Ten Windows

How Great Poems Transform the World

Jane Hirshfield

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hirshfield, Jane, 1953–
[Essays. Selections]
Ten windows : how great poems transform the world / Jane Hirshfield.
—First edition.
pages; cm
"This is a Borzoi book."
ISBN 978-0-385-35105-8 (hardcover)— ISBN 978-0-345-80684-0 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-385-35106-5 (ebook)
I. Title.
PS3558.I694A6 2015
814′.54—dc23   2014025430

Cover image: St. Augustine in His Study *(detail) by Vittore Carpaccio.*
S. Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice, Italy. Scala / Art Resource, N.Y.
Cover design by Carol Devine Carson

v3.1_r2

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PREFACE

Good art is a truing of vision, in the way a saw is trued in the saw shop, to cut more cleanly. It is also a changing of vision. Entering a good poem, a person feels, tastes, hears, thinks, and sees in altered ways. Why ask art into a life at all, if not to be transformed and enlarged by its presence and mysterious means? Some hunger for *more* is in us—more range, more depth, more feeling; more associative freedom, more beauty. More perplexity and more friction of interest. More prismatic grief and unstunted delight, more longing, more darkness. More saturation and permeability in knowing our own existence as also the existence of others. More capacity to be astonished. Art adds to the sum of the lives we would have, were it possible to live without it. And by changing selves, one by one, art changes also the outer world that selves create and share.

This book continues the investigation begun in an earlier volume, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. The questions pursued by poems themselves are speckled, partial, and infinite. These books, though, pursue as well a single question: How do poems—how does art—work? Under that question, inevitably, is another: How do we? Inside the intricate clockworks of language and music, event and life, what allows and invites us to feel and know as we do, and then increase our feeling and knowing? Such a question cannot be answered. "We" are different, from one another and, moment by moment, from even ourselves. "Art," too, is a word deceptively single of surface. Still, following this question for thirty years has given me pleasure, and some sense of approaching more nearly a destination whose center cannot ever be mapped or reached.

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CHAPTER ONE

Kingfishers Catching Fire: Looking with Poetry's Eyes

A mysterious quickening inhabits the depths of any good poem—protean, elusive, alive in its own right. The word "creative" shares its etymology with the word "creature," and carries a similar sense of breathing aliveness, of an active, fine-grained, and multicellular making. What is creative is rooted in growth and rising, in the bringing into existence of new and autonomous being. We feel something stir, shiver, swim its way into the world when a good poem opens its eyes. Poetry's work is not simply the recording of inner or outer perception; it makes by words and music new possibilities of perceiving. Distinctive realms appear to us when we look and hear by poem-light. And these realms clearly are needed—there is no human culture that does not have its songs and poems.

One way we praise a work of art is to say it has "vision," and good poetry and good seeing go together almost always. Yet before art's more ground-level seeing can liberate itself into that other vision we speak of, a transfiguration is needed. The eyes and ears must learn to abandon the habits of useful serving and take up instead a participatory delight in their own ends. A work of art is not a piece of fruit lifted from a tree branch: it is a ripening collaboration of artist, receiver, and world.

A painter enacts perception's pleasure through brushstroke and color. For a poet, an equally material eros transforms the engagement with words. Consider, for example, the enkindled and sensuous seeing-through-language, hearing-

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through-language, to be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins. Even in prose, the voracious attention Hopkins gave to the shapes and forms of existence inhabits words precisely honed, originally tuned, and infused with the joy of category-leaping. Here is a journal entry from February 24, 1873:

> In the snow[,] flat-topped hillocks and shoulders outlined with wavy edges, ridge below ridge, very like the grain of wood in line and in projection like relief maps. These the wind makes I think and of course drifts, which are in fact snow waves. The sharp nape of a drift is sometimes broken by slant flutes or channels. I think this must be when the wind after shaping the drift first has changed and cast waves in the body of the wave itself. All the world is full of inscape and chance left free to act falls into an order as well as purpose: looking out of my window I caught it in the random clods and broken heaps of snow made by the cast of a broom. The same of the path trenched by footsteps in ankledeep snow across the fields leading to Hodder wood through which we went to see the river.

Intimate, physically engaged, this account awakens both senses and psyche. Consider "the sharp nape of a drift"—how the word choice surprises by tenderness, as if Hopkins had reached out to touch the snow and found it humanly warm. In the equally physical "trenched by footsteps," we not only see but hear the snow re-made by our human passage through it. Flutes, shoulders, wood grain, maps, waves—each bounds with the exhilaration of seeing made monarch, not slave.

