

INTRODUCTION

by Jorie Graham

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I

I went to a reading recently—fiction and poetry. It was a warm Indian summer night. The man introducing spoke first about the novelist—her meteoric rise to the top along the fast track. Book awards. Movie deals. The person in question stood up and read wonderful, funny stories. I laughed out loud; listened to the sentences flowing by—their aggressive overtaking of the space. There was no silence, there was the *run run* of story over it all. It sprayed forward over the unsaid until it was all plot. People changed or didn't. You felt at home.

Then our host introduced the poet—one of our very best. The introductory remarks referred to the “dark times poetry is in.” People resettled in their chairs. The man in question stood up to read, looked out at us over his glasses, cleared his throat. He tried to say something funny to put us at our ease, but we weren't. What was he going to do? Where did the wonderful warm sensation of *story* go? A poem began. Not a little story told in musical rhythms, but a poem. Oh, it had story. And it was music. But it seemed to begin out of nowhere. And it moved irrationally—by the standards the fiction had set. It leapt. It went too suddenly to the heart of the matter. Why was I feeling so uneasy? I didn't feel myself thinking anymore. I wasn't feeling lifted or entertained. My hands felt heavy. My body felt heavy. The air into which language had been pouring for almost an hour felt heavy.

Then I started to hear it: the silence; the words chipping into the silence. It felt loud. Every word stood out. No longer the rush of

sentences free and unresisted into the air. Now it was words cutting into an element that was crushing in its power and weight. I thought of Sartre's notion that prose writers tame language and that it's up to poetry to set it free again. I thought of the violence from within summoned up to counter the violence from without. I looked at the man and listened. His words cut into the unsaid and made me hear it: its depth and scope; its indifference, beauty, intractability.

② Listening, I became aware of how much each poem resisted the very desires that the fiction, previously, had satisfied. Every word was clear, yes, every image clear—but the motion of the poem as a whole resisted my impulse to resolve it into "sense" of a rational kind. Listening to the poem, I could feel my irritable reaching after fact, my desire for resolution, graspable meaning, ownership. I wanted to narrow it. I wanted to make it into a shorter version of the other experience, the story. It resisted. It compelled me to let go. The frontal, grasping motion frustrated, my intuition was forced awake. I felt myself having to "listen" with other parts of my sensibility, felt my mind being forced back down into the soil of my senses. And I saw that it was the resistance of the poem—its occlusion, or difficulty—that was healing me, forcing me to privilege my heart, my intuition—parts of my sensibility infrequently called upon in my everyday experience in the marketplace of things and ideas. I found myself feeling, as the poem ended, that some crucial muscle that might have otherwise atrophied from lack of use had been exercised. Something part body, part spirit. Something the species should never evolve away from. Something I shouldn't be living without. *The poem must resist the intelligence / almost successfully*, whispered Wallace Stevens.

II

* Yet surely the most frequent accusation leveled against contemporary poetry is its difficulty or inaccessibility. It is accused of speaking only to itself, or becoming an irrelevant and elitist art form with a dwindling audience. And indeed, contemporary poetry's real or apparent difficulty has made it seem somewhat like an intransigent outsider—or perhaps a high-minded purist—in the

vast hungry field of American art. And this, in turn, affects how many poets conceive of their enterprise. For how often can we hear that "no one reads it," or that "no one understands it," without experiencing a failure of confidence, however inchoate? And how easily that failure of confidence converts to self-hatred, causing some of us to write articles about the death of poetry, or the horrors of creative writing programs, and others to turn on our own poems, prescribing rules, announcing remedies, saying narrative is all there is or should be, saying *self* should be ostracized, saying free verse is fatal, or all rhyme and meter reactionary, talking about elitism, about how poetry has failed to communicate to the common reader, until finally we cease to trust the power of poetry. We "accept the limitations" of the medium. We start believing that it is essentially anachronistic. We become anecdotal. We want to entertain. We believe we should "communicate" . . .

* One problem might stem from the fact that poetry implicitly undertakes a critique of materialist values. It rests on the assumption that material values need to be seen through—or at least complicated sufficiently—in earnest or truer, or more resonant, more supple values. No doubt many of the attacks against poetry come from those of us who, uncomfortable with our slippery marriage to American materialism and its astounding arrogant excess, wish, however unconsciously, that poetry would avert its scrutiny. Or from those of us who turned to poetry at a more idealistic time in our lives and who now rage against it as we lose the capacity for idealism—dreamers turned insomniacs, accusing the dream of having failed them.

