a definition, or a list, or a claim to explain something. (I myself like to write "how-something-works" poems.) These things lend order and propriety. Form gives us confidence that we are not wasting our time on shapeless nonsense. (That's a

joke of course; nonsense is *always* shaped. You can distinguish real nonsense from garbage because nonsense is shaped and tense.)

3 EXACTNESS. The nonsense writer is exact about things that only become important because he is exact about them: "Take a pig, *three or four years of age*, and tie him by *the off-hind* leg." There is little slop here. Similarly, the exactness of a poem's distinctions makes us feel that the distinctions matter. We suddenly care, for example, when Marianne Moore describes the shell of the paper nautilus with its "wasp-nest flaws/of white on white." We just feel that something precise is something important.

4 INCONGRUITY. Nonsense revels in working incompatible elements "*into a paste*." For example, "some cream, some slices of Cheshire cheese, four quires of foolscap paper and a packet of black pins." The poet too feels that things which bear no outward relationship to one another must nonetheless be brought into proximity. Think of Marianne Moore's connection of "mussels" to "injured fans." Or simply think of "injured fans"; that's great enough.

5 A SENSE OF IMMINENCE. Lear's instructions contain the faith that something is about to happen: "ascertain if ... the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties." Things are on the verge of coming together—which is more exciting than things having actually come together, of course. A poem, both for the writer and reader, must have this same buildup, as to a sneeze. Nonsense, like poetry, is a kind of game, with rules or requirements. Neither is pointless play like that endless horsies whinnying and prancing thing girls do, or that strange martial arts sequence by which small boys advance through rooms. Play assumes that there is no end. Games (nonsense and poetry) assume there is—if only for the sake of seeing it thwarted.

6 A HIGHLY PERSONAL IDEA OF CAUSE AND EFFECT.

Lear insists that there *is* a relationship between the pig, the pig's placement, the pig's diet, the beating of the pig, and the paste, which may bring about Gosky Patties, although then again it may not. We must accept all this on faith, for we know nothing about such things. We simply know that there *is* cause and effect in nonsense, as we know it in a poem—some interior machinery that must strike and tap and rotate in a particular sequence to get something to happen, bekownnst only to the author. As readers, we like this. It's nice not to be in charge of cause and effect all the time, as we feel we are in "real life."

7 THE READER IS MADE INTO A CO-CONSPIRATOR. This is in contradiction to the previous point, which is not a problem. We are treated both peremptorily and as equals. It is assumed—wrongly, of course—that the reader shares the knowledge of what Gosky Patties would be if they were to become themselves. There is this sense of *shared delicate sensibility* between reader and author about this: the reader must use *judgment* equal to the author's: "Visit the paste and beat the Pig alternately for some days, and ascertain if at the end of that period the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties." You'll know what to do.

And so of course with poetry. We have the flattering feeling in reading a poem that we are somehow creating it. We're sending it where it goes. And in a way this is absolutely true, since the poem is only reconstituted by our act of reading and understanding, the letters otherwise quite helpless on the page. One might note, further, that in both the case of Lear's nonsense and in a poem, the thing that is being asked of us, such as knowing when Gosky Patties are about to form, may be pure hokum. We may understand it as hokum, and remain

exactly as willing to get on with the show. Perhaps more willing, since who wants more practical outcomes.

8 A PERFECT ABSENCE OF SENTIMENT. The pig's feelings do not concern us. The pig is provided endless (primarily) tasty food (except the candle). The pig is at the same time beaten: "Beat the Pig violently, with the handle of a large broom.... Visit the paste and beat the Pig alternately for some days." If the whole doesn't turn into Gosky Patties, "the Pig may be let loose." (We may ask, What might have become of the pig if the Gosky Patties *had* occurred? But we are given no hint ... except in the terrible word, "Patties.") If we had feelings about the pig, this would not be fun for us. I believe that feelings, *attached* feelings that is, are also dead weight in a poem. We mustn't be feeling things for the poor tethered pigs in poems; poems are to liberate our feelings rather than to bind them. If a poem sticks you to it, it has failed. Consider the example of the death of Lesbia's sparrow, as described by Catullus, that "has hopped solitarily/down that dark alleyway of no return." Our sentiments are stuck neither to the bird, nor to Lesbia's grief over its death, but, through Catullus's tone of mock gravity, are connected to something truly grave: that implacable force that "swallows up all beautiful things."

