

## PAYING ATTENTION TO ELEMENTS IN POEMS ~Tryfon Tolides

What is the poem about? Describe it, its essential drama(s), their structure and/or unfolding. Are they compelling for you? Do they move you? Why? Where? How? Does the poem work (or not) for you? Why (why not)? Who and/or what are the presences/actors in the poem? In what way are they invoked? How is the poem made/built?—how does it get from where it starts to where it ends?—where and what are its divisions and how do they link together?/how does the poem cohere, internally? What recurs?—theme, words, etc..... effects....

Are there voices speaking in the poem, in any way you might conceive of “voices?” What is their relationship to each other? Toward whom/where/what is their speech going and from what/whom/where is it coming (directionals)? Describe the speech’s distance (dilation) (does speech travel far either from where in the speaker it is coming or towards where it is going), what of its immediacy, intimacy, detachment, texture, dynamics....

How does the language and its movement relate to the drama(s)? How does the poem move in its flow? How or when does it stand still? What of its movement or standing still-ness? Talk about the density of the language. The language’s register: high/low, abstract/concrete; and mode: interrogating, commanding, directing, questioning, answering, defending etc. What argument is the language/poem making? By what means? Direct? Indirect?

Consider sentence lengths, phrase lengths, breath lengths, line lengths and their effects and how they are arranged relative to one another (i.e. a long sentence followed by a short one; or if the poem is one long sentence, or many short ones; what is the effect?) What of the syntax? Does it strike you as “normal?”

If the speech/sound of the poem can be charted, like a musical composition, where does it swell/crescendo, ebb, and how are these movements/flows/cadences related to the poem’s essential drama(s)?

What strikes you in the poem? What are the effects on you? What points, words, nodes, aspects, spots, locations, places, landmarks, turns, shifts.... in the poem are crucial, important, surprising, unique, lynchpins, mysterious, unusual, patterned....? Of what’s important, why is it so?

What works well in the poem? What doesn’t work? What do you like best/least?

What is the poem’s/speaker’s tone (his/her/the poem’s attitude toward the subject(s)? How can you tell?

Where is the speaker situated spatially/physically, temporally, psychically, emotionally? Point of view. With respect to who/what?.... Who/what is s/he speaking to? What is the view like? Is the poem zoomed in or general in scope? Does the focus move around? And the speed? And the clarity: Clear? Obscure? Opaque?

What is the place/function of time (also consider the tense), weather, setting....?

What is the main material of the poem? Memory? Wonder? Internal/external? Politics? Pots and pans? etc. How is the poem told: as story/legend, myth, fact, as if, as complaint, argument/polemic, political, pastoral, as formula, directive, equation, prayer, memory, song, invention, imagining, address, art, anthem, list, encounter, incantation, speech, meditation, wish....? What is the effect on you of the mode of poem’s telling?

Think of the poem as a living organism, comment on aspects of its life, its livingness, its gait, does it limp, how it breathes, identifying marks on its body. Or as a world, a place, perhaps its shape on the page in terms of identity, like a map of a country or continent with bays, peninsulas, outlets, borders, rivers, forests, mountains....

What cannot be explained? What works/is like “magic”?

What don't you understand? Pose a question or two about the meaning or structure. Also, offer a statement or observation to enlighten others on the poem.

**Brief Poem Guide.** Structure/content/sense/movement. What's it about (the poem's essential dramas)? What's it doing? How? What's it saying (to whom, from whom and where)? How's it made/linked together? Does it have parts/regions? Behavior of language: densities and variation, syntax, punctuation, flow, rhythm, line and sentence length and variation? How does language act to register and/or convey the dramas? What surprises? What stands out? What do you like/respond to best/most? Why? What's important to the writer of the poem?

### **SOME IDEAS ON ART AND POETRY FROM ARTISTS AND POETS:**

**Louise Bourgeois** "The artist who discusses the so-called meaning of his work is usually describing a literary side-issue. The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself."