* But, these basic issues aside, the difficulty of poetry, even for its most sympathetic readers, is a real one. Or rather it is both real and imagined. Much of it dissipates as one opens up to the experience of poetry. To comprehend poetry one must, after all, practice by reading it. As to "see" modern dance, one must at least know its vocabulary, its texture, what the choreographer chose *not* to do. As to understand good carpentry one must be able to grasp what the maker's options were, what the tradition is, what the nature of wood is, what the structural necessities were: what is underpinning, what flourish and passion, what *decor*. Of course, with wood-working or ballet, one can still enjoy what one barely grasps. And

such pleasure would also be possible with poetry if intimidation didn't set in: intimidation created by its apparently close relation to the normal language of discourse; fear that one is missing the point or, worse, that one is stupid, blind.

Poetry can also be difficult, though, because much of it attempts to render aspects of experience that occur outside the provinces of logic and reason, outside the realm of narrative realism. The ways in which dreams proceed, or magic, or mystical vision, or memory, are often models for poetry's methods: what we remember upon waking, what we remember at birth—all the brilliant irrational in the human sensibility. Poetry describes, enacts, is compelled by those moments of supreme passion, insight or knowledge that are physical yet intuitive, that render us whole, inspired. Among verbal events—which by their nature move horizontally, through time, along the lines of cause and effect—poetry tends to leap, to try to move more vertically: astonishment, rapture, vertigo—the seduction of the infinite and the abyss—what so much of it is after. “Ever more ancient and naked states” (Octavio Paz).

In fact, one could argue that poetry's difficulty for some readers stems from the very source of its incredible power: the merging of its irrational procedures with the rational nature of language. So that one mistake we often make is as simple as expecting poetry to be apprehended by the same reading methods and habits that “grasp” prose. While instead—mere practice and exposure to the art form aside—it's probably more a matter of avoiding the interference of fear in reading; more a matter of reading with one's most natural instincts and senses.

That's what is perhaps wrongheaded about the arguments often mounted today against poetry's alleged lack of accessibility to “ordinary” Americans. Aren't such accusations of elitism rather condescending to the people on whose behalf they are made? As if the non-literary men and women of America somehow didn't dream? As if associational logic were restricted to the educated? As if a portion of American readers were only able to read poems of narrative simplicity, having somehow—because of their work experience or background—lost all intuition and sensory intelligence? Isn't this line of thinking, in effect, another symptom of the distrust

many of us feel regarding the very core of poetry, its inherent way of proceeding, its nature? I think of Umberto Eco in a recent radio interview: How do you explain that your books, so difficult, sell in the hundreds of thousands of copies in America? “Well,” he replied, as if surprised by the question, “in my experience, people, ordinary people, like difficulty. They are tired of being treated like they can't get it. They want it. I give them what they want.”

There is, however, another difficulty connected to the poetry of this historical (or posthistorical?) moment. It might be best understood as the result of poetry's confrontation with certain aspects of the culture—particularly its distrust of speech and of what is perceived as the terminal “slowness” of speech in relation to the speedier verbal image as a medium for sales (of objects, people, ideas, of verisimilitude, of desire).

As visual imagery largely supplants speech as the language of choice for most cultural transactions (since most constitute a form of sales), it brings with it, in its shadow, new (fin-de-siècle?) attitudes for poets to contend with: a pervasive distrust of *thinking* people; a distrust of rhetorical power (of articulate speech in general); a disrespect for all nonlucrative activities; a general impatience with depth, and a shortened attention span.

Sound bites, shortcuts, clips, trailers, minimalist fragmented “dialogue,” the Reagan-era one-liner on the way to the helicopter: the speed with which an idea must be “put across” is said to be determined not just by monetary considerations, but by the speeded-up, almost decimated attention span of the bored, overstimulated viewer who must be caught, bought, on the wing, as he or she is clicking past, “grazing” the channels, wanting to be stopped, but only momentarily.

