

# Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Certain Contemporary Poems

BY BRENDA HILLMAN

## Introduction

In 2006, poet Brenda Hillman delivered the lecture “Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Certain Contemporary Poems” at the University of California at Berkeley as part of the Judith Lee Stronach Memorial Lecture Series. Hillman—whose own poetry often brings together narrative fragments, language-led lyricism, ideas steeped in social activism and Gnosticism, and a deeply personal voice—here examines the role of complexity in contemporary poetry and the benefits that engaging such complexity can offer readers.

As an advocate of poems that some readers might regard as difficult and therefore intimidating or off-putting, Hillman offers close readings of several such works by tracking their syntactic, tonal, and imagistic shifts. Contemporary poetry, Hillman notes, “favors process over destination,” and her readings model a way to enter, rather than paraphrase, these poems.

While her students have often praised what they call “flow,” Hillman examines inventive or disruptive grammar as a means of indicating where “the *yes* of a brush stroke meets the *maybe* of a thought.” She notes that contemporary poetry should be read in its historical context, in the wake of Modernism, which challenged and redefined our relationship to the world as well as made room for disjunction and fragmentation in the arts.

Hillman organizes her lecture according to the four main ways in which she believes poetry can serve contemporary readers. First, she argues, poetry helps us see ourselves in the context of a range of

environments, and thus to find our place in the world. Secondly, poetry displays the breadth of language's power and potential. Thirdly, truly engaging with the matter of a poem can offer a reader a means by which to process emotion. Finally, poetry can help a reader tap into the precise beauty and strangeness of our days.

Hillman's lecture draws on her experience as a teacher of poetry as well as her own poetry's engagement with difficulty and complexity.

I'm thrilled to be presenting a lecture honoring Judith Stronach to many colleagues and friends, and I'm grateful to Ray for publishing this series of lectures by poets—I feel fortunate to be among such illustrious company.

When I began to work on this lecture some time ago, I had just received an email saying that former Attorney General John Ashcroft, having retired from the Cabinet, was seriously hoping to be selected as Poet Laureate of the United States. Ashcroft's best-known poem, "Let the Eagle Soar," was used at President Bush's swearing-in ceremony:

*Let the eagle soar,  
Like she's never soared before.  
From rocky coast to golden shore,  
Let the mighty eagle soar.  
Soar with healing in her wings,  
As the land beneath her sings:  
"Only God, no other kings."  
This country's far too young to die.  
We've still got a lot of climbing to do,  
And we can make it if we try.  
Built by toils and struggles  
God has led us through.*

I don't want to spend too much time analyzing this poem. It makes a straightforward patriotic statement based on an image of a bird; it

rhymes. The problem here isn't straightforwardness, or rhyming, or birds; Dickinson, Hopkins, and Frost all employ those things. The problem is that Mr. Ashcroft has not used his imagination in his poem. He needs to sign up for my introductory creative writing class at Saint Mary's, where we could help him begin his poetry studies in just two weeks. The fact that Ashcroft wants to represent American poetry officially and to be its servant is frightening. His poem reminds me of the 21-year old pipe-bomber planting his bombs all over the Kansas countryside in the shape of a gigantic smiley face. The world quite literally suffers from a lack of imagination.

Here is a poem with imagination, written by Lisa Fishman, It's called "Note":

*Was wintered in  
unmade of stone and what-  
not*

This compact poem, like the inverse of a dreamed place, invites a sense of uncertainty and of safety. Its three-line form suggests haiku, but it is not haiku. The lines hold an unbalanced number of stresses: 2-3-1. The poem has neither noun nor pronoun for its subject; who is speaking? It begins mid-thought: someone or something has been entrapped by winter. The second line, after an implied comma, seems an extension of the first thought; the someone or something being "unmade of stone" is either being released from a previous condition of being "made" of stone, or the "unmade" means "not yet made." The third thought-perception is the colloquial, but not current, "what-/not," broken in half by a hyphen and a new line: "what-not" points to the tentative quality of the initial perceptions. To live without expectation seems a particular terror and amazement in this brief structure.

Could the same thought have been expressed in any way other than in these nine words? A poem cannot be paraphrased. But it can be described, its effects analyzed to heighten appreciation for how such a delicate mechanism plays itself out. In poems, the meanings coincide

with the rhythms of someone thinking them; they are the subjects of their own making.