And more: the snow is further inquired of, investigated for what ideas it might yield. Hopkins's mid-passage insight is startlingly contemporary. "Chance left free to act falls into an order as well as purpose" is a sentence with which current complexity theorists might well agree. Then, having struck this spark of abstraction from his snow-chilled flint, Hopkins's thoughts do what the thoughts of poets do: return

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to the realm of things, for test and confirmation. He comes back to what the snow looks like, broom-swept from the front door: an image that visually rhymes with, and so verifies, the idea he has found in the natural realm. The passage, like many other descriptive entries in Hopkins's journals, could only have been written by a person in love with close observation, one who sees with the whole body, and also with the senses of emotion and mind.

But then, there is this:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

And this:

I caught this morning morning's minion,
kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air …

And this:

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous,… stupendous
Evening strains to be time's vast, | womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height
Waste; her earliest stars, earlstars, | stars principal, overbend us,
Fire-featuring heaven.

The gap between the voice of Hopkins's journal and the voice of his poems isn't simply the difference between rough diary-jotting and finished work, or the difference between prose and verse. It is the difference between a poet's seeing and *poetry*'s seeing, and hearing, speech. One may help make

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the other possible, but they are not the same, in kind or intention—and the distinction exists because poetry itself, when allowed to, becomes within us a playable organ of perception, sounding out its own forms of knowledge and forms of discovery. Poems do not simply express. They make, they find, they sound (in both meanings of that word) things undiscoverable by other means. "Earlstars," "daylight's dauphin," even the seemingly simple description of "roundy wells"—each is a note newly made, on a keyboard expanded to hold its presence.

Hopkins's work is one of the great exemplars we have of poetry's expansion of accurate knowing. The idiosyncratic marriage of vision and ear in his poems unlocked the forms of English verse; a perception emanating from the passion for words sprung fully to music lies somewhere close to the marrow of his genius. Hopkins's desire for a wellspring seeing peeled his mind, tongue, and ear free of convention. The resulting permeability to whatever comes forward, however "counter" or strange, sustains the fierce aliveness found in even the darkest of his works. Seeing through poetry's eyes, hearing through poetry's ears, we come to know ourselves less tempered, more free than we were, and connected to—emancipated into, if you will—a larger world.

> *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.*

The quiet, declarative "I can" of Hopkins's "Carrion Comfort" carries a promise: the commitment to full experience is an infusion and elixir that works against whatever diminishes the soul, even despair. Oxygen is available; so long as the poet is speaking, it can be breathed.

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There are ways of sensing beyond our familiar litany of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Fish have an organ, the lateral line, running the length of the body, with which they sense not only vibrations in the water but also depth, direction, and temperature. Carrier pigeons use vision to navigate and yet, set free hooded, will still find their way home, following the currents of the earth's magnetic fields. A bean plant has no nervous system, no eyes or fingertips, yet turns, hour by hour, toward the sun; a clematis ignored for a decade will—at last given a spring trellis to climb—shoot up five feet in three weeks.

In the last instants of a shark's approach to its prey, it closes its inner eyelids for self-protection, and most of its other senses shut down as well. Only one remains active: a bioelectrical sensory mechanism in its jaw, a guidance system uniquely made for striking. The poet in the heat of writing is a bit like that shark, perceiving in ways unique to the moment of imminent connection.

Poems appear, as often as not, to arise in looking outward: the writer turns toward the things of the world, sees its kingfishers and falcons, hears the bells of churches and sheep, and these outer phenomena seem to give off meaning almost as if a radiant heat. But the heat is in us, of course, not in things. During writing, in the moment an idea arrives, the eyes of ordinary seeing close down and the poem rushes forward into the world on some mysterious inner impulsion that underlies seeing, underlies hearing, underlies words as they exist in ordinary usage. The condition is almost sexual, procreative in its hunger for what can be known no other way. All writers recognize this surge of striking; in its energies the objects of the world are made new, alchemized by their passage through the imaginal, musical, world-foraging and word-forging mind.

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This altered vision is the secret happiness of poems, of poets. It is as if the poem encounters the world and finds in it a hidden language, a Braille unreadable except when raised by the awakened imaginative mind. Hopkins's kingfisher is both a kingfisher and more than a kingfisher; his rung bell travels equally through the tunnels of spirit and ear. The inward life spills into material substances, fragrances, and sounds, as material substances, fragrance, and sound spill into each other. This double life of objects is at work in a traditional Japanese haiku, an Australian aboriginal chant, a Nahuatl flower song, a twenty-first-century American experimental lyric. Finding ourselves in the realm of poetic perception, we return to the word's first conception: poïesis as *making.*

To say it outright: a poem is not the outer event or phenomenon it ostensibly describes, nor is it the feeling or insight it may seem to reveal or evoke. A poem may involve both, but is, more complexly, a living fabrication of new comprehension—"fabrication" meaning, not accidentally, both "lie," "falsehood," and, more simply and fundamentally, anything created and made: the bringing of something freshly into being. Fabric, whether of material or mind, is an interwoven invention: some substance—silk or cotton, wool or image—made stronger, larger than itself, by the dual-natured meeting of warp thread and weft thread. A work of art holds our lives as they are known when fully engaged with the multiple, crossing experience-strands of self, language, culture, emotion, senses, and mind.