As a collective emotion this distrust of language is, of course, one that each of us is free to subvert, override. But precisely because it is a collective emotion, it is one that much poetry inevitably incorporates, explores or enacts as not only an anxiety concerning its very reason to exist, but also as an anxiety concerning the nature and function of language, its capacity for seizing and transmitting . . . truth? Even that word seems tinged with regret, nostalgia, in such an atmosphere.

For isn't the essential characteristic of speech, and the particular virtue of its slowness, that it permits the whole fabric to be *received* by a listener—idea, emotion, fact, product, plot detail, motive—the listener having enough time to make up his or her mind?

Isn't to describe, to articulate an argument, to use language at the speed where the complexity and sonorousness of syntax and cadence reach the listener, to use it so that the free will of the listener is addressed—free will it is the very purpose of salesmanship to bypass? The genius of syntax consists in its permitting paradoxical, "unsolvable" ideas to be *explored*, not merely nailed down, stored, and owned; in its permitting the soul-forging pleasures of thinking to prevail over the acquisition of information called knowing.

That this is an essential aspect of the activity of poetry as we know it seems obvious, yet in an atmosphere in which the very notion that a reader might grasp or "receive" the poem written by the writer is questioned, on the one hand, and in which the much of the audience wants to be zapped, fast, as it clicks down the dial on the other, the whole enterprise becomes, in many cases, fraught with anxiety.

And though these concerns have been present, to some extent, in the poetry of the English language for some time, it is the vehemence (and in some instances the desperation) with which they creep into the formal, aesthetic and thematic concerns of our poems (and into the very writing process)—the incredible tension between the desire to return to "slower" uses of language and the historical values they still transmit, and an equally strong desire to rebel against the very nature of language—its slowness, its referentiality—that most vividly characterizes American poetry as I encountered it in 1989.

III

Sometimes the distrust of language results in the refusal to use words denotatively. There are "language-events," for example, that imply a need to rely on other media in order to restore to language the depth or wholeness it seems to lack. As they can't be reproduced in an anthology such as this one, some examples might be of use.

A recent work by Leslie Scalapino, for example, whose "instructions" read: "done by four or five people as movements as if the words were music." Or the language-work done for the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company by a number of poets which is used as "music": a long liquid verbal text stretched out electronically, sometimes shattered, to make it suitable as a backdrop to dance. The newest "works" by Jenny Holzer consist of phrases and words (and it seems clear that almost any words will do) carved into granite, projected in neon.

Looking at other temperaments—and, more specifically, at some of the work represented in this anthology—we find a renewed fascination with very high diction, surfaces that call attention to themselves as unnatural in relation to ordinary human speech. This highly self-conscious use of language points fiercely to our distrust of the natural, the spoken—as if to insist that for us, now, the beautiful (the true?) is not in nature but in artifice. It points as well, to the problem of subjectivity and the active struggle with Romantic and Modernist notions of *reality* and the *self* that so many of these poems enact.

Our so-called Language Poets take a different tack. In their work we often see the dismantling of articulate speech in an effort to recover a *prior* version of self, a cleaner one, free of cultural association—a language free of its user! In this volume numerous poems work toward the forcible undoing of the sentence, but they also explore for us the notion of *right choice* in diction, and the whole relationship of choice of word to *choice* in its broadest sense. In some of the more radical work, the word is privileged over the phrase and the sentence. One can see this as a corrective measure against the political and cultural excesses the sentence is a metaphor for; one can see it, too, as an attempt to redefine the nature of sense itself. In fact in such poems meaning itself is often questioned as a cultural value, and chance and the inner laws of language are asked to reign as tutelary deities. In them, too, the silence is argued with most excitingly: a silence at times loud and deeply empowered, at times violently reduced to mere white space on a page.

Then there are those who fall, perhaps, under the heading of narrative poets. In them we see a passionate determination to reclaim the power of articulate speech via its more "traditional" meth-

ods: plot, cause and effect, the spun web of storytelling. These poems often refuse the swift association, deep economy, leaping of mind, and structural use of analogy which many of the "pure" lyric poets favor. It is as if these more strictly lyric methods were seen as being, in some manner, partially responsible for the breakdown of speech's powers: the holes they allow in the fabric of telling seen as having finally gotten too big, the net no longer able to hold the mystery, the swift prey.