My argument for this talk stems from the idea that it is all right for poetry to have made it into the twentieth century and beyond, and that it is a healthy thing for us that poetry engages with complexity, that this complexity is practical and aesthetically pleasing in ways that offer beginning and advanced readers more reality. Complexity and simplicity are not mutually exclusive. The paradoxical inevitability and openness of poetic expression make it both satisfying and mysteriously difficult to teach. To engage the mysterious or the difficult is not such a bad thing. It is mysterious and difficult to be alive and to express why. For lovers of poetry, there is disequilibrium between ourselves and the world that nothing restores to balance but poetry. The Stronach Lectures are meant to address issues of teaching poetry for audiences that have both scholarly and non-scholarly interests in the subject. I want to approach the topic in a fairly intuitive and jargon-free manner, and to present four survival tools for contemporary culture that poetry is especially good at providing: (1) the sense of who we are in our historical, cultural and—for want of a better term—natural (but I really mean “not man-made”) environments; (2) a sense of the power of language, of each word and phrase; (3) the ability to think through emotion on many levels—literal, abstract, concrete, metaphysical, figurative; and (4) an awareness of how particular and odd everything is, especially in moments of compressed thought captured in time. Taking delight in this four-fold toolkit provides my primary pedagogical energy. I think about these things when composing my own poetry and when teaching at all levels. Poetry is the most powerful method I’ve found for expressing the particular and extreme states life has to offer.

The idea for this talk came from hearing hundreds of questions over several decades—not only in the classroom, but also in conversations with friends and strangers—about the challenges of current poetry. “I

can't say I read much poetry; it really kinda loses me," someone will say. "Why can't they just say it normally?" or "Am I supposed to feel stupid when I read it?" as a friend recently asked.

The challenges of reading contemporary poetry also came up in a stimulating lunchtime conversation I had with Judith Stronach in the late nineties. We discussed stylistic difficulties of poetry in relation to states of mental suffering. Judith was troubled by a struggle she was having understanding a particular poem, and asked me whether poetry might not have a special obligation to present directly what might seem inexpressible. I said I thought poetry has the obligation to try to express what cannot be expressed, but that it could not always be done in direct ways. We talked about how the confusion of daily life, the impossibilities, the unredeemed moments of spiritual darkness, as well as massive social and political injustices, could all find shapes in poetry. I know Judith wrestled with these things, and I thought of this lecture as a way of continuing that conversation with her. Thinking about stylistic difficulty and the ineffable in poetry resonates in other types of hermeneutical reading I've done for decades—including literary theory, gnostic and occult writings of the second century, spam sent by pharmaceutical companies, and instructions for various pieces of technology. I would say all of these require considerably more interpretation than poetry!

A while back, my husband showed me a thrilling article in the magazine *Representations* by David Keightley, a Berkeley scholar, about the origins of writing in ancient China. I will try to summarize a few of the main points. Keightley discusses divination by fire (pyromancy), and the development of writing in neolithic Chinese culture. In the Shang dynasty (that's 1200–1050 B.C.E.—around the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Egypt and of the Trojan Wars), the bones of ancestors and animals were used for this sort of pyromancy, often exhumed from burial grounds, and then reburied and exhumed again, and then burned for the purposes of divination.

After the diviners interpreted the messages from the stress-cracks resulting from fire, they uttered sounds as they “read” the cracks, and the sounds of their spoken prophecies were carved deeply into the bones and emphasized with ink. It is in part from these painted carvings that the written Chinese language evolved. Keightley notes that these rituals of divination and writing were open only to a few, and that their interpretation remained a specialized field. He demonstrates that this form of Chinese writing kept the power of knowledge specific to the scholar classes over the centuries. It seems these individual logographic signs were different from the alphabetic or syllabary scripts in other cultures (Microsoft did not recognize “syllabary” and tried to suggest “salability” in my laptop)—for instance, those in Mesopotamia—that combined syllables or signs to make meaning. Nor were they pictographic. Each sign came with a single sound and a prediction, with its own meaning. When Bob and I were in Paris last summer we visited the Asian Museum and saw some of these amazing bones and turtle shells and my breath was taken away by the beauty of the markings—like the tracks of small animals surrounding their own absence.

The ability to produce and to interpret the cracks, to utter the sounds from the dead, and to carve the encoded signs became the most valued form of literacy. The signs produced in this manner were more stylized and abstract than those of ordinary writing. Because they came directly from the ancestors whose power was considered to be of an abstract and collective nature (unlike the Egyptian and Greek idea of the particularized soul existing after death), these writings had a powerfully generalized aesthetic function in the culture. I am intrigued by this idea of purely abstract, sound-based script—the signals from the ancestors. The value of these markings lay in their very mystery and abstraction, and in the fact that the accompanying sacred sounds had a social function. This oracle bone script exists between words and music.

