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David Weiss

POETRY'S BAGATELLE

The short poem. An ugly phrase for this serendipitous and mercurially difficult kind of poem. Sonnet, epic, lyric: these are strong names, names with long shadows. And it's true, the briefest poem is perhaps just a type of the lyric—hypertrophied, supra-lyrical—a kind of bonsai lyric, a miniature, not really a species of its own.

And yet, like the smallest units of matter, there is something fundamental about it, as though it contained or was composed solely of the germ of poetry, or were its *sine qua non*. The brief poem's polestar nature has the power to guide us through the drossy deserts that poetry sometimes founders in. Too momentary to have a voice or story, it flashes by, minute in size and duration—a compelling simulacrum of pure being.

This matter of duration, its vulnerability to time, is why the short poem might deserve a categorical moniker of its own; its brevity confers on it an ontological difference. Like a curse or a blessing, like an epitaph or schoolyard chant, it unavoidably pits its eruptive essence against the unyielding igneous of *materia mundi*. The meaning of a very brief poem resides partly in the simple fact of its existence; nothing, its near-nothingness seems to say, is too insubstantial to counterweigh the ticking of the world's prosy necessities.

The short poem is an at-risk form, though not a form, exactly. A condition, rather. Its metaphysics are identical with its conditions—heightened mortality and longing whose physic is to make the momentary momentous. "Western Wind" is a fine instance of this.

Westron Winde, when will thou blow,
The smalle raine downe can raine?
Christ if my love were in my armes,
And I in my bed againe.

If eruptive essence is the primary characteristic of the short poem, its signature is suddenness. It begins, virtually, at the place where mediation gives way to immediacy. It starts (or startles), often, with suddenness or violence (though violent in the way that the word *violent* with its initial stress is), a violence that

makes and holds open a space for the poem; it's strong the way an eggshell is strong.

Louise Bogan manages this suddenness metrically,

At midnight tears
Run into your ears.

by turning, as I hear it, a usually unstressed syllable, “at,” into a weighted one—the first stroke of the midnight hour. The initial spondee, mimetic of time tolled, produces an immediacy that is the immediacy of misery’s insomnia. It is a misery made more despairing by the matter-of-factness of the statement and by the homely comedy of the rhyme and of those liquid-quick syllables, “to your,” that speed up and gather in the word, “ears.” The slowness of time in the first line (further retarded by the caesura before “tears”), set against the speed of misery in the second makes for a pronounced claustrophobia. What could be worse than despair without a story or drama to enoble it? Perhaps, the poet’s own self-deflation and sense of absurdity do. Here we have an absolute condition. Sometimes, it is easy to forget that a poem, at root, is not a being-about something but an instantiation of it, whether it’s seven words long or “Paradise Lost.”

Likewise, this 13th century poem has a similar sort of poetics,

Fowles in the frith,
The fisshes in the flood,
And I mon waxe wood:
Much sorwe I walke with
For beste of boon and blood

Sheer animal joy, at-homeness in the world, juxtaposing the heaviness of human alienation. Alliterative, rhythmical lightness against alliterative and rhythmic heaviness. The force of the poem lies in its stark, sudden contrast, in the gulf between these two conditions of being.

Robert Bly, twenty-five years back, promoted the short poem for its “leaping” qualities which he felt were located in the image, “the deep image.” Most of the examples in his essay-anthology, *The Sea and the Honeycomb*, are translations meant, by example, to continue his work of resuscitating American poetry. Yet poetry in English is full of the “leaping” he was writing

about, only a kind not always rooted in imagery. “Fowles in the frith” is a good example of this.

Who has the short poem been best suited to? To imagists, most programmatically. But, perhaps, it’s suited to dreamers, really, who want to pick the etymological lock on the gates of paradise. Theodore Roethke in his notebooks; Dickinson throughout; Paul Celan. Those whose longings are inseparable from the closing of those gates; they register the iron echoes of that closing; for them, the brief poem is a peek through the keyhole.

And yet it’s a mistake to think of the short poem as mostly metaphysical or otherworldly. Just as often the opposite is true as a look at Catullus’s well-known *Carmina* LXXXVI (“Odi et amo”) will show. To my American ear, Catullus’s Latin breaks into being with a cry, “*Odi*,” and sustains it with a curse, “*et amo*”—the sound, however, reversing the sense, “I hate and I love.” Hate that sounds like love, love that sounds like hate. Some of the force comes from the conjunction “*et*” and, of course, that conjoining is where Catullus’s agony lies. Hate and love, here, are part of a scarcely distinguishable matrix, and this may be why Ezra Pound in his version reverses their order; his “I love and hate” slurs, out loud, into a single word and concept, much as the elision of *Odi* and *et* do in the Latin. The line and a half that remain defend that exclamation of twinned passion simply by reasserting its irreducible actuality.

I love and hate. Why? You may ask but
It beats me. I feel it done to me, and ache.

Pound’s “ache” doesn’t quite sustain the aural violence of feeling in Catullus’s “*excrucior*.” I don’t know what could. The forcefulness of the lines, however, fends off the “pressure from without,” as Stevens called it. The poet’s right to feel and the poem’s right to exist are fending off similar incredulities.

A very short poem is an embattled thing, its right to exist threatened from beginning to end. To exist it must be charged with more existence or being than surrounds it. In this sense it is very much like a ruin or fragment. The *ex nihilo* of the brief poem is mirrored by the annihilated, missing parts of the fragment.