What gives poetry's threads their hold and tensile power to discover is music. Take even one line of Hopkins's poetry, attending purely to its sound, and you can see clearly the braided, musical making that draws its parts into a larger and enlarging whole. "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame"—the line flares a copulant beauty. In its first half, the "k" of "kingfishers" repeats itself in the hard "c" of "catch,"

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while its mid-word “f” returns in “fire.” An identical pattern is hand-tied, as if in the way a fisherman’s fly is, into the following phrase: the opening consonants of “dragonflies” repeat in “draw,” its middle dipthong returns in “flame.” The vowels, too, confirm the strengthening of recurrence: the “i” in “kingfishers” repeats in “fire,” the “a” of “dragonflies” in “flame,” each shifting from short to long in pronunciation. We cannot always know whether such intricate sound work is made by conscious effort or by some less deliberate, more intuitive process. What matters is that things are said, are seen, in the ways of connection and enlargement, when said and seen in the ways of poems.

Poetry’s generative power, then, lies not in its “message” or “meaning,” nor in any simple recording of something external to its own essence. It resides within the palace of its own world-embedded, intertwining existence. Poems speak in a language invented by mixed and untethered modes of perception, in grammars and textures that instruct first writer, then reader, in how to see, hear, and feel through poetry’s own senses and terms. Those terms include the communicative elements of content, craft, and form. They include also a certain kind of tropism—poems lean toward increase of meaning, feeling, and being.

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But how does the writer, poetry’s amanuensis, rise to meet this yearning for increase? Surely he or she brings to the page not only what is already known but also the contrapuntal impulse of a permeable intention. The writing of poems must be counted as much a contemplative practice as a communicative one, and in the contemplative byways of every tradition, a reshaped intention is the ground of change. By intention’s ripening, the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen

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teacher Eihei Dogen said, the white milk of rivers grows fragrant and sweet—a statement only comprehensible to the ears and mind awake also to the transformative language of poems. Intention welcomes the new less by force of effort than by dissolving the psyche's old habits, gestures, forms. It is the enactment of an invitation to something that does not yet exist.

The kind of intention I speak of here is not the kind referred to in courts of law: contemplative intention is translucent to what lies beyond the self. Will and choice may play a role, but creative intention's heightened speech requires an equally intensified listening, as a violinist must listen to orchestra, violin, and body if he or she is to play well. The listening goes into the violin's sound as much as the drawing of the bow across the strings. A similar transformation occurs when a person sits down within the intentions of poetry. Poetry's addition to our lives takes place in the border realm where inner and outer, actual and possible, experienced and imaginable, heard and silent, meet. The gift of poetry is that its seeing is not our usual seeing, its hearing is not our usual hearing, its knowing is not our usual knowing, its will is not our usual will. In a poem, everything travels both inward and outward.

In *shikantaza,* the form of Zen meditation practiced by Dogen, a person's eyes are neither fully closed nor fully open: they are held in a state of betweenness. A similar gaze, lowered yet present, is called by Catholic monastics "keeping custody of the eyes." Neither escape, disregard, nor avoidance, this careful balancing of attention's direction reflects an altered expectation of what is being looked for. The desire of monks and mystics is not unlike that of artists: to perceive the extraordinary within the ordinary by changing not the world but the eyes that look. Within a summoned and hybrid awareness, the inner reaches out to transform the outer, and the outer reaches back to transform

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the one who sees. Catherine of Siena wrote, in the fourteenth century, “All the way to heaven is heaven”; Marcel Duchamp, in the third year of the First World War, submitted a porcelain urinal to an art show, titling it *Fountain.* Both say: to form the intention of new awareness is already to transform and be transformed.

Is it possible to say that poetry’s seeing is both innate and learned? Even the ordinary vision we are born with is learned. We know this from studies of the congenitally blind: after surgery makes possible the physical capacity to see, there remains a lag in cognition, in the ability to parse image from sensory data. One eight-year-old boy, operated on in the early 1900s for cataracts, was asked, when his bandages were first removed, what he could see. “I don’t know,” he answered. The surgeon moved his hand in front of the boy, who still could “see” nothing. Only after the boy touched the moving hand with his own did he begin to recognize the shifting patterns of light and dark before him for what they were.

