

HOW POEMS WORK

PAUL VERMEERSCH

The Use of Being Fat

BY EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

I used to have a superstition that
there was this use to being fat:
no one I loved could come to harm
enfolded in my touch —
that lot of me would blot it up,
the rattling chill, night sweat of terror.

I've learned that I was wrong.
Held, even held
they withdraw to the secret
scenes of their unmaking.
But then I think
it is true they *turn away* inside.
It feels so like refusal.
Maybe still there is something to my superstition.

— From *Fat Art/Thin Art*
(Duke University Press, 1994)

I'll let you in on a little secret. I have a superstition, too. Mine is that someday, maybe even during my lifetime, if I wish for it hard enough, poetry will once again enjoy the same widespread popularity it had during the days of Wordsworth and Coleridge, when books of poetry were often printed small so that workers in the field could keep them in their pockets, reading a few lines of verse whenever they could find the time.

If you're reading this column, maybe you share this superstition, or would like to.

Like most superstitions (stepping on cracks, throwing salt over your left shoulder, even wishing on stars), there isn't much factual basis for believing in it. We take certain things on faith, or in the absence of faith, hope, but we'll likely see John Goodman in *Playgirl's* centrefold before books of poetry regularly appear on this or any newspaper's bestseller list.

Which, in a roundabout way, brings me to *The Use of Being Fat*, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. I want to talk about how poems work — not only what makes them tick, the little gears and wheels of rhythm, rhyme and metaphor, but also how they work in our lives, how they function in society. Does *The Use of Being Fat* have a use in our society? To answer that question you need to ask three more.

First, what is she saying? Second, how is she saying it? And third, who is listening?

The first question seems easy enough to answer. She is saying she used to believe that because she is fat, she could keep her loved ones safe merely by holding them, that her body would absorb whatever harm might befall them. But despite her caring touch, her loved ones have still come to harm — "they withdraw to the secret scenes of their unmaking."

The wording suggests they bring

their fate upon themselves. But how? Is it because they turn away inside? Somewhat disgusted with her body, do they in fact refuse the protection of her magical embrace? The poem leaves this question unanswered.

But is that really what she's saying? Isn't there a larger statement here? A social statement? That perhaps it is a common human failing to react a certain way toward people, even toward those who love and care for us, because of how they look? Maybe there's some self-deprecating sarcasm in the title. If so, what does the