A few weeks ago, a poet-friend, Lauren Levato, gave me an article about the development of *nüshu*, an encoded secret script developed more recently by women in the mountains of southern China for the purpose of sending secret messages men couldn't read. It is thought that this script derived from the oracle bone tradition. The figures are graceful and stylized—even more so than the bone scratches—bird prints, chevrons, spiked angles. Both these scripts seem like modernist practices in the twentieth century. As Robert Kaufman reminds us that Theodor Adorno reminds us, the vast expressiveness of the abstract and the lyric—as in Kandinsky paintings—help aesthetic culture reconceive its social function. The oracle bone signs and *nüshu* script both remind me of Mandelstam's poems criticizing Stalin in secret metaphors, and of reports that servicemen in Iraq are doing highly encoded rap and hip-hop in order to express criticism of the military hierarchy and of the presence of multinational corporations benefiting from their labors.

One of the big jobs of a teacher is to convince students that any effort whatsoever is worth it. In the remarks that follow I'm thinking mostly of introductory poetry classes, but the students might be of any age. Some of my students, especially those new to reading poetry, become afraid when they think they are supposed to understand contemporary poems and can't. Slant or oblique styles of poetry make them feel stupid, even if the very same techniques are used in music videos. Panicked that they will produce the wrong response, students may grow impatient in an increasingly impatient culture, believing that if poetry does not have an immediate appeal, it is undemocratic and ungenerous. Even some grown-up, famous poets put forth these opinions—arguing that poetry should be easy, should give a quick story, should never make them feel as if a highbrow or academic trick is being played on them. My goal as a teacher is to bring students closer to the initiating impulses of the poem, so that what might have evoked a hostile response can move them to a sense of accomplishment, to the deep pleasures of finding multiple interpretations for what may have seemed obscure.

The fearful student and the equally fearful famous poet might need a small review of the basics of twentieth-century modernism, which redefined the nature of art in several important ways: (1) in light of—or in the dark of—the First World War, modernism broke from the past—but also brought a new consciousness of cultural history—think art deco with its Egyptian motifs; (2) modernism brought an interest—through Freud, but not only Freud—in the mind’s psychological processes, which inspired artists to incorporate images reflecting mental process; (3) modernism defined creativity in new ways (by redefining god and nature); and finally, (4) modernism recognized that the modern city—people living together as alienated beings—was as important to the subject matter of aesthetic expression as rural scenes had been to pastoral traditions. (Readers might want to take a look at Charles Altieri’s *The Art of 20th Century American Poetry*.)

To most of you this will seem basic, but I wanted to remind the reader that a little background goes a long way. These redefinitions—what we are, what art is, what nature/god is, what we are in cities in relation to our mental lives—and the fact that dramatically new forms of art can include the threadlike, the fragmentary, the unfinished, that objects can point to their own synthetic qualities—all these are concepts worth reminding students of—even if “make it new” is by now one hundred years old. Much contemporary poetry that readers find mysterious makes use of modernist modes, tones, types, levels, styles that we take for granted in other aspects of our lives. It doesn’t take more than half a day to present this summary to students, though it might take them many years to absorb the art itself. Not having arrived at the twentieth century is, incidentally, one of the many problems in Mr. Ashcroft’s poem.

The fact that art comes from other art as well as from non-art, that it should be current, that the dilemmas of our present poetry come from unresolved arguments about representation and expression in the nineteenth century should not dismay us—it is a good thing. As romantic emotion, symbolist moody alienation, surrealist wild



irrationality or Russian formalist philosophy make their way into contemporary poetry, we can remind students that originality in art, as in the human genome, resides in the way things are reconfigured, not in some god-given attribute (though I personally talk to rocks, plants, birds and the piece of paper when composing my own poetry, and thus do not want to put down people who think an actual muse still exists). Oracle bones of ancient China speak metaphorically through their ancestors' recirculating messages. An overwhelmed, busy, depressed, confused or mystified contemporary reader can depend on the poet to make expressive signs, to give meaning to—or even to undermine meaning in—the sounds of her time.

I want to go through the four-fold toolkit I mentioned earlier: the sense of who we are in our environments; the understanding that every word and phrase matters and can be of interest; the idea that meaning circulates on many levels; and the conviction that the strange mystery of our existence can be represented. To proceed inductively, I thought about some poems I have taught in the last few years, and recalled some of the pedagogical challenges they present.

