

Chapter One

ON THE MARGINS

Verse Poems

NO OTHER ART FORM clings to representation-what we think of in fiction as realism-like mainstream poetry. In visual art, figurative painting-representation's equivalent-has fallen in and out of favor regularly since Paul Cézanne, and painting has shifted from abstraction to cubism to expressionism and back. Classical music has abandoned and occasionally returned to tonality; modern dance has made ample use of abstraction since Isadora Duncan, from Merce Cunningham's chance collaborations with John Cage to Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp and beyond; and contemporary theater routinely blends realism with surrealism and the absurd.

Representational poetry is built on the metaphors of dream and narcosis: it provides the pleasure of suspension of disbelief and recreated characters and events. In a lyric poem, representation depends upon a reader's desire to identify the speaker with the poet, placing great faith in verisimilitude. It assumes, too, that conscious or self-conscious use of the medium (language) will distract from and diminish a reader's experience. Although one can posit any number of theories as to the persistence of representation in poetry, one factor might be connected to poetry's diminishing role in culture. Although it seems naïve to believe poets have the power to alter historical, economic, and social circumstances well beyond their control, many poets worry about difficulty further depriving them of an audience-so a new wave of well-meaning populizers like

Garrison Keillor and Robert Richman promote clarity and directness, advocating the fiction of accessibility and authenticity. I say fiction for obvious reasons: experiences are filtered through consciousness, so no memory actually recreates experience or escapes subjectivity or distortion. And when narrating memories we select some details, omit others. Secondarily, it is difficult to imagine how the many competing truths of modern life and the increasing complexity of an individual's relationship to language and the world can be portrayed directly without seriously reducing experience. Arguments about representation present a vexing question: by what means are we moved in art? How are we changed? Is it by our stories, themes, and the music behind them, or are those changes more unconsciously and irrationally rendered by the present-tense encounter with language and the unfolding arrangement of the words themselves? In music (despite the "programmatic"), we're clearly moved by the medium and not by subject or story. In poetry, though, two legitimate but contrary aesthetic stances shape the controversy: those who wish to advance the art form and those who wish to conserve it. Further, those poets who write representationally believe either in universal truths or in the romantic convention of illuminated and heightened moments. Avant-garde poets, for the most part, believe in the fluidity and relativity of truths about form and experience (Lyn Hejinian's essay "The Rejection of Closure" articulates this point of view). Most poets actually fall somewhere between these two extremes, but the central focus of most of these essays will explore the territory of poets who make use of avant-garde

techniques without fully abandoning the above-mentioned pleasures of representation.

There is a truism about art that systematizers do not produce the most textured and suggestive art; perhaps it is an arguable truth, but the poets under discussion here have created moving poems of surprising depth and imagination by absorbing those aspects of literary history they can use and then extending them. These artists make use of image, metaphor, music, and narrative, but they also deploy modernist and postmodernist techniques: collage, fissure, multiple voices, and an unfolding syntax that explores and resists cohesion. I make no value judgment about those who work inside the tradition, but artists like Picasso and Stravinsky provide models of artists who went out of their way to see the world freshly, not to repeat themselves, changing artistic strategies when their view of experience changed. They continued to reinvent themselves, learning from—among others—contemporary movements in their arts: impressionists, dadaists, cubists, the surrealists, "the primitives," and neoclassicists. As a result there's no *one* Picasso or Stravinsky, which is one reason why we can be constantly surprised by the body of their work. In poetry, too, we can learn from responding to the historically altering medium as well as the wildness (imagination) and the kind of extension that comes from long-reaching and difficult connections and gaps at least as much as from the pleasures and comfort of shapeliness we find in a more-traditional lyric or narrative poetry.

Many contemporary avant-garde writers believe that writing is performative, that drama and feeling emanate more from the words themselves and their placement

rather than from their signification, their rhetorical or symbolic content. After all, poems are made of words: the effect of a poem comes from the arrangement, sounds, dictions, and imaginative perceptions in and behind the words. The so-called L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets are often conflated with (and blamed for) all avant-garde writing, even though they belonged to a specific writing community for a brief time in the early 1970s and were named L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets by a hostile critic. That they theorized their aesthetic made more traditional poets even more hostile, even though the theorizing premise behind much representational writing is formalist or New Critical; that writers like Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armentrout, and Bob Perelman are as different from one another as Robert Duncan is from Allen Ginsberg also seemed lost on more defensive poets and critics. Arguments against L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E writing included its self-reflexivity, obscurity, and overdose of intellection. Their poems were elitist, self-conscious, self-referential, and, once you understood them, repetitive: language was their only subject. Furthermore, critics of L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E writing maintained that it is impossible to escape signification: our associations with words and things are often lightning fast: otherwise we wouldn't be able to communicate with one another at all.