Our simplest acts of perception depend, then, upon an experiential and experimentally crafted knowledge. Perception is not passively given us; it is a continually expanding interaction and engagement, both mental and physical, with the world. Sound, temperature, motion enter the attention of an infant even before birth, and that cog-and-wheel conversation continues until the moment of death. A parallel process unfolds in the making of art. What a writer or painter undertakes in each work of art is an experiment whose hoped-for outcome is an expanded knowing. Each gesture, each failed or less-than-failed attempt to create an experience by language or color and paper, is imagination

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reaching outward to sieve the world. To make a genuine work of art, or even to take in such a work fully, is to tie a further knot on that fisherman's intricate fly.

But there is more: it is as if the fish of perception did not exist until it is caught. The physicist Arthur Zajonc once designed what he called a "box of light." In it, a bright projector casts light into a space in which no surface or object is visible. When the viewer looks inside, what is seen appears to be absolute darkness. Then the person is shown how to move a handle on the side of the box, to control a movable wand—and once an object is brought into the space, it is clear that a brilliance falls onto it from one direction, and that the other side is in shadow. Light, as the experiment was designed to show, is only perceptible when it catches upon the stuff of the world. Or, more precisely, it is only perceptible to us when three elements are present: when the looking mind catches light entangled in the net of things.

Consider three words: "apprehend," "comprehend," "prehensile." There is, deep in the process of human knowing, a necessary and active reaching out—to understand is to *grasp,* to *take in.* The philosophers of ancient Greece believed that vision was a beam thrown out by the eyes as if from a lantern. Like the boy who could not see a hand until he himself had touched it, the mind, before it can enter a new perception, needs first to extend itself into existence in tangible ways. Poetic imagination is muscular, handed, and kinesthetic. The tongue, the ear, the eye, the alertness of skin, entwine the world for which and by which they come into being, and of which each is part. In its musics, its objects, its strategies of speech, thought, and feeling, a poem plucks the interconnection of the experiencing self and all being. In poetry's words, life calls to life with the same inevitability and gladness that bird calls to bird, whale to whale, frog to frog. Listening across the night or ocean or pond, they recognize one another and are warmed by that

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knowledge.

There is no way to convey this prehensile imagination and its liberating reach, except by example. Hopkins is filled with that heat of connection. Here are a few other fragments charged with imaginative transference, by more recent poets.

The fish are dreadful. They are brought up
the mountain in the dawn most days, beautiful
and alien and cold from night under the sea,
the grand rooms fading from their flat eyes.
Soft machinery of the dark, *the man thinks,*
washing them.

Jack Gilbert, from "Going Wrong"

One was a bay cowhorse from Piedra & the other was a washed-out palomino
And both stood at the rail of the corral & both went on aging
In each effortless tail swish, the flies rising, then congregating again

Around their eyes & muzzles & withers.

Their front teeth were by now yellow as antique piano keys & slanted to the angle
Of shingles on the maze of sheds & barn around them; their puckered
Chins were round & black as frostbitten oranges hanging unpicked from the limbs
Of trees all through winter like a comment of winter itself on everything
That led to it & found gradually the way out again.

In the slowness of time. Black time to white, & rind to blossom.
Deity is in the details & we are details among other details & we long to be

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Teased out of ourselves. And become all of them.

Larry Levis, from "Elegy with a Bridle in Its Hand"

The ache of marriage;

thigh and tongue, beloved,
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

Denise Levertov, from "The Ache of Marriage"

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
   placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
   in space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
   riprap of things:
Cobble of milky way,
   straying planet

Gary Snyder, from "Riprap"

Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn

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as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.

Elizabeth Bishop, from "At the Fishhouses"

In his *Rhetoric,* Aristotle praises what he calls "active metaphor" for the quickening it brings to the reader's mind. He especially notes the way Homer endows the inanimate with life, using as his example a description of spears "standing fast in the ground, though longing to feed on flesh." Aristotle uses the term "metaphor" broadly, to signal any attributive transference; current usage might name his example "personification" or call it Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy"—attributing feeling to objects. But the essential observation holds: poetic perception inhabits an animate world, infused with empathic connection. Qualities human or animal spring forth from seemingly stolid objects. Attributes belonging to one being or thing phosphoresce inside another. Shape-shifting, metamorphosis, transmutation: these are the leavenings of thought, the yeast and heat by which flour and water rise into sweet-scented bread.