## I. The sense of who we are in our environments

Contemporary poetry has a huge range of approaches to this question of who we are. What we find in nineteenth-century poetry—Wordsworth's hopeful meditations, Coleridge's depressed intimate ones, the symbolist Baudelaire's haunted outsider descriptions, Rimbaud's hallucinatory narratives, Whitman's capacious sweep, Dickinson's uncanny metaphysical puzzles—provided twentieth century poetry with a *satura*—"satura" being a food medley, what the word "satire" comes from—of mental states. In that mix, for example, Stevens's speakers are both Keatsian and *très français*; Eliot and Pound offer collage fragments of literature, polyphonies of urban, pastoral, medieval and Renaissance voices; Gertrude Stein assembles human thought patterns in abstract,

cubist fashion; HD introduces vatic and oracular lyricism, while Williams uses concrete, everyday American speech, and so on. Often the persona in poetry is assumed to be that of the poet recounting an experience, or series of thoughts, about an experience in narrative or meditative form. That this became the main mode in the twentieth century is probably because personal accounts have, and well continue to have, a particular appeal. When students first come to poetry, they are excited that it can address their own states of feeling, their questions: Who am I? What is my problem? The lyric poem is still going steady with the turbulent heart that loves its own turbulence. The basic desire for emotional identification, and the lack of it, brings most people to poetry in the first place. No poet forgets the power of emotion. My introductory students have often been drawn to Sylvia Plath's poetry despite—or perhaps because of—the perilous nature of her metaphors. Here is one of her poems:

*Morning Song*

*Love set you going like a fat gold watch.*

*The midwife slapped your foot-soles, and your bald cry*

*Took its place among the elements.*

*Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.*

*In a drafty museum, your nakedness*

*Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.*

*I'm no more your mother*

*Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow*

*Effacement at the wind's hand.*

*All night your moth-breath*

*Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:*

*A far sea moves in my ear.*

*One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral*

*In my Victorian nightgown.*

*Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square*

*Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try*

*Your handful of notes;*

*The clear vowels rise like balloons.*

Many students can enter this poem relatively easily. It seems to have a “single speaker,” and though Plath deploys wildly contradictory metaphors, her persona is a familiar figure—that of an exhausted new mother. The style is one of apparent realism: this could “really happen.” The poem depicts feelings and a setting most students, even if they don’t have children, recognize. The new parent in the poem feels alienated from her new baby. Students can follow how Plath builds her personal myth: the baby is an “arrival” in a museum, the mother a rather detached figure who moves between feeling like a cloud and like a cow. The images show the progress and irony of her condition as they range from surreal—moth-breath, a window swallowing stars—to a more hopeful, easier simile: vowels like balloons. When students are first studying poetry, they are often told it is bad to “mix metaphors,” but Plath, like Dickinson, wildly mixes metaphors in search of the transformation into a different realm. It’s good to question prejudices about inconsistency. In addition, I wanted to present this as an example of a poem with difficult metaphorical language that is relatively easy to teach.

It’s more challenging to teach poetry that confuses the issue of “who is speaking.” I’ve often taught a book-length poem, *Muse and Drudge*, by Harryette Mullen, of whom Sandra Cisneros has written, “Hip hyperbole, thy queen is Ms. Mullen.” The book, a lyric meditation which shakes up the question of “speaker” and “speakingness,” uses the style of a collage-voice, a composite of many types of utterance. Its playfulness ceaselessly undermines our expectations of poetic procedure, mixing common aphorisms, song lyrics, cultural truisms, mottos, clichés, asides. Written in unpunctuated quatrains, every page of this eighty-page book can be taken as a separate work. You can read each page by itself, each quatrain by itself; even each line can stand as a separate poem. The opening of the book, like any epic, invokes the muse figure—in this case Sappho, punning on lyric poet Sappho with her lyre/liar:

*Sapphire's lyre styles  
plucked eyebrows  
bow lips and legs  
whose lives are lonely too  
my last nerve's lucid music  
sure chewed up the juicy fruit  
you must don't like my peaches  
there's some left on the tree  
you've had my thrills  
a reefer a tub of gin  
don't mess with me I'm evil  
I'm in your sin  
clipped bird eclipsed moon  
soon no memory of you  
no drive or desire survives  
you flutter invisible still*

In response to this poem, one student noted: “You know who is talking, but it’s confusing to know what she’s saying.” Another said: “You *don't* know who is talking, but she has a really particular style of talking.” Not being certain of who is speaking in a poem isn’t always appealing to a junior English major endeavoring to “find herself” through poetry, to identify with a group, to find the money to buy a sweatshirt with a hood, or to believe someone will love only her. Poetry without an identifiable speaker or a single emotional register may be a hard sell. It is nonetheless inappropriate at every level to say to a student that it doesn’t matter whether she finds herself in poetry or not; it is also inappropriate not to include many alternative strategies for self-discovery—such as Mullen’s kind of poetry.