The headwaters of the very short poem lie in the fragment—Sappho, Archilochus, the gnomic utterances of Heraclitus and the other Pre-Socratics; they’re like catching the glimpse of a whale’s curved back cresting the sur-

face. What is lost in substance survives through the glimpse into its retained spaciality

[] that labor []
[] a face to remember in wonder []
[]

[] to sing []
[] to storm wind []
[] and no pain []

—Sappho (Guy Davenport, trans.)

In Sappho, one feels a provocative sufficiency in the incompleteness, a shard as intact as the whole and which suggests its continuation into the surrounding silence like the unseen underwater extensions of the whale's glistening spine. One oscillates between reading the words consecutively and reading them as archipelagoes. In this sense the briefest poem is like the epic; one's a telescope, the other's a microscope, but both predicate a compelling and orienting existence. The very short poem is akin to a minuscule part of the Mandelbrot set, that mathematical iteration whose smallest part contains the whole in microcosm.

Another characteristic of the short poem which the fragment hints at is its just-enoughness. The authenticity of the short poem is often felt in its bare sufficiency, its simplicity. If suddenness is necessary to bring the short poem into being, just-enoughness keeps the poem's contingent vulnerability a part of its implicit subject. The short poem is a kind of allegory of how we pass through the world; suddenness and just-enoughness the binary stars of its dynamics. The language of poetry recreates the conditions of being. Anything more than just-enoughness would be to commit an infidelity.

Sufficiency is about the constant, felt presence of a threshold. How it crosses that threshold initially out of the non-existence of worldly silence into full linguistic presence is what makes a very short poem seem miraculous. "A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving wheel," starts Dickinson with precise dislocation. "Whenas in silks my Julia goes," begins Herrick whose line is all silk and "liquefaction," each iamb with a different tempo, the melipoeia of "sweet disorder." Yet that threshold can only ever be just barely crossed.

Sometimes a poem must cross it repeatedly as in Quasimodo's great poem in which each line moves over the threshold and then falls back.

Each of us is alone at the heart of the earth
pierced by a ray of sunlight:
and suddenly it's evening.

Anatomically, Quasimodo's poem is like a Möbius strip. With each line, one is stricken anew. The light-giving middle line is the most painful of the three, both in its coming and its being withdrawn. One doesn't realize this withdrawal of the light has happened, however, until the third line. "And suddenly it's evening" blots out the second and leaves us back (or is it forward?) at the beginning and the conditions of the beginning. For all one's readings of or circuits around the poem, one never recovers from the second line and its desolate hope in time to be ready for the third.

The short poem takes up almost no space, but its felt spaciousness exerts its fullest powers over the sense of time. Just-enoughness suggests subjection to time; suddenness suggests the alteration of it. It may seem idiosyncratic to offer up Kafka's "The Next Village" as an example of a very short poem, but I think of it as one. Only in Kafka is the marvelous a consequence of intensifying the absolute power of necessity, of removing all the layers of protection.

My grandfather used to say: "Life is astoundingly short. To me, looking back over it, life seems so foreshortened that I scarcely understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that—not to mention accidents—even the span of a normal happy life may fall far short of the time needed for such a journey."

The dizziness and terror this poem produces are the signs of its success in supplanting an incessantly normalizing state of mind with a revelation about time. It is a poem about what's required to make such a naked understanding of time possible or, better put, palpable. The beginning, "Life is astoundingly short," is a platitude, a denatured truth. It is immediately revised into "life seems so foreshortened" which turns the platitude into a metaphor, one which brings "short" to dramatized life. Metaphor then turns into allegory: "for

instance, how a young man can . . .” The allegory concretely and vertiginously miniaturizes a life’s time and makes the initial meaningless platitude into its opposite, an absolute, an inescapable one. It ruthlessly dramatizes the metaphor just as the metaphor breathed life into the nostrils of the platitude. From platitude to the terror of allegory in a single sentence. One is left “astounded”; an adjective which had seemed an empty intensifier at first becomes the literal reality. *Astounded*: from *astonished* meaning struck by lightning.

The very brief poem often aims to be astounding. Its power may derive from its similarity to what’s formative in us: the traumatic (if ecstasy as well as catastrophe can be included in the realm of the traumatic). The short poem, virtually atemporal, replicates the genotype of this experience. The astounding—the shock of it—is crystallized as a moment of recognition. We catch this recognition in the paroxysm of longing in “Western Wind,” “Christ that my love were in my armes / and I in my bed againe.” We catch it in Dickinson in the paradox of analogy through which trauma and exhilaration occur simultaneously,

When Bells stop ringing—Church—begins—
The Positive—of Bells—
When Cogs—stop—that’s Circumference
The Ultimate—of Wheels

The analogy leads to an apprehension of imminence. We can *hear* when bells stop ringing; but “When Cogs—stop”—that’s *not* experienceable, it’s death. Analogy attempts to carry us across the threshold. But the logos of analogy finds its limit at “ultimate” things. The conundrum even lies in the word “ultimate” which means farthest as well as final. The density of dashes, a punctuational figure, dense even for Dickinson, tries to provide what can’t be had—cessation as revelation.

In the short poem, more intensely even than the lyric, the purpose, or consequence, of the shock is to furnish us, as Dickinson put it, with “unfurnished eyes.” Hers is an image of de-domestication or defamiliarizing, by which she means to assert the necessity of coming to experience without the cushioning mediation of received ideas. Perhaps that makes the short poem, sometimes in outcome, sometime in intent, not unlike a short form neither native nor especially congenial to English but which does have its own name, haiku.