9 INDIFFERENCE TO OUTCOME. There is no product, and this is perfectly satisfactory. "If it does not then [turn into Gosky Patties] it never will; and in that case the Pig may be let loose, and the whole process may be considered as finished." There were expectations, it was important to have expectations, but achieving them doesn't matter a black pin. Isn't this the *burden* of Cavafy's "Ithaca" as much as "Gosky Patties"? Although I hate to bring in the word burden; the burden here is that there is no burden. I love this blessed release from the goal. I love the feeling of deflation, in general, that one enjoys in nonsense. Take this familiar rhyme:

Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?
I've been to London to see the Queen.
Pussycat, Pussycat, what did you there?
I frightened a little mouse under a chair.

I love the small thing that results from great circumstances. The Pussycat goes the long way around to do something she could have done in the next room. When any child repeats this nonsense rhyme, she most likely pays no attention to what she's saying, but some interior overworked overdutiful overintentional windup machinery inside her is relaxed, and that is why this rhyme has lasted without anyone ever worrying about it.

10 A WONDERFUL SENSE OF HELPLESSNESS. We can do certain (very exact) things to make Gosky Patties, but we have no control over whether or not they *work*. This of course is the exact delicate state required of poetry writing. We can urge parts (pins, cheese, etc.) together and then we have to hope that they will do their part, somehow becoming active in an enterprise that is beyond us.

11 THE OBJECT IS DELIGHT. Lear is first delighting himself and then his audience. And I would argue that the poet as well as the nonsense writer is delighted by his work, whatever the apparent extremity he may be describing in a poem. Could Hopkins, for example, have been anything but delighted/released by the phrase "time's eunuch"? Somehow he created an atomic broth (cooked over despair) that twisted these unlikely word partners together into a supremely powerful and economical description of supreme powerlessness and waste. He is, in the moment of calling himself "time's eunuch," released from *being* "time's eunuch." I wouldn't be at all surprised if he actually laughed. I don't think it would be a rueful laugh, either; it would be joy.

III

MODIFY THE GLEE

I can't go on any longer without reference to Emily Dickinson, whose work is so buoyed by nonsense that it fairly pops out of the water. When I was first thinking about this relationship between poetry and nonsense, I opened her collected to find an example in her work, and the book fell to a remarkable demo poem that I hadn't previously known at all. But the truth is, when you're reading closely, almost any poem can be a great demo poem. Almost any random poem by a great poet can become your private key to their enigma machine; although the enigma machine keeps spitting out different daily codes, you will sense the same deep gizmo behind it. For example, everything in Frost has that same ominous something-that-drains-away-the-gold, once you've really seen it at work in "Nothing Gold Can Stay."

Here is Emily Dickinson's "The Morning after Woe":

The Morning after Woe—
 'Tis frequently the Way—
 Surpasses all that rose before—
 For utter Jubilee—

As Nature did not care—
 And piled her Blossoms on—
 And further to parade a Joy
 Her Victim stared upon—

The Birds declaim their Tunes—
 Pronouncing every word
 Like Hammers—Did they know they fell
 Like Litanies of Lead—

On here and there—a creature—
 They'd modify the Glee
 To fit some Crucifixal Clef—
 Some Key of Calvary—

Dickinson is a natural in thinking about the cool, ungummifying effects of nonsense on poetry and the liberation nonsense introduces to the spirit. "The Morning after Woe" is a grief-giddy poem, dazzled with loss and filled with extreme invention.

The first two stanzas establish one of those big contrasts so characteristic of Dickinson's way of constructing a poem, how she rubs rough opposites together so that each side aggravates the other. In this poem the contrast is between the night of Woe (probably someone's death) and the tauntingly joyous morning after.