Mullen’s stanzas present multiple possibilities rather than assertions of bold certainty of what we are. Each line pursues its own logic in paratactic relation to others. The lines and phrases interact, and all interaction becomes the “who is speaking.” When students discuss the speaker issue here, the word *polyvocal* comes up—how the character in the poem pursues her cultural, sexual, ethnic critiques, taking

references from jazz, literature from the Renaissance to the present, from movies, socio-political fusions and pop culture, braiding historic memory and re-tooling it. Mullen ironizes the very agility at which she excels, acting as a synthesizing presence, becoming an energetic trickster-goddess, one who does not rely on notions of other gods or nature. The music in this vast poem seems like the montage in our heads as we drive in a haze to work or school, hearing corporate news of war; as we sit ding-ding-ding downloading the email; as we are on hold with the traffic department; as the cell phone battery goes out; as we hurry home to make dinner—or rather, to bring home the take-out. Harryette Mullen has said that her inclination is to “pursue what is minor, marginal, idiosyncratic, trivial, debased, or aberrant in the language that I speak and write,” noting that this courtship is a gesture of defiance. She says she wishes to “recycle familiar and humble materials in search of a poetry of everyday language: puns, double entendres, taboo words, Freudian slips, jokes, riddles, proverbs, folk poetry. . . .” Like the oracle-bone-divining poets, the poet here pursues unity as an elusive ancestral collection of voices, a pursuit that goes with the charge Wordsworth gives to poets in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*—to speak to and for all people.

II. The understanding that every word matters and can be of interest

It is common to hear students talking about “the idea behind the poem.” There is no idea “behind” a poem, I say. The words and their phrases are what we have. Generally it is helpful to know some of the cultural or historical context of the poem. It is interesting and somewhat relevant to know if the poem had a theoretical apparatus to accompany it. But basically, we have the poem on the page.

Poetry asks us to attend to language very carefully, because the qualities of individual words and their relationships to one another are what matters. Styles and theories of reading come and go over the centuries, and they do not all emphasize the evolution of diction. Paying attention to an attractive poem, like falling in love, occurs

because something draws us to an object of interest. Paying more attention makes for more love, but the attraction must be based on interest in the first place. Would the oracle-bone diviner, paying attention to the signs, have been able to do his work if his signs had been uninteresting? Surely part of the poet's job is to build a case for her compressed expression, and it is the interpreter's job to enjoy the effort. The reader's job is to stay interested.

Loving individual words is a way of staying interested in a culture. Think about the word "special" in its current usages. In the phrase "United States Special Forces," the word "special" is resoundingly inspiring if someone with nationalistic conviction has a family member serving in Iraq, but ironic if one is opposed to the present war. The same word "special" occurs in the same phrasal position in "United States Special Olympics." "Special Olympics"—a beneficent idea—doesn't allow quite the same ironic possibilities as does "Special Forces." Once we become sensitized to its occasional ironies, we hear the word differently: "special" fares on airlines, or "special" meals—and in fifties movies, sometimes seen on Saturday night, "Saturday night *specials*" are weapons. Our children have invented a phrase for family quarrels during the Christmas season: rather than saying a family member has "issues" or problems, we say he has "special topics."

A contemporary poet who diligently attends to diction and who loves minimalist forms is Carol Snow, whose book *For* isolates perceptions in phrases that serve both personal and cultural memory. Here is one of her poems in which even each punctuation mark has implication and formal heft:

*NEWS OF*

*another massacre; and the clean bright morning.*

*Keeping walking. 'Contradiction' is human—I know that.*

*And 'knowing' . . . A stirring from the place the whirlwind—something  
like fear—arises, and watching my breath*

*to still that. Suddenly thinking somewhere in the breath—along the breath, is an understood place. Somewhere—but somewhere in passing—where the matter is reconciled.*

This poem opens with reference to explicit political content, but the reference is generalized. A student might ask about this problem of reference, how do we know when to care? What is the difference between obscure and oblique references, the evocative and the obfuscating? The student without experience in literary exegesis might make up a wild narrative on the side, using her favorite nouns; she might become annoyed and say, “Why does Carol Snow get to do this and I don’t?” It’s a natural question that can be answered in part by asking whether the student is drawn to the piece. One might add that the specialized features of poetry belong to everyone. In other words, Carol Snow gets to do this, and so do you.