The ambition to reclaim ground for eloquence and rhetoric is perhaps even more starkly visible in the sharp, urgent poems of sheer argument—the lyric-essay, which seems to be flourishing, stark offspring of the more classic meditation, also in vogue.

One important formal development is the recent popularity of prose poems. We might think of them as, perhaps, the frontal approach; they are certainly—in many cases—the most extreme in their attempt to use the strategies of "normal" articulate speech to reach the reader. Their number, variety and sheer quality (and the extraordinarily different uses to which the form is put) caused me to think of this volume as, in part, a subterranean exploration of the form.

Yet another battle fought over the power and nature of articulate speech predates our current anxieties. For when we get to the work of some of our so-called minimalists, we are faced with a more historical (and American) distrust of articulateness: "inarticulateness" as stoicism, perhaps—the terseness we recognize in our Western folk heroes—as if to speak a full sentence, to yield to easeful speech, were a sensual activity one cannot, or should not, afford to indulge.

This is verbal reticence of a vastly different order from that caused by the fear or distrust described above. Rather, it is better seen as a metaphysical condition in which language is fully mastered but withheld. It dovetails, in some instances, with the symbolist sense of the alchemical power of each word, or Zen notions of restraint, or the objectivist desire to honor the resistance of the material world and attempt a suppression of ego—(George Oppen: "It is necessary to be afraid of words, it is necessary to be afraid of each word, every word").

In most instances this distrust of eloquence is sinewed by the

desire for sincerity. The longing for the "pure clear word," to use James Wright's phrase, expresses a deeply-held American belief that the simpler the utterance—the closer to the bone of the feeling—the better the chance of getting the *self* through uncontaminated by language: speech a vehicle that can "betray" honest feeling when it becomes too ornate or "articulate"; the self imagined as existing in some form prior to speech, inside, forced to translate itself out (a passage that can betray the "pure" self, can misshape, lie).

If we look at the Puritan conviction (still alive as a "law" among the Amish) that to use more words than required—more than the absolute minimum to get the thing said—is sinful, we can feel the dimensions of this belief. The Amish to this day can be shunned for such garrulousness—it being relegated to the level of promiscuity.

There is, however, another version of selfhood: Elizabethan, dramatic, created in performance, created precisely by acts of speech. It involves a whole other set of assumptions about the location and nature of selfhood—assumptions both more "primitive" (as in many native ritualistic dramatic ceremonies by which the self is "invented" or "invoked") and more "sophisticated" (the Language Poets, for example, share the notion of a constructed self—although they tend to regard it with suspicion).

At any rate the notion of a *mask* or mythic persona created by language competes with the tradition of "honest" speech on American soil, and there are many poets (this reader would argue that it is all the significant ones) who attempt to merge the two impulses: in most instances they marry, apparently happily, and the struggle goes underground; in some the tension between the two is carried out on the surface of the poem.

For others, minimalism of phrasing—or more precisely, decimated, sputtered phrasing—is not a question of reticence or stoicism. Rather, it is a mixture of inward abbreviation and the kind of speediness imposed on the language of someone who wishes to be heard (or to hear himself) above an assembly line. Phrasing fragmented as much by competition with the machine (whose purpose it is to silence the spirit?) as by mental exhaustion. There is an element in it, too, of the coding covert political activity requires.

In yet others, the fragmentation of phrasing would seem to be

as an active participant. I do not, by any means, intend that the reader become what is sometimes called the "co-creator" of the text. Rather, what I admire in these poems is the controlled way each poet has found to coax the reader into a new—shall we say *awakened?*—state without handing over the reins of the poem either to pure *chance* or to that embodiment of chance, the bored, barely willing, barely attentive, overstimulated (i.e., shut down) reader.

Indeed, one could argue that the poems in this collection that do not let us become comfortable with plot, point of view, setting, eventually force us to read in a different way; force us to let music take the place of narrative flow; force us to let our senses do some of the work we would "normally" be letting our conscious minds do. We discover, in the process, that we can trust a deeper current of our sensibility, something other than the lust-for-forwardness, with all its attendant desires for closure, shapeliness, and the sense that we are *headed somewhere* and that we are in the *hands of something*. We are forced to suspend these desires, to let the longing stay alive unsatisfied; forced to accord power to a portion of ourselves and a portion of the world we normally deem powerless or feminine or "merely" intuitive.