**W.S. Merwin:** "All poetry comes from listening. What you're listening for is what you don't know, trusting and letting it lead you to so many places. We need what we know but that, finally, is so small, and it is also very deceptive, it can hide what you don't know and make you think it is only part of the real thing.... the real thing is vast, the unknown. The imagination, which goes beyond knowledge, moves closer to the unknown, and comes out of the unknown." Images in childhood are what lean us toward poetry. Camus said we return to a very small number of dominant images. "You must respect what, find out what, you really want to do, and respect that, not paying attention to only other people's expectations. And of course not everybody can do this, this. Not everybody has the freedom to do it. Bertrand Russell says if a poet cannot be independent, nobody on earth can; not everyone can be independent; i.e. a poet is responsible for being independent; he is a guardian of independence... and you have to give an example of the way of doing it the way it has to be done because maybe nobody else can do it... You have to speak for people who cannot, speak for any kind of life that cannot speak for itself. And you have to try to maintain that kind of freedom if you can, because it's not self indulgence, it's the important thing, it's paying attention."

**Boris Pasternak:** "The proper task of art is to be always an observer, to gaze more purely than others do, more receptively and faithfully."

**Gunter Kunert:** "I could do nothing else and—what was more decisive for the future—I never wished that I could do anything else.... I am no good for any useful purpose...."

**Diane Arbus** "But I don't think that's the sort of thing you can calculate on because there's always this mysterious thing in the process." ; "I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself." ; "If you scrutinize reality closely enough, it's fantastic the more specific you are, the more general you will be."

**Marc Chagall** "I have always done without theory and method." ; "I am unable to see how I draw. My hand sees, but my eyes are often turned toward the interior and focused on other drawings and paintings I shall realize one day." ; "In my pictures there is not one centimeter free from nostalgia for my native land."

To have great poets there must be great audiences too. ~Walt Whitman. Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. ~T.S. Eliot, *Dante*, 1920. It is the job of poetry to clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things. ~Stephen Mallarme. The true poet is all the time a visionary and whether with friends or not, as much alone as a man on his death bed. ~W.B. Yeats To be a poet is a condition, not a profession. ~Robert Frost. Poetry is an event, not a record of an event. ~Robert Lowell. Poets utter great and wise things which they do not understand themselves. ~Plato. A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a homesick-ness or a lovesick-ness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words... ~Robert Frost

## Tryfon Tolides

“Five of these poems were written in my village in Greece; the other two in Marfa, Texas, in the high desert. With the exception of ‘From “Standards in Norway,”’ which is a poem referencing a song on a Keith Jarrett recording, the poems are about place. Even the Jarrett poem, while starting with the song, finds its way to place. One poem was written from my balcony, two during walks; one looks back on a day at day’s end, another does the same but then extends its look back upon a life. “Poems begin in a real place, for me, in the world more than in the mind; or if the mind is involved, the mind becomes the place it sees—reflects it, anyway. Place more than mind, and place more than people. Place or its elements, without interpretation, without metaphor—that alone can be the poem, just a thing ringing out; or it can bring me to experience and consider time, consciousness, longing, or through memory the past and what is gone or fleeting, or the echoing of some absence; or I may be brought to consider the world at this current strained point in time. I start with place, often by simply describing what’s in front of me. Then the poem begins to take me where it will. I would also say that all seven poems are poems of solitude; and silence; and loneliness, as Isaac the Syrian understands loneliness: an experience of the presence of God, which includes the feeling of abandonment.”

Tryfon Tolides was born in Korifi Voiou, Greece. His first book manuscript, *An Almost Empty Walking*, was a 2005 National Poetry Series selection, published by Penguin in 2006. In 2009, he received a Lannan Foundation Writer Residency in Marfa, Texas.

### Things to Do

Bring sand to my mother’s grave.  
Trim the wild plum tree with the small axe  
to keep shoots from growing against the house and shedding in the yard.  
Wash the old green painted pottery jug.  
Sit on cliffs and gaze at the valley,  
at the church against the blue.  
Feel the fresh air.  
Consider the stones of stone houses and the houses entire on hills  
or where they happen to be.  
Listen to the rooster.  
Clean the yard and gather kindling wood.  
Feel the sun.  
Go for a walk with the dog  
that appeared suddenly at my door today.  
Walk beyond the village.  
Feel the dry grass and weeds under our feet as we walk.  
Stop at the grassy knoll above the gorge and peer down where stone meets stone  
and listen  
to the winter river, to the rubbery cloth bird wing sounds, the cry of a truck  
in the winding mountain road across the valley.  
See water shining on cliff rock.  
The running water and its path nobody but the water makes.  
Feel the sun.  
Sit there a while.  
Watch the dog sleep in his golden brown fur against the earth.

### List and Process

Luminous April wheat fields under the Greek sun, their curves and dips,  
some of the green made yellow gold under the sun and a curve's  
parabola, the breeze turning a field into a moving sea with small waves,  
undisciplined advancing armies of glitter, and in the adjacent bare furrowed  
tractor-plowed field an island with a tree and a few stones, a rise  
on the topographical map of the field, the sun on my face.  
There is no last word. Joy repeats yet is singular, and the wildness of being.  
I could stand in this glow watching sunlight and waves, hearing  
and feeling the air. Part of me holds these visions as I leave,  
though I return a number of times to the glow and curve and presence of  
the green shoot field before finally going, back onto the road and the lizards  
come to life running across the road like shadows, the land haunted with  
spirit, that is, filled with spirit.

Two white horses on a green hill. Birds drawn to a tree like filings to a magnet,  
but also following each other there. The slanting, curved furrowed tractor-  
plowed field next to the fresh green spring field. Sweet, sunlit.  
The freshly plowed brown, redder in one curvy place, white brown on a crest,  
a kind of bread already, or precursor of bread. Purple flowers  
on the side of a hill, their shaking color on my eyes. I become more and more  
where I am, the rhythm and way of the walking, lost in the way, the road  
and all that is off the road, going slowly, in time, in step with the land.

### From "Standards in Norway"

On the second track, "Little Girl Blue," Keith Jarrett plays  
a seven-note phrase with an eighth one made of a breath after.  
The pattern goes back and forth between two notes.  
The seventh note repeats the sixth, as if landing there twice,  
and finally, as if someone tries to jump to fly  
three times, each time coming back down and the third  
landing twice. The breath note after is a sigh.  
Between the last note and the sigh, the bass line waits.  
Just brushstrokes and Jarrett accompanying himself  
and silence, then he sighs—an exhalation,  
maybe sadness. He stays as close as he can to the music  
while it is happening, without interfering. As a boy  
I remember the bus coming from the market town to my village,  
then leaving, scattering chickens to the side of the road.  
Dogs and children trailed the bus till it was gone.  
But more than seeing it off, we were gone with it. With it and out  
of its way at the same time. And what remained of the bus  
in us after. I'd come back breathless, in pieces of star.

### Afternoon

Cool air arrives, sounding in high parts of the huge silvery plane tree  
in the churchyard. In the schoolyard, children add their steps and  
voices, the ball travels through the last of the sunlit air. My neighbor's  
yard with its canopy of grape leaves is in shade, save for a spot of  
brightness on the edge of the wash kitchen where she sleeps at noon.  
Outside its door her black yard slippers. The phone rings, no one  
answers. Another old woman knocked on her door an hour ago,  
she didn't answer. It's past the time of noontime naps, it's seven. There's  
still plenty of light. It doesn't get dark till after nine. She called earlier  
to give me warm leek pita. The last thing as I closed her gate  
was the creaking, which could be oiled, but she wants to hear when  
someone is coming. Now her roof is creeping with summer afternoon  
shadows and splotches of light—a camouflage—the top half  
of one of the chimneys is still all in horizontal light—bright, deep, sharp,  
sweet. And melding. The shine of the iron water jug on her stove  
must be fading.

## **November Surf (Robinson Jeffers)**

Some lucky day each November great waves awake and are drawn  
Like smoking mountains bright from the west  
And come and cover the cliff with white violent cleanness: then suddenly  
The old granite forgets half a year's filth:  
The orange-peel, eggshells, papers, pieces of clothing, the clots  
Of dung in corners of the rock, and used  
Sheaths that make light love safe in the evenings: all the droppings of the summer  
Idlers washed off in a winter ecstasy:  
I think this cumbered continent envies its cliff then. . . . But all seasons  
The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep,  
Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm that prepares up the long coast  
Of the future to scour more than her sea-lines:  
The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous,  
The rivers mouth to source pure; when the two-footed  
Mammal, being someways one of the nobler animals, regains  
The dignity of room, the value of rareness.

## **Place (W.S. Merwin)**

On the last day of the world  
I would want to plant a tree

what for  
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit  
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands  
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already  
going down

and the water  
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead  
and the clouds passing

one by one  
over its leaves

## **Yesterday by W. S. Merwin**

My friend says I was not a good son  
you understand  
I say yes I understand

he says I did not go  
to see my parents very often you know  
and I say yes I know

even when I was living in the same city he says  
maybe I would go there once  
a month or maybe even less  
I say oh yes

he says the last time I went to see my father  
I say the last time I saw my father

he says the last time I saw my father  
he was asking me about my life  
how I was making out and he  
went into the next room  
to get something to give me

oh I say  
feeling again the cold  
of my father's hand the last time

he says and my father turned  
in the doorway and saw me  
look at my wristwatch and he  
said you know I would like you to stay  
and talk with me

oh yes I say

but if you are busy he said  
I don't want you to feel that you  
have to  
just because I'm here

I say nothing

he says my father  
said maybe  
you have important work you are doing  
or maybe you should be seeing  
somebody I don't want to keep you

I look out the window  
my friend is older than I am  
he says and I told my father it was so  
and I got up and left him then  
you know

though there was nowhere I had to go  
and nothing I had to do

### *Those Winter Sundays by Robert Hayden*

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

### **I have a horse**

--Tomaz Salamun

I have a horse. My horse has four legs.  
I have a record player. On my record player I sleep.  
I have a brother. My brother is a sculptor.  
I have a coat. I have a coat to keep me warm.  
I have a plant. I have a plant to have green in my room.  
I have Marushka. I have Marushka because I love her.  
I have matches. With matches I light cigarettes.  
I have a body. With a body I do the most beautiful things that I do.  
I have destruction. Destruction causes me many troubles.  
I have night. Night comes to me through the window of my room.  
I have fun racing cars. I race cars because car racing is fun.  
I have money. With money I buy bread.  
I have six really good poems. I hope I will write more of them.  
I am twenty-seven years old. All these years have passed like lightening.  
I am relatively courageous. With this courage I fight human stupidity.  
I have a birthday March seventh. I hope March seventh will be a nice day.  
I have a friend whose daughter's name is Breditza.  
In the evening when they put her to bed she says Salamun and falls asleep.

**Allegro**, by Tomas Transtromer

After a black day, I play Haydn,  
and feel a little warmth in my hands.

The keys are ready. Kind hammers fall.  
The sound is spirited, green, and full of silence.

The sound says that freedom exists  
and someone pays no tax to Caesar.

I shove my hands in my haydn pockets  
and act like a man who is calm about it all.

I raise my haydn flag. The signal is:  
"We do not surrender. But want peace."

The music is a house of glass standing on a slope;  
rocks are flying, rocks are rolling.

The rocks roll straight through the house  
but every pane of glass is still whole.

(trans. Robert Bly)

## Postscript, by Seamus Heaney

And some time make the time to drive out west  
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,  
In September or October, when the wind  
And the light are working off each other  
So that the ocean on one side is wild  
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones  
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit  
By the earthed lightening of flock of swans,  
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,  
Their fully-grown headstrong-looking heads  
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.  
Useless to think you'll park or capture it  
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

## Eyesight (A.R. Ammons)

It was May before my  
attention came  
to spring and

my word I said  
to the southern slopes  
I've

missed it, it  
came and went before  
I got right to see:

don't worry, said the mountain,  
try the later northern slopes  
or if

you can climb, climb  
into spring: but  
said the mountain

it's not that way  
with all things, some  
that go are gone

## The Heron (Hayden Carruth)

Let me tell you, my dear, about the heron I saw  
by the edge of Dave Haflett's lovely little pond.

A great blue heron standing perfectly still, where it had been  
studying Dave's rainbows and brookies beneath the surface.

And I too stood perfectly still—as perfectly as I could—  
not twenty feet away, each of us contemplative and quiet.

Communication occurred. I felt it. Not just simple  
wonder and apprehension, but curiosity and concern.

It was evident. The great bird in its heraldic presence,  
So beautifully marked, so poised against the dark green water.

I in my raggedness, with my cigarette smoldering, my eyes  
squinting, my cap tilted back. Two invisibly beating hearts.

Then the impetus lapsed. The heron nodded and flew away.  
I turned back into Dave's workshop and picked up a wrench.

If goodness exists in the world—and it does—then this moment  
was the paradigm of it, a recognition, a life in conjunction with a life.

But why am I compelled to tell you about it? It was wordless.  
And why, over and over again, must I write this poem?