Eliot and Pound gave modern readers a sense that specific cultural and historical references are stand-ins for universal nature and for the minds of writers. Many references in poetry may be glossed or Googled; it’s harder with a private allusion. Yet it’s possible to get a bushel of emotive information from the symbolic nature of an image, especially if you trust your ear. Bob Dylan’s “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” begins with images that might be right out of Rimbaud’s turbulent symbolism—“With your mercury mouth in the missionary times / And your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes”—to describe the attributes of a lover who has a timeless mystique.

Snow’s “massacre” is one of those works with a tremendous symbolic maze inside of it. A student might ask, “How can I relate to this poem unless I know whether the poet refers to Uganda, Kosovo, Rwanda, Darfur?” Because “massacre” is a nearly unbearable word, it puts the human imagination into an unbearable place. The OED shows how this word has evolved and devolved: massacre, in the sense of the brutal slaughter of people in huge numbers, has in it the French *maçacre*, a slaughterhouse—but before that, *macecrarius*: “a provision dealer.” The horror of the word has intensified throughout

history, as common usage accretes, sheds and fuses meaning into it, so that the massacre in Snow's poem is Herod's massacre, the Huguenots, Native American peoples, the massacre in Croatia. Concurrently, there is also the de-intensification of the word; "massacre" is sometimes used about the outcome of a college football game.

"Whirlwind" is also a diction moment of note. Often used in conjunction with "romance"—a whirlwind romance—*whirlwind* is notably used in the Old Testament when the prophet Elijah is taken up into one: "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Can Elijah's whirlwind and a whirlwind romance co-exist? Not only can they, but the poet demands that they must. Snow's whirlwind—no small matter—is stripped of neither of these possibilities, Context seizes the word for itself. There's a memorable sentence about this sort of thing in R. P. Blackmur's essay on Wallace Stevens's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Blackmur comments: "Words, like sensations, are blind facts which, put together, produce a feeling no part of which was in the data."

Snow's poem commemorates breath, a breath carrying the body through and past a terrifying thought. Her multiple use of the "ing" endings—*morning, keeping, walking, stirring, knowing, something, watching*—make a rope-ladder of gerunds and participles across the breath-chasm, giving the poem a sense of process and of the present moment. The *ing* is a present-tense device and a grammatical synaesthesia, making verb-forms out of nouns and adjectives and vice versa.

The tentativeness of Snow's sentence structure, its jagged, bumpy surface, foregrounds the way the need for acceptance collides with a sense of powerlessness. Sentence fragments slip up on each other. There are six periods and only two sentences. This halting, disruptive quality may be hard for students to absorb. They often bring to class a vague emphasis on what they call "flow": "I like this because it flows



easily,” someone will say. Flow as in an oil spill? What makes “flow” and inherent good, we might ask? Do your lives always “flow”? Does an unpleasant incident or thought ever disrupt your day? Has a wave of desire ever entered you suddenly? If disruption is part of life, it is certainly part of poetry.

A new diction exercise I’ve given students is to archive good spam from the internet: it’s not exactly a muse in the classic sense, but pharmaceutical advertising provides immediate access to the realm of the unconscious in diction. My spam folder includes “treachery reclaim,” “arsonist fritter,” “My chemicals cardinal of the planetary’s most broadly inflicted antidepressants,” and “Erection for less. Easy Ordering. Sincerely, Esmeralda Fang.” Esmeralda Fang could be another of Bob Dylan’s women, like Madame Butterfly and the Sad-Eyed Lady. Mr. Ashcroft might want to lower his spam filter a bit.