Metaphoric transformation is not the sole means of poetic imagination—there is the cello's singing made purely by sound craft, there are the muscles and hinged joints of story, the sinew of abstract statement, the footfall of a single, awakening image standing in its own thrown light. But kaleidoscopic mind—whether flamboyant or subtle—is one marker for the poet reaching actively toward a renewing perception. From the work of Hopkins, and each of the writers presented here, springs a supple, turning aliveness, the hawk's-swoop voracity of the mind when it is both precise and free. Different as they are, there is something entirely unshackled in each of these poets. You feel they could say anything, from within the liberated energies of creative seeing.

Consider Jack Gilbert's fish, whose flat eyes hold grand,

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fading rooms. (Here I pause to imagine Aristotle's pleasure in the active motion of that present-participial "fading.") To find such wholly surprising rooms—the plural, too, is important—vanishing inside the eyes of the fish plunges the writer, the reader, into his or her own multi-chambered sense of the possible. We pursue that receding image through interior passageways, doors beyond doors. Calling the skeleton "soft machinery of the dark," Gilbert enlarges the fish further still—in the phrase, three quite different image systems (tactile softness; darkness both visual and inner; technological gleam of machine) come quietly together, with the slight, almost silent tock of a lock's tumblers slipping into alignment before it falls open. These fish will become, over the course of the poem, a kind of metonym: gutted and deboned on the table, they signal the sustenance the poet eats, containing, as he goes on to say, "the muck of something terrible." They are also the sustenance of poetry, whose flesh and blood and intricate machinery carry Gilbert, and us, forward, fully fed within the austerity he has also chosen.

The liberating transformation in Larry Levis's passage has to do with time, as it is tracked through a procession of shifting objects: time is counted on the metronome of tail-swish, it yellows into teeth like old piano keys, it tastes of frostbitten, unpicked oranges. Each new image steps cleanly into the arc—and ark—of the poem. Each seems inevitable as soon as it's met. Yet who before Levis has seen frostbitten oranges in the underchins of old horses? And then, like a field of ten thousand blossoms reduced to an eighth ounce of essential oil, come the time-reversing words, "In the slowness of time. Black time to white, & rind to blossom," before the poem returns to chronicling the beloved lost.

In Denise Levertov's poem, the realm-transferring image, strong as a physical blow, is marriage throbbing in the teeth —her phrase shows that what is made first by ritual must be

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lived out deep in the body, in all of its parts: the grinding, subliminally violent jaw is present within any kiss.

Gary Snyder, from the early "Riprap" to his most recent work, has been our practitioner of the manual imagination. Others have laid trail, felled trees, rebuilt engines, and learned the names of rock, but he is the one who showed American poets how to make these activities *see*. "Cobble of milky way" is a conjunction only a poet who has worked stones could have made.

Finally, there is Elizabeth Bishop, whose closely considered objects shift continually into new life. Dignity, patient expectancy, indifference—all these human attributes are placed into fir tree and ocean with a seamless, unsentimental ease, and the objects and elements under her gaze transform, one into another, with equal ease. In the lines shown here, the transformation takes place explicitly through the mediating human—it is by a hand dipped into icy waters that saltwater turns into fire.

I have called this transubstantiation of being the secret happiness of poems, of poets: secret because rarely spoken of, and secret, too, because even the poets themselves often fail to recognize the source of their own joy in writing, or even joy's presence as the pen leaps to enact it. No matter how difficult the subject, while writing, a poet is unchained from sadness, and free. The means of this unlatching is a theme that will run throughout this book.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* holds many explicit accountings of the soul's love of changing. In subtler ways, any good work of art embodies a version its own and no other's. The change of key in a piece of music; the downward and inward gaze in Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*—we need only look, and some sense of turning is there to be found.

To close, here again is Hopkins—this time a poem in its entirety.

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MOONRISE JUNE 19 1876

I awoke in the midsummer not-to-call night, | in the white and the walk of the morning:
The moon, dwindled and thinned to the fringe | of a fingernail held to the candle,
Or paring of paradisiacal fruit, lovely in waning but lustreless,
Stepped from the stool, drew back from the barrow, | of dark Manaefa the mountain;
A cusp still clasped him, a fluke yet fanged him, | entangled him, not quit utterly.
This was the prized, the desireable sight, | unsought, presented so easily,
Parted me leaf and leaf, divided me, | eyelid and eyelid of slumber.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Among the range of Hopkins's work one might call this a sketch—unrhymed, a little unripe somehow, quite possibly an abandoned start. And still, what overspilling density it holds, seeing as it does with poetry's eyes. The moon named as a "paring of paradisiacal fruit" is a moon almost fragrant to the imagination; the "white and the walk of the morning" is an unparsable phrase, making perfected alliterative equals of color and action. The poem, too, raises a thought I have increasingly come to believe holds true: that good description in poetry is never purely description, it is a portrait of a state of being, of soul.