I remember voicing many of those same concerns. It's been more than twenty-five years since I attended a talk titled "The Lyric Speaker," given by poet Bob Perelman. But one section of the talk critiqued William Stafford's well-known plain-style voice poem, "Traveling through the Dark," which had been formative in teaching me how to write. In retrospect, it is easy to see what drew me to

the poem. Most of us begin writing poems as vehicles of self-expression: we tell stories and want to suggest their import. The poem's images were clear and pointedly observed; the structure, transparent; its sentiments, seemingly noble (read as my own) and respectful of the environment. The talk drew attention, though, to two problems with representational lyric poems like Stafford's: first, the narcissism of the lyric "representative" speaker: the romantic lyric always places him at the center of all knowledge, wisdom, and sensitivity ("I thought hard for us all ... / then pushed over the edge into the river"); second, like all representational poems, the truth of the poem is not so much enacted or lived but reported, mediated, and summarized. The resultant experience is more of a product than a process: it is packaged and compartmentalized. The drama (and therefore the emotional volatility) of the poem happens before and after we get to the illumination. The harmonies of the Stafford poem now seem to me too facile, the easy reversal of nature and machine (the "doe a heap," "the car purring") too clever and symmetrical, the ironies too neat. Oddly, one justification for this kind of writing is as poetry of "self-discovery." Whatever else the joys of "Traveling through the Dark," it is hard to imagine its making many discoveries. Stafford's poem could have used a second voice unraveling the man-versus-machine myth, questioning his moral authority when the speaker has just gotten out of a car. Then the poem might have put to the test its claims about where grief ends and resignation begins ("It is usually best to roll them into the canyon" and "my only swerving").

In the intervening years since I discovered that poem, I've become less interested in a poem of reportage, to quote Lowell, one that "say[s] what happened." ? Partly out of faith in the medium of poetry, I find myself responding more to imaginative and linguistic surprise and transformation than to "wisdom" and illuminated truths. If I can articulate a poem's strategies, its design, its conceptual meaning, or its theme too quickly, I know only my intellect and ego have been engaged: it tells me what I already know and, in most cases, agree with. Some representational poems, like Stafford's, feel that way to me, and many others don't. If I want to be moved by a poem, the poem itself generally must be *moving*, which is to say mobile, emotionally, linguistically, and syntactically. I may have come to this view in part because reading so many representational poems over the years has made their strategies begin to seem predictable. As Stanley Elkin once quipped to me in a conversation about science-fiction stories, either we go there or they come here. Either this happened to me or them and then this-in image or statement-is the consequence of that drama or plot. The fiction of "sincerity" and "the real"-the vehicles of persuasion in the Stafford poem-is one important voice for our poems, but surely it is not the only one. More crucially, I have come to believe that we are changed by what we witness and experience directly, not so much by what we recollect, picture, resolve, or instruct. I find myself drawn to poems that seem to reflect more of the world where we actually reside: a world of great speed, a world suspicious of truth and ideology, a world where the medium can be acknowledged and explored as artifice as

well as be seamlessly invisible. I often admire a poem unfolding and snagging before my eyes, including sometimes breaking through the fourth wall (the fiction of narrative event), or one that layers contrary voices and actively wrestles with cohesion and difference. And one reflects and interrogates fixity as a metaphysical and verbal experience.

Although Joanne Kyger's work is too various for a sweeping overview (she is one poet whose style has evolved and transformed from her early days, associated with the Beats and the Black Mountain poets), her poems are almost always simultaneously straightforward and prismatic, serious and playful, representational and self-conscious about process and changes of mind. She uses the geography of line often as a musical measure, a pause, or an aside. Her layering of contending voices, though, experientially brings the reader with her. The colloquial elements and her emphasis on the valences of diction reflect Jack Spicer's and the New York school's influence, but they also reflect an integrated absorption of Zen. The poem "September," written in 1973, contains elements of traditional narrative but also breaks with both sequence and the univocal voice.

The grasses are light brown and ocean comes in long shimmering lines under the fleet from last night which dozes now in the early morning
Here and there horses graze On somebody's acreage
Strangely, it was not my desire
that bade me speak in church to be released but memory
of the way it used to be in careless and exotic play
when characters were promises then recognitions. The
world of transformation is real and not real but trusting.