### III. The idea that meaning circulates on many levels

If Snow’s poem isolates phrases to slow down the thought process, this next poem, by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, deploys almost an opposite strategy: it is a syntactically turbulent poem; its sentences are multi-grammatical and poly-logical, its logic is hard to follow. But you *can* follow it, and the poem does “flow” in a surprising way. Berssenbrugge uses technique of collage and montage from visual art to show the seams and constructed nature of her perceptions. She layers physical observations, speculations, and commentary in process analysis, mostly in declarative sentences:

*TEXAS*

*I used the table as a reference and just did things from there  
in register, to play a form of feeling out to the end, which is  
an air of truth living objects and persons you use take on  
when you set them together in a certain order, conferring privilege  
on the individual, who will tend to dissolve if his visual presence  
is maintained, into a sensation of meaning, going off by itself.  
First the table is the table. In blue light*

*or in electric light, it has no pathos. Then light separates  
from the human content, a violet-colored net or immaterial haze, echoing  
the violet iceplant on the windowsill, where he is the trace of a desire.  
Such emotions are interruptions in landscape and in logic  
brought on by a longing for direct experience, as if her memory of experience  
were the trace of herself. Especially now, when things have been flying apart  
in all directions,  
she will consider the hotel lobby the inert state of a form. It is the location  
of her appointment. And the gray enamel elevator doors are the relational state,  
the place behind them being a ground of water or the figure of water. Now,  
she turns her camera on them to change her thinking about them into a thought  
in Mexico, as the horizon when you are moving can oppose the horizon inside  
the elevator via a blue Cadillac into a long tracking shot. You linger  
over your hand at the table. The light becomes a gold wing on the table. She  
sees  
it opening, with a environment inside that is plastic and infinite,  
but is a style that has got the future wrong.*

This poem is in a style that has got the future right. It deploys several basic modernist techniques, especially those of Gertrude Stein writing in a cubist manner, placing phrases and sentences in an angular way to make an effect of uneven surfaces. This kind of writing derives some of its enchantment from having antecedents in a sentence disappear. Pronouns and antecedent nouns seem swallowed. Berssenbrugge's poem gathers force from abstract expressionist painting, as when the *yes* of a brush stroke meets the *maybe* of a thought.

When I try to teach this poem to undergraduates or to a general audience (at a writer's conference, for example) there is often resistance, a balkiness *extraordinaire*: "Why can't she say it straight? What is she trying to say? She should just write normally." At first, "Texas" may make students angry. They may think of this kind of work as a hothouse flower that requires too much care. They often don't want to spend the time on analysis when it's hard to get to get the emotional thrust of it. I give them permissions to bring their own impressions to the piece, even if they want the antecedents and the emotional register of the poem to be clear. If they respond with distress to what seems like the poem's arbitrary nature, I find it useful

to distinguish between writing that relies on chance operations—like Jackson Mac Low’s poems—and writing that uses indirection for a purpose. Marjorie Perloff, Steve Burt and others have written brilliantly about the many ways contemporary poetry adopts a disruptive grammar. Once students begin to look at poems in this new way they often become excited by the possibilities they are able to see—and by the pleasure of the endeavor.

Most of the sentences in “Texas” use a shift in perspective. As the pronouns in the course of an unfolding sentence become unhinged from their antecedents, the poem accumulates multiple perspectives without relinquishing any. In the first sentence, which continues for six lines, the “you” part of the sentence could be the “I” talking to the general “you,” to another specific you, or to herself. The second stanza assumes the perspective of a “she.” The third stanza is in the perspective of a “you” *and* a “she.” The free-floating references take on a life of their own, as the light is doing in this poem. The poem asks us to consider what our point of reference is as we try to look at something. There are always odd angles when we’re trying to figure out how light strikes objects: photons don’t have mass but tables do. Berssenbrugge suggests that just as light and its effect on the table can be thought of at a slant, so can a thought or a phenomenon of feeling. The irregular, non-grammatical syntax might cause an experience of uneasiness within an illusion of wholeness. A metaphysical version of this unease appears in Dickinson’s “There’s a Certain Slant of Light.” How can an instructor teach students to love a kind of beauty that is counter to “normal” beauty? I hope I’m suggesting that there are many kinds of normal. You cannot teach love, but you can demonstrate causes for love. Walking outside a museum after having seen a powerful art show, you see the world through the painter’s eyes. Certain kinds of poetry bring that experience too—of perceiving the world differently because of having been exposed to different angles. One’s relationship to space has been changed, as if one had entered a haze of otherness that is not ego-bound. Our lives navigate between sense and non-sense. In its multiplicity, “Texas” is eccentric but not

private. It expands perception, and has a strange relationship to its feeling-tone but doesn't give itself over easily. Yet I have a strong emotional response when I read it, and since I write poetry that contains epistemological argument, I like teaching such work. "Texas" comes with a strong strain of skepticism; either it is possible to represent the world and our feelings for it directly, or it is not. The poet has learned to accept ambiguous states with a longing for reality. Barbara Guest calls this "Fair Realism." My Brazilian-born mother calls it "saudades"—a longing for home even if one is already home.