For me, though, this poem's last two lines are the richest treasure; the first for the knowledge that the prize of vision arrives unsought, as grace, while our more purposeful consciousness sleeps; and the second for its luminous intertwining of inner and outer: "Parted me leaf and leaf, divided me, | eyelid and eyelid of slumber." No matter how many times I read these words I am left uncertain, sound-spelled, placed into the sleepy wonderment of a young child: Is it the poet awakened by this slim remnant of mountain-

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held moon, or is it the leafy world itself that awakens, in the poem’s own moon-opened eyes?

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CHAPTER TWO

Language Wakes Up in the Morning: On Poetry's Speaking

Language wakes up in the morning. It has not yet washed its face, brushed its teeth, combed its hair. It does not remember whether or not, in the night, any dreams came. The light is the plain light of day, indirect—the window faces north—but strong enough to see by nonetheless.

Language goes to the tall mirror that hangs on one wall and stands before it, wearing no makeup, no slippers, no robe. In the same circumstances, we might see first our two eyes, looking back at their own inquiring. We might glance down to the two legs on which vision stands. What language sees in the mirror is also twofold—the two foundation powers of image and statement. The first foundation, image, holds the primary, wordless world of the actual, its heaped assemblage of quartzite, feathers, steel trusses, red-seamed baseballs, distant airplanes, and a few loudly complaining cows, traveling from every direction into the self's interior awareness. The second foundation, statement, is our human answer, traveling outward back into the world—our stories, our theories, our judgments, our epics and lyrics and work songs, birth notices and epitaphs, newspaper articles and wedding invitations, the infinite coherence-makings of form. All that is sayable begins with these two modes of attention and their prolific offspring. Begins, that is, with the givens of experienced, embodied existence and the responses we offer the world in return.

"Image": The word comes from the Latin *imago,* a "picture" or "likeness." An image is not the primary world, though that

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is its source. It is the constellated, partitioned understanding we frame and know that world by, once it has come into the mind. Once formed, an image of a crow at dusk or a shopping mall storefront, of a pencil or a factory floor thick-bolted with pounding machinery, may remain in the possibility-storehouse of imagination; or it may travel back into the outer world in the form of paint or stone or word.

Some images enter the mind by touch, others are heard or seen. Some are simple, others complex. Here is a simple image: a small fish hovers in a creek, its body exactly the color and variegation of the algae-draped rocks below it. For an instant, the onlooker rests only in noticing that. But it is not mind's nature to stop with what it first sees. The mind goes on to observe that in its streaked camouflage mottling, the fish—it is a young trout—appears to be itself a rock, but a rock drifting somehow, and a little transparent. It appears to be what a rock would be if a rock could dream itself alive. Then perhaps comes the memory of having seen this before. Generations of trout have made a home in the same deep place in the streambed, scooped to steepness by ten thousand years of winter rains; the watcher recalls having seen more than a few. Then the mind continues further: "Almost big enough to eat," the mind murmurs. "Two good mouthfuls, if I were truly hungry."

Our human attention has many ways of engaging the primary world in any moment—perception, identification, comparison, associative drift, memory, the attraction/aversion of fear and desire, the old evaluative habits of predator in the presence of prey. And somewhere in their midst, image-mind becomes the mind of statement—the rock of pure being breaks free from its creek bed mooring in the world and swims off: lithe, muscled, and hungry for what the world tastes of, for what it can make use of, play with, mate. Little splinter of life force looking for something to do, because that is its nature.

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we ask in awe of the shining stars.

The nine sister Muses are depicted always as virginal, young. Perhaps their youthfulness carries the silence, the doubt, of *mussare*'s first meanings. The very young animal, when it is learning, begins by watching, by listening, by testing, by taking in. Then it experiments with its body, its tongue, its desires. It is neither self-conscious nor contained. And what is virgin does not yet know, and so stays open. The Muses, in their slender and untested forms, remain strangely unwetted by the enormous floodwaters of creation that pass through their beings. An epic, a tragedy, a concerto, is finished, and the next begins as it must: from the silence preceding beginning, from the condition where nothing as yet exists—not the first word, not the first note, not key or tempo, gesture or subject. Only a template is there, or perhaps even less: a proclivity. This is why the Muses do not age. Only in the realm of the human, earthly existence does knowledge transform the body.

A poem by the Swedish poet and novelist Lars Gustafsson captures the condition of the world as the Muses might know it before they have changed it by their own workings—a world purely image, in which the mind-created realm of statement scarcely exists:

THE STILLNESS OF THE WORLD BEFORE BACH

There must have been a world before
the Trio Sonata in D, a world before the A minor Partita,
but what kind of a world?
A Europe of vast empty spaces, unresounding,
everywhere unawakened instruments
where the Musical Offering, *the* Well-Tempered Clavier
never passed across the keys.
Isolated churches
where the soprano line of the Passion

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never in helpless love twined round
the gentler movements of the flute,
broad soft landscapes
where nothing breaks the stillness
but old woodcutters' axes,
the healthy barking of strong dogs in winter
and, like a bell, skates biting into fresh ice;
the swallows whirring through summer air,
the shell resounding at the child's ear
and nowhere Bach nowhere Bach
the world in a skater's stillness before Bach.