It's the last two stanzas I want to get to. Emily Dickinson's sensitivity this morning (if we agree to think of her as writing this on the morning after a death) is so extreme that the language is exaggerated and speeded up and *cartoonlike*. The mind is impatient with anything local. It has to find some sort of mover—like the little cast-metal car or boot of the Monopoly board—that can maneuver free of the clingy stuff of the actual unbearable morning. She finds birds. She describes the birds as "Pronouncing every word/Like Hammers." See how fast she's moving here from the aural to the physical. She barely slows down as she passes from the sound of birdsong to the still logically related sound of ringing hammers, to the strange shift in logic whereby she keeps the hammer idea, but moves from their sound to their terrible downward weight. The picture is comically impossible; if you think of the birdsong broadcast out (as of a sprinkler, say) it suddenly condenses, going south fast and hard, falling as "Litanies of

Lead.” The transmutation from the immaterial sound to the aggressively material hammerheads shifts the poem to a cartoon scene where “here and there—a creature” is getting bonked on the head like Krazy Kat.

Now the game changes again. No more weight; back to abstraction. If the birds knew the painful effect their joyous song was having on the sufferers below, “They’d modify the Glee.” And it’s little wonder the word “glee” should come up here; it’s glee that’s cranking up this poem, delivering it now to another kind of invention dear to nonsense writers, the invented word “Crucifixal” nestling against an actual word: the birds would find some other way of singing, some “*Crucifixal* Clef.” With that, Emily Dickinson has invented a whole new musical notation—a new pitch of suffering.

Well, no, not suffering. We are far beyond suffering here. We are in the grip of invention so free that invention invents further, so that the first great trope, nudged by the appetites of rhyme (“Glee”) effortlessly discovers its own restatement: “Some Key of Calvary.” This whole new notational Golgotha at which we arrive is a place discoverable only by language operating on language. The direction of this poem is one of increasing exaggeration and extremity, moving out and out—much as Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay”—to a condition of understanding which only the poem sustains. In Frost, we know a shivering gold; in Dickinson, this painless pitch beyond hearing. I have to think they were both having a wonderful time.

Nonsense exists only in relation to sense. It uses the rules of sense but comes to different conclusions. What is it but nonsense that has taken the grave weight of Frost’s and Dickinson’s poems—the sensible, expressible weight of them: all that is new is soon lost; human grief finds no sympathy in nature—and has left them weightless? Because if these

poems, or a Shakespeare sonnet or a dark sonnet by Donne, had not had their arguments undone somehow, they would indeed crash upon our heads like hammers.

All feelings must go through the chillifier for us to feel them in that aesthetically thrilling way that we do in poetry. Poetry’s feelings are not human feelings; we know the difference. There is some deep exchange of heat for cool that I’m trying to get at, something that I see operating in nonsense and that I believe gives poetry much of its secret irresistibility and staying-power (we are not exhausted by it and must always revisit it). In fact I am sure this mysterious exchange informs all the arts I’m drawn to. Today, again, I’ve found evidence of it in a *New York Times* article about a puppet theater version of Anne Frank’s diary. The puppets are Barbie-sized “pose-able mannequins” that two actresses move around in “a giant cutaway dollhouse, an exact replica of the annex rooms where Anne and her family hid.” This unlikely production, “which sounds at first blush like someone’s idea of a bad joke,” succeeds. It is thought to succeed “because puppets, by their very woodenness, force the audience to fill in movements, expressions and interior lives.”

We swarm to a vacuum. We warm a vacuum. That’s nonsense; vacuums can’t conduct heat. That’s funny.

GLASS SLIPPERS

Despite the hard luck
of the ugly stepsisters,
most people's feet will fit
into glass slippers.
The arch rises, the heel
tapers, the toes align
in descending order
and the whole thing slides
without talcum powder
into the test slipper.
We *can* shape to the
dreams of another; we are
eager to yield. It is a
mutual pleasure to the holder
of the slipper and to the
foot held. It is a singular
moment—tender, improbable,
and as yet unclouded by the
problems that hobble the pair

isn't anywhere, nor does
the bare foot even share
the shape of the other.
When they compare,
the slippered foot makes
the other odder: it looks
like a hoof. So many miracles
don't start far back enough.