And then, lastly, throughout this volume, you'll find the undiminished, or unintimidated, eloquence of our classical believers—perhaps only apparently unperturbed by the desperate fray; poets in whom the repose of counted language is perhaps the highest form, today, of bravery.

IV

What is especially interesting about poetry's current situation is that it is practically alone, among the art forms being practiced, in still viewing the artist as essentially an outsider to the marketplace. And perhaps there is reason to celebrate that this Romantic-Modernist vision is, for the most part, given the economic limits of the life of the poet, still a reality. It's ultimately due to the very nature of the enterprise. "Where," said the teacher, ripping the page containing Keats' poem out of the book, crumpling it up and tossing

it into the waste can across the room, "where is the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* now?" . . .

The particular advantage of this position for the poet is that it makes poetry's task as a moral and spiritual undertaking more starkly clear than ever. And the renewed fascination—on all sides of the aesthetic spectrum—with formal techniques that foreground process, indicates the rediscovery, by yet another generation of poets, of the ways in which the act of the poem is identical with a spiritual questing. A rediscovery of the ways in which the honing of one's tools for *sight*—formal techniques—is the honing of one's tools for *insight*.

After all, great poems are language acts of amazing precision, acts in which precision is coincident with humility. The human sensibility, via language, moves to its object of scrutiny and gives way to it, letting it stain the language. The imagination goes out as far as it can into the thing and comes back imprinted. One of the great mysteries in poetry centers on the way in which the crisp and honest description of the outer world schools one for the encounter with one's inner reality. To see clearly is to think clearly: a commonplace. To see clearly and think clearly is to feel deeply: a mystery.

The poetry that fails the genius of its medium today is the poetry of mere self. It embarrasses all of us. The voice in it not large but inflated. A voice that expands not to the size of a soul (capable of being both personal and communal, both private and historical) but to the size of an ego. What I find most consistently moving about the act of a true poem is the way it puts the self at genuine risk. The kind of risk Robert Frost refers to when he describes the "ideals of form" as "where all our ingenuity is lavished on getting into danger legitimately so that we may be genuinely rescued."

To place oneself at genuine risk, that the salvation effected be genuine (i.e., of use to us), the poet must move to encounter an other, not more versions of the self. An other: God, nature, a beloved, an Idea, Abstract form, Language itself as a field, Chance, Death, Consciousness, what exists in the silence. Something not invented by the writer. Something the writer risks being defeated—or silenced—by. A poem is true if it can effect that encounter. All matters of style, form, and technique refer to that end.

That is why precision is so crucial: on it depends the nature of the encounter; on it depends whether the poet achieves or fails at the discovery. That is what Pound means, I believe, by his famous formula describing technique as a measure of the poet's sincerity. How sincere are we about wanting to go where the act of a poem might take us? Do we not often, instead, take the poem merely where *we* want to go—protecting ourselves. . . . In the end how sincere we truly are, how desperate and committed we are, is revealed by how hard we are on ourselves, how sharp we are willing to make our instruments.

So that, for this reader of the poetry of 1989, precision remained the watershed criterion. A poem, however difficult in its overall strategy, needs to be, step by step, precise, accurate, clear. Where the senses are used in language, the image needs to be seized, not approximated. Where the mind moves abstractly in language to grasp, outline, blurt into an idea, it does so with precision. Vague thinking, blurry emotion, approximate sensation—and their slippery cousins, sentimental, “poetic” sensation—are not, I hope, what we mean by difficulty in poetry. They are failures of encounter, failures of perception, failures of character even. Difficulty is a powerful tool and not in any way synonymous with imprecision, laziness, lack of descriptive power.

The bedrock role of poetry, ultimately, is to restore, for each generation anew, the mind to its word and the words to their world via accurate usage. Every generation of poets has that task, and it must—each time—do it essentially from scratch. Each image achieved, each moment of description where the *other* is seized, where it stains the language, undertakes that same vast metaphysical work: to restore the human word to the immortal thing; to insure that the relationship is, however momentarily, viable and true. Free of decor. Free of usury, exaggeration. To make the words channels between mind and world. To make them full again.

Each poem is, in the end, an act of the mind that tries—via precision of seeing, feeling, and thinking—to clean the language of its current lies, to make it capable of connecting us to the world, to the there, to insure that there be a there there. For it is when we convince ourselves that it is not really wholly there—the world, the text, the author's text, the intention—that we are free, by the

mere blinking of a deconstructing eye, to permit its destruction. It can't be *taken* from us if it's not there. It's up to language to make sure that it *is* there, and so much there, that its loss would not be an act of interpretation—a sleight of hand—but an act of murder.

V

As for what is *American* about these poems. . . . There is what I consider a totally American moment at the end of the movie *A Life Lived* about the painter Philip Guston. He sits before what had been a very large, very complex, completed painting. We had been “watching” him paint it, on and off, throughout the movie. Now it has been totally whitewashed and erased. It had been very strong. *What happened*, the interviewer asks. Well, the artist replies, yes, it did get done, and it was, yes, a good one. But it was too good. It was a *painting painting*, he says. And besides, it happened too fast. I didn't have the experience, he says. I don't want the painting without the experience. It happened too fast.

Much of the poetry I read this year was trying both to *happen fast* and *have the experience*. That is the signature ambition of our current poetry, what is so brave in it, so American.

Another way to say this is that our poems promote *voice*—and personality—but not at the expense of form and not at the expense of imagery. They jazz the surface up—they let themselves be seen through—they ham it up, they are totally, tragically aware of themselves as surfaces, as media events, as punctured through with temporality (the minutes click by loudly in them as if paid for at advertiser's rates), and yet they still insist on the deep song, the undertow, the classical griefs and celebrations. They try to be both deeply historical and utterly ahistorical—breakdancing on the surface and breaking the flow of anything that would thicken into *history*. They are, in other words, both in history and somehow beyond it: the American moment: still in the story we've told ourselves of ourselves, still wanting that weight to slow us down, that sense of manifest destiny, of progress—and yet tragically outside it, playing the part out, crackling on the surface in that dizzy, irreverent self-knowledge that passes today for freedom. A more

tragic predicament is hard to imagine. That we are making art out of such being-seen-through; that we—the estuary through which the past is suddenly thrust into the vast cold currents of total self-consciousness, capitalism's furthestmost chapter—are making song out of such a predicament is amazing and very moving to this witness.

VI

Finally, although the diversity of the work is staggering, and reminds one of how truly huge this nation is—how many different kinds of experience it affords us by its very expanse and variety of landscape—I still found it impossible to generalize about origins when it came to the strong work. Urban poetry did not own certain poetic procedures. The most “radical” poems in the anthology come from poets in Arizona, Washington, North Carolina, New York City, Massachusetts, Iowa, California—from graduates of writing programs, from graduates of factories, offices, happy childhoods, miserable childhoods. The metrical verse is equally widely distributed as to geographic origin and personal background. I found no voice exclusively attached to region, race, gender, class; no concerns limited by region, race, gender, and class. And I found very few “pure” examples of one or another aesthetic camp—finding many more poems to be incredibly fruitful and moving hybrids of styles, techniques and aesthetic premises. I wouldn't like to call on the notion of postmodern style to explain the kind of hybridization I found, because the tone in which these marriages of technique are undertaken is rarely ironic. Instead it seems to me that the very seriousness of the stylistic searching going on here—and the degree to which the poems increasingly enact a deep spiritual longing—speaks to a genuine revival of poetic ambition. The poetic map of the country reads far less like a set of rival encampments, as the various polemicists would have us believe, and far more like a wonderfully varied and passionate family argument, in which much cross-pollination is going on. Excitement and the spirit of birthing far override the contentious spirit of analysis and prescription.

explicitly, some implicitly. They all speak about the condition of the Republic. As for the matter of overt communication—as in the frequently asked question, *Who is the audience for these poems?*—the poet speaks from the condition of his time. He doesn't address his fellows, he speaks in their behalf. He is their voice. This is how we sound. Whether or not we listen to ourselves is less important than whether we raise our voice to speak, whether we raise it with courage, skill and integrity, or whether we flounder in inaccuracy. These poets are hard on themselves, their skill is immense, they believe in hard work (that it will produce truth), and they speak for us.