Lars Gustafsson
tr. by Philip Martin

The landscape of Gustafsson's pre-Bach world—a world into which art's disruptions and re-constellations have not yet come—is a country of childhood and fairy-tale innocence, one preceding the complications of adult knowledge. Archetype has not yet been stamped by its own emergence. Daughters of memory, the Muses remember form, remember pattern, remember an arc of awakening and the sleep that follows, but content—even content as transformative as the music of Bach—passes tracelessly through them. Their gaze is always turned toward the not-yet-imagined.

Let us return to the morning bedroom, to the moment when language awakens to rise, looks outward, looks inward, asks its one question: "What might I say?" What does it mean when the answer arrives through the gate of a Muse, arrives, that is, in the form we think of as art?

Thought is thought, color is color, sound is sound. Each becomes recognizable also as art when a secondary

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awareness, one tuned toward shapeliness, movement, and intention, enters in. The forms we experience as "art" balance between the stilled familiarity of established knowledge and the fluidity of the creative mind at play. The linguistic root of "art" means most simply "skill": it signals a task undertaken in some particularly effective way. Near it in the dictionary are words concerning themselves with small, ingenious, and movable fittings: words used to denote the body's physical joints, or the idea of compression, or the condition of things packed tightly together while still maintaining their distinctness. Etymologically, then, an "articulate" person is one who speaks by dividing things into their precise parts, but also with awareness of the precisely geared clockworks on which an argument must turn. The "artificial" is that which has been cleverly maneuvered, altered by the ingenious human hand. The artist begins by fitting one thing into another—a cup to its hand, a lid to its box, a color to its image, a story to its cultural and individual occasion. Once placed into the world, the cup is lifted for use, the lid swivels on its small brass hinges, the story shifts a little with each telling.

A good poem, though, goes beyond its own well-madeness. Even in motionless, time-fixed paintings and sculpture, there is the feeling of hinge-turn we find in poems and often name with the terms of music—alterations of rhythm or key that raise alterations of comprehension and mood. Music, almost undefinable in itself, is delineated by philologists by contrasting it not to silence but to "noise"—sound that lacks structure, intention, and meaning. Music's self-aware re-orderings bring experience out of randomness and into the arc of shaping direction, into the cross-trusses of what has been made recognizably formal. These shifts are made by patterned departure and return, by dramatic selection, by awareness of cadence shift, emphasis, harmony and useful dissonance—all the progressive unfoldings of sound-rhyme

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and sound-variation we have come to find useful engagements with feeling and beauty. Language enters artfulness by the same means. But ordinary language, unlike ordinary noise, does already include structure, purpose, and meaning. One way language signals its entrance to art, then, is by the inclusion of music's intensified awareness and music's full-ranging, engaging intentions. The sentences of poetry, fiction, drama, attend to their music the way a tree attends to its leaves: motile and many, seemingly discardable, they remain the sustenance-source by which it lives.

The centrality of movement and alteration in any art form can be seen by what happens if the word "art" is given a negative prefix: the opposite of art is inertness. It is the nature of living beings to move—some quickly as that stream-immersed trout when an insect disturbs the surface above it, others as slowly and inexorably as a bishop pine growing the narrowest of annual rings around its two-thousand-year-old heartwood. Art—some part of a life distilled to essential and self-aware gesture—is similarly active and moving, in its enactments and in its effects. And when a work of art is unable to move us—because of some failure in its conception or clumsiness of execution, or because we are too far from its originating circumstances to understand what request it makes of the senses, heart, and mind—that work itself becomes inert, becomes noise, deafened to meaning and feeling.

Art that keeps its heat and breath is quick, alive as a blow. Consider the force of this late, margin-scrawled fragment by Keats. Not finished, not shapely, deeply uncharacteristic, it has preserved nonetheless a place among his most-known poems:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold

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And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you.