IMPERSONAL

The working kabbalist
resists the lure of
the personal. She
suspends interest
in the biblical list
of interdicted shellfish,
say, in order to
read the text another way.
It might seem to some
superficial to convert
letters to numerals
or in general refuse plot
in favor of dots or half circles;
it might easily seem
comical, how she
ignores an obviously
erotic tale except for
every third word,
rising for her like braille
for something vivid
as only the impersonal

2

can be—a crescent
bright as the moon,
a glimpse of a symmetry,
a message so vast
in its passage that
she must be utterly open
to an alien idea of person.

I MARVELED AT HOW
GENERALLY I WAS AIDED

The Autobiography of Charles Darwin

I marvel at how generally
I am aided, how frequently
the availability of help
is demonstrated. I've had
unbridgeable distances collapse
and opposite objects coalesce
enough to think duress itself
may be a prayer. Perhaps not chance,
but need, selects; and desperation
works upon giraffes until their necks
can reach the necessary branch.
If so, help alters; makes seven vertebrae
go farther in the living generation;
help coming to us, not from the fathers,
not to the children.

FORCE

Nothing forced works.
The Gordian knot just worsens
if it's jerked at by a person.
One of the main stations
of the cross is patience.
Another, of course, is impatience.
There is such a thing as
too much tolerance
for unpleasant situations,
a time when the gentle
teasing out of threads
ceases to be pleasing
to a woman born for conquest.
Instead she must assault
the knot or alp or everest
with something sharp
and take upon herself
the moral warp of sudden progress.

from *Say Uncle* (2000)

SAY UNCLE

Every day
you say,
*Just one
more try.*
Then another
irrecoverable
day slips by.
You will
say *ankle*,
you will
say *knuckle*;
why won't
you why
won't you
say *uncle*?

4

STAR BLOCK

There is no such thing
as *star block*.
We do not think of
locking out the light
of other galaxies.
It is light
so rinsed of impurities
(heat, for instance)
that it excites
no antibodies in us.
Yet people are
curiously soluble
in starlight.
Bathed in its
absence of insistence
their substance
loosens willingly,
their bright
designs dissolve.
Not proximity
but distance
burns us with love.

HELP

Imagine *help*
as a syllable,
awkward but utterable.

How would it work
and in which distress?
How would one gauge
the level of duress
at which to pitch
the plea? How bad
would something
have to be?

It's hard,
coming from a planet
where if we needed something
we had it.

THE PIECES THAT FALL TO EARTH


One could
almost wish
they wouldn't;
they are so
far apart,
so random.
One cannot
wait, cannot
abandon waiting.
The three or
four occasions
of their landing
never fade.
Should there
be more, there
will never be
enough to make
a pattern
that can equal
the commanding
way they matter.

THE SILENCE ISLANDS

These are the
Silence Islands,
where what outsiders
would consider
nearly imperceptible
aural amusements
land like coconuts
on the crystalline
hammers and anvils
of the native inhabitants.
Theirs is a refinement
so exquisite that,
for example, to rhyme
anything with *hibiscus*
is interdicted anytime
children or anyone weakened
by sickness is expected.