Enough of the lessons? I mean didactic phrases to take you in and out of love's mysterious bonds?

Well I myself am not myself

and which power of survival I speak for is not made of houses.

It is inner luxury, of golden figures that breathe like mountains do and whose skin is made dusky by stars. The poem begins mimetically enough through the first two stanzas (except for the foreshadowing of "long shimmering lines," which introduces suggestions of both poetry and composition), and is enlivened by the syntax and breath rhythms until the line "On somebody's acreage." All of a sudden the poet's confidence in naming and placing falters—here the poem interrupts itself to question its "intentions": the diction shifts too, with the elevated word "desire." At this point the interruption forces the reader to suspend the narrative, though our curiosity is raised: perhaps she didn't want to describe—she's turning away from nature, from the exterior world to the interior. But she takes a narrative leap that moves us to the past, to the church voice of the repressive and archaic "bade." It turns out that the present-tense sequence in nature is Edenic, a place of "careless and exotic play," a call away from the institutional, the spiritual wrenched from the natural (as landscape and as in spontaneous). The reader at this point suspends judgment, doesn't quite know what to make of the flashback or change of voice. The abstract meditation that follows metaphysically registers the import of those changes. Memory is tricky, the lines suggest: the nostalgia for the past as possibility, as the unfamiliar becoming familiar, is both real and Maya. But the speaker

is not satisfied with any New Critical wisdom about the scene: the postmodern moment in the poem interrupts the poem in midthought: "Enough of the lessons?" The judgments are temporal, a form of removal as well as engagement from "love's mysterious bonds." In other words, the easier connections the speaker has tried to register won't suffice to enliven, to keep her in the perpetual now.

The curious intensifying and shifting of the mystery of the poem comes from the colloquial "Well" followed by how she is implicated in this shifting landscape of the temporal and eternal: the iambic "I myself am not myself" is simultaneously Eastern and Western: it expresses both alienation and distance and at the same time it acknowledges the difference between identity temporal (in the body) and what "survives" (not for houses, the house of the body).

It is difficult not to think of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" or other "Eastern" Whitman poems as predecessors here. This lyrical overflowing allows the speaker to see the material world differently-the poem has brought us somewhere new by its changes of stance and dictions, by its shifting music (from the iambic to the anapestic to the more prosaic abstract diction of stanza 5 which cues the reader to the speaker's rejection of those lines as a resting place). The speaker is surprised then by the expansion of her vision: in short, the speaker now sees more beginnings of "souls" in the present, not in some Edenic origin (read as Christian paradise). The tortoise on the shore of this poem becomes an apt metaphor for the body carrying the soul in its sleigh: September, mythically a time of moving away from

origins and spring, carries with it its own song, leaving the speaker feeling blessed because she is inhabiting the world differently than she did at the beginning of the poem. And Kyger's choice to inhabit rather than to resolve, to interrogate the poem's premises, to break into multiple tonalities and voices, vastly expands her resources as a poet.

James Galvin's early work, allied with the neosurrealists, was influenced-as with many of his generation-by W. S. Merwin's work in *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders*. Very soon thereafter, though, he found his own gifts, and as his writing became more individuated, it also became more adventurous: sometimes foregrounded language. His poem "Meteorology" offers as one of its subtexts language itself. The poem suggests assertion and indirection, evasion and the power of the irrational, the heart and its accompanying hurt. The emotion is powerful enough so it cannot be addressed directly, and since it cannot be authentically resolved in its closure, the poet refuses to do so. The deception that the speaker names is also self-reflexive. The poem is wildly associative and imagistic: feeling syntactically accrues and intensifies as the poem changes its mind, as it moves closer or further from the poem's softer and more idealized assertions. The poem sees as its failure and its authenticity as its inability to match up its figures, its metaphors with its heart. The motives: deception, the desire to romanticize, history itself. After all, the meteor falls to the earth and burns out: the poem is a study of that arc.

The heart is such a big awkward girl, I think it's a paper cup of gasoline. The floor dozes off when I walk across it.

And the windows turn opaque When they are sure no one
is around.

At night when no one sees them Lovers write each
other's names With black volcanic stones On the white
salt flats. There were slamming doors and flowers,
A cup of milk left on the stove too long. There was all the
wind in Wyoming. No one saw anything. We were not evil
enough to make decisions, But able to let things happen
Evil enough. We are learning that weather Is always
merciless- Even if you don't mean weather- Even the
best days.

(Continues...)

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