IV. The conviction that the strange mystery of our existence can be represented

My fourth point will mostly remain in the realm of suggestion: poetry allows the mind to come into contact with the impossible oddness of everything. Andrew Joron has called this "the unsayable." Jung called it the collective unconscious. I often think of it as the spirits of the world and word coming into contact at ineffable points. Here's another poem I like to teach; it's by Alice Notley and, like my other examples, it addresses what might be described as a form of existential anxiety:

*WHEN I WAS ALIVE*  
*When I was alive*  
*I wore a thin dress bare*  
*shoulders the heat*  
*of the white sun*  
*and my black thin*  
*dress did envelop me*  
*till I was a shell*  
*gladly and breeze*  
*ruffled and filled*  
*against good legs*  
*the translucent fabric and my*  
*heart transparent*

*as I walk toward Marion's  
and Helena's as my  
skirt empties and fills with  
cooling air*

Notley's poetry—like other work from the New York School in the sixties and seventies—has associated itself with art and with recovering a process-orientation in poetry, with styles of unassumingly fresh meditation, non-literariness and natural-sounding speech tones. Teaching this poem, I might begin by isolating the shift in verb tense. The title, "When I Was Alive," puts forth (and the apparent "I" speaks out, or into, a state of being alive from a seemingly posthumous state, or speaks from a state which contrasts with aliveness) something that once existed and now doesn't. Students are often made uneasy by the fact that the action changes from past tense in three-quarters of the poem to present tense in the last stanza. The woman speaking remembers an experience of walking along, in a thin dress, toward the places of two women named Marion and Helena. She notes the transparency of the fabric and of her heart. The tone of the first two stanzas is lightly, sweetly elegiac, then changes, just as the speaker's dress loses physicality. The jaunty tone seems hard for a ghostly person to manage. Why is there no punctuation? The ontogenic insecurity of the persona intensifies as the breeze whips through the unpunctuated, songlike quatrains as if through small city streets.

Notley's poem seems Keatsian in the best sense—that of negative capability. In the way Keats's poetic persona knows he can't be a nightingale, doesn't want to want to be a nightingale, but wants to want to want to be a nightingale, or rather, doesn't want to die, the floating, alive-dead-reborn woman in this poem might be in sync with all these Keatsian desires, and even the desire to be another wonderful bird—the one in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," for example—that makes its poet happy only by being golden and unflappable—the symbol for art in the spiritual realms.

If students don't know what they are supposed to feel about the meaning of the experience presented, or about its tone—"When I Was Alive" seems light, even a bit fey, about being in motion, in solitude—this uncertainty in relation to things or events is brought to us by the twentieth century. It favors the sense of process over destination. It isn't that the woman is in any one place, but she is in process at the many points of searching. This searching brings the deeply personal and social moments of a day into temporary focus. Notley's poetic stand is that she is never alienated from herself and her own mind for very long. I do think this stand in art connects us both to our ancestral states, like the oracle-bone script, and to new ones.

I would like to conclude by saying that teaching, reading and studying poetry do not substitute for other kinds of moral activity; for me, all of these activities are very important, and exist beside my spiritual practice of writing and meditation, and also beside social and political activism (which will have to be the subject of another talk). But I heartily believe that the habits of mind learned from reading and engaging with poetry can counter a culture of greed, narcissism and blind destruction, and help the poetry reader to live with patience and attentiveness. I urge you to keep a great range of poetry in your life; if you run out of poetry ideas, email me at Saint Mary's, as I always have something I'm excited about. Any temporary difficulties in confronting the challenges of poetry will be assuaged by the boundless possibilities of perception that poetry offers, just as, at this moment, the scratching of the fern with its black orderly seeds at the window, the squirrel building its house of twigs, and the huge national debt all provide a context. The constructed world exists in relation to an unknowable, endangered world. Stevens writes, in *The Necessary Angel*, "The subject matter of poetry is not a collection of solid static objects extended in space, but the life that is lived in the scene it composes . . . ." You make some sense of things as if you were your own diviner of signs, as if the cracks in the oracle bone were details brought from this world into this world.

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Brenda Hillman, "Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Certain Contemporary Poems", published by The University of California Press. <http://www.ucpress.edu>. Copyright © 2008 by the Regents of the University of California. Reprinted by permission of The Judith Lee Stronach Memorial Lectures on the Teaching of Poetry, University of California, Berkeley. <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu>. Originally Published: August 16th, 2010