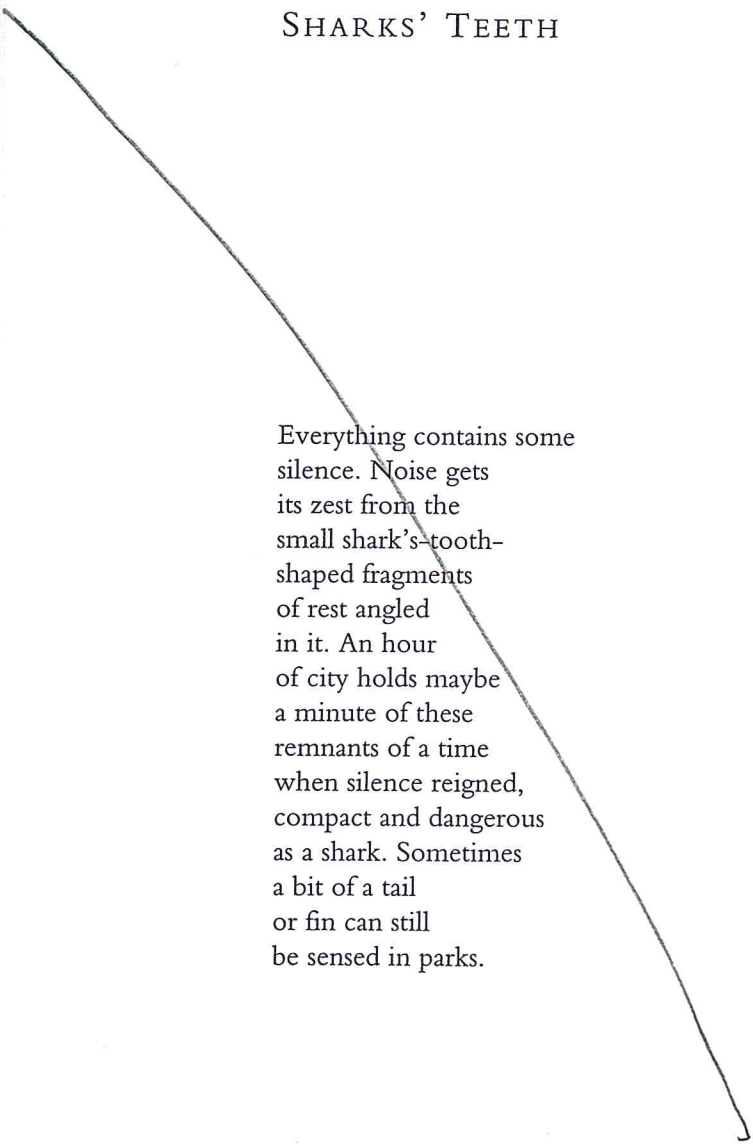
CHESHIRE

It's not the cat,
it's the smile that
lasts, toothy
and ruthless.
It's facts like this
we like to resist—
how our parts
may lack allegiance
to the whole;
how the bonds
may be more casual
than we know; how
much of us
might vanish
and how well
some separate part
might manage.



SHARKS' TEETH

Everything contains some
silence. Noise gets
its zest from the
small shark's-tooth-
shaped fragments
of rest angled
in it. An hour
of city holds maybe
a minute of these
remnants of a time
when silence reigned,
compact and dangerous
as a shark. Sometimes
a bit of a tail
or fin can still
be sensed in parks.



WEAK FORCES

I enjoy an accumulating
faith in weak forces—
a weak faith, of course,
easily shaken, but also
easily regained—in what
starts to drift: all the
slow untrainings of the mind,
the sift left of resolve
sustained too long, the
strange internal shift
by which there's no knowing
if this is the road taken
or untaken. There are soft
affinities, possibly electrical;
lint-like congeries; moonlit
hints; asymmetrical pink
glowy spots that are not
the defeat of something,
I don't think.

LEAST ACTION

Is it vision
or the lack
that brings me
back to the principle
of least action,
by which in one
branch of rabbinical
thought the world
might become the
Kingdom of Peace not
through the tumult
and destruction necessary
for a New Start but
by adjusting little parts
a little bit—turning
a cup a quarter inch
or scooting up a bench.
It imagines an
incremental resurrection,
a radiant body
puzzled out through

tinkering with the fit
of what's available.
As though what is is
right already but
askew. It is tempting
for any person who would
like to love what she
can do.

LATE JUSTICE

Late justice may
be more useless
than none. Some
expungings or
making-rights
or getting-backs
lack the capacity
to correct. The
formerly aggrieved
become exacting
in unattractive
ways: intolerant
of delay, determined
to collect. And shocked—
shocked—at their
new unappeasableness,
who had so long
been so reasonable.

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPING

Seas pleat
winds keen
fogs deepen
ships lean no
doubt, and
the lighthouse
keeper keeps
a light for
those left out.
It is intimate
and remote both
for the keeper
and those afloat.



DOGLEG

Birds' legs
do of course
all dogleg
giving them
that bounce.
But these are
not normal odds
around the house.
Only two of
the dog's legs
dogleg and
two of the cat's.
Fifty-fifty: that's
as bad as it
gets usually,
despite the
fear you feel
when life has
angled brutally.

LEDGE

Birds that love
high trees
and winds
and riding
flailing branches
hate ledges
as grippless
and narrow,
so that a tail
is not just
no advantage
but ridiculous,
mashed vertical
against the wall.
You will have
seen the way
a bird who falls
on skimpy places
lifts into the air
again in seconds—
a gift denied
the rest of us
when our portion
isn't generous.

PENTIMENTI

*"Pentimenti of an earlier position of the arm may be seen."
Frick Museum*

It's not simply
that the top image
wears off or
goes translucent;
things underneath
come back up,
having enjoyed the
advantages of rest.
That's the hardest
part to bear, how
the decided-against
fattens one layer down,
free of the tests
applied to final choices.
In this painting,
for instance, see how
a third arm—
long ago repented
by the artist—
is revealed,

working a flap
into the surface
through which
who knows what
exiled cat or
extra child
might steal.

STILL LIFE WITH LEMONS,
ORANGES AND A ROSE

(1663) Francisco de Zurbarán

Like two
giant's hands,
shade and
gravity collude
to squeeze away
the light and leave
the clay, rued
Zurbarán. Which
means he has to
find a counter way
to paint, unless he
wants his oranges
too to stick, glued
into a lump
like candy. And
now his wife
is sick.

MONK STYLE

In practice, it took 45 minutes to get his stride.

It was hard for Monk to play Monk.

National Public Radio

It may be
that Monk is
always playing
Monk but down
the hall. There are
long corridors
as in a school.
Monk must
approach himself,
join himself
at the bench and
sit awhile.
Then slip his
hands into his
hands Monk
style.

ON THE NATURE OF
UNDERSTANDING

Say you hoped to
tame something
wild and stayed
calm and inched up
day by day. Or even
not tame it but
meet it half way.
Things went along.
You made progress,
understanding
it would be a
lengthy process,
sensing changes
in your hair and
nails. So it's
strange when it
attacks: you thought
you had a deal.

THE MAIN DIFFICULTY OF
WATER WHEELS

was their inseparability from water.

Wikipedia

There are machines of
great generative power
that can only work locally
for one reason or another.
The great fixed wheels
moved by water
cannot be moved
from water. It hurts
to think of anything
wrenched out of where
it works. But not
just for the work.
Those buckets
drenching the river,
all the ornaments
of torque.

ALL YOUR HORSES

Say when rain
cannot make
you more wet
or a certain
thought can't
deepen and yet
you think it again:
you have lost
count. A larger
amount is
no longer a
larger amount.
There has been
a collapse; perhaps
in the night.
Like a rupture
in water (which
can't rupture
of course). All
your horses
broken out with
all your horses.

ALL YOU DID

There doesn't seem
to be a crack. A
higher pin cannot
be set. Nor can
you go back. You
hadn't even known
the face was vertical.
All you did was
walk into a room.
The tipping up
from flat was
gradual, you
must assume.

THE PAW OF A CAT

The first trickle
of water down
a dry ditch stretches
like the paw
of a cat, slightly
tucked at the front,
unambitious
about auguring
wet. It may sink
later but it hasn't
yet.

VENICE

There is a category
of person eased
by constraint, soothed
when things cease.
It is the assault
of abundance
from which they seek
release. The gorgeous
intensities of Venice
would work best
for these people
at a distance:
sitting, for example,
in a departing
train car, feeling the
menace settle.

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