John Keats

The heat of life and the ice of death coincide in this poem. The request and implied threat of its words are, in one way of reading them, shocking—but the reader's ethical response depends upon where in time the poem is placed in his or her mind. Are these words spoken by the living man to his beloved, or from the grave? The grammar and facts of its composition tell us we must see it as the former; yet the poem's concluding statement cannot help but now be heard in the second way—these words come to us from beneath the shroud. Read in this posthumous and proleptic way, we can forgive their proposition of desperate exchange: their speaker knows it impossible. Still, we should not read these lines for anything less brutal than they are, nor lightly pass over that fact, however heartbreaking we may also find them. "I want to live," the poem says, "and I would take your life-blood if I could in order to do it." It offers an unveiled depiction of the way the artist occupies the psyche of others. Aspiring to the immediacy of life, art is rapacious to escape the laws of human transience.

As we saw in looking at Gerard Manley Hopkins, art's shapeliness baits not only time, but thought itself. Patterned and musical, awake to its own voice, compressive, heightening, any work of art that is not superficial is more than a stylized outward signaling. Art's desire is not to convey the already established but to transform the life that takes place within its presence. Understanding grows resonant and amplified, as certain plants grow more fragrant

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green weeds in the crack of a sidewalk. Art's limitlessness awakens in us the sense of the psyche's own limitless rooms. It is how the inner world grows continually new.

What have we gathered thus far into our fold? The outer world of image in all its mottled shapes and scents, its antlered and stamened densities, its secretions of nectar and sweat. The complex or simple statements that are our reply to that world. The moods and modes of the gatekeeping Muses, their playfulness and also their silences, pauses, and doubts. The necessity for musical shapeliness and its muscular, resilient collaboration with time. Movement. The shivering joy of aesthetic encounter.

Next, perhaps, is experience, is knowledge. The Muses may be virginal, but a realized work requires both skills and materials. Its pieces must be found and fitted together, before it can bring into being the not-yet-known. For this, the sum of a life is needed. Everything we have lived and touched and learned from is the knowledge brought to the moment of creative making—emotional experiences, ethics, yearnings, heard bird calls and tasted breads, the storehouse of learning. A poet needs to know the parts of the internal combustion engine, the histories of Buenos Aires and the Ukraine, the fleeting trace-maps of particle physics, the poetries of South India, Portugal, and Iran. He or she needs to know the close to alchemical processes by which whiskey and honey come into being, the secret look that passes between mother and almost-grown son, the narrow alleyways of rhetoric, the differing fatigues of failure and success. There is no way of telling in advance what part of our knowledge will be needed at any given moment. Hence, Henry James's apt formulation —the writer must be one on whom nothing is lost.

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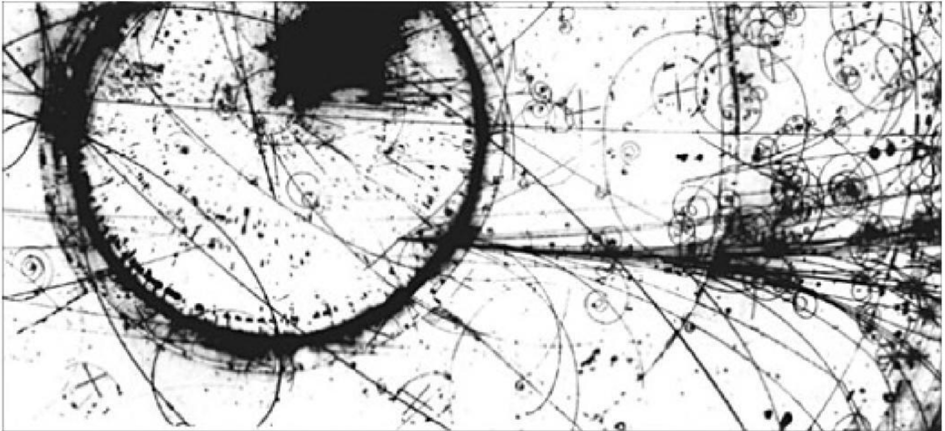

Neutrino event in bubble chamber (illustration credit 2.1)

Detailed view of early one-inch bubble chamber event (illustration credit 2.2)

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Seen from the point of view of art itself, the artist's life is not the source of the poem, the painting, the drama; it is its servant. Think of the beginning of a poem by Czesław Miłosz, "My Faithful Mother Tongue":

Faithful mother tongue,
I have been serving you.
Every night, I used to set before you little bowls of colors
so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch
as preserved in my memory.

But nothing in a good poem is simple, and the poet goes on:

This lasted many years.
You were my native land; I lacked any other.
I believed that you would also be a messenger
between me and some good people
even if they were few, twenty, ten
or not born as yet.

Now, I confess my doubt.
There are moments when it seems to me I have squandered my life.
For you are a tongue of the debased,
of the unreasonable, hating themselves
even more than they hate other nations,
a tongue of informers,
a tongue of the confused,
ill with their own innocence.

But without you, who am I?
Only a scholar in a distant country,
a success, without fears and humiliations.
Yes, who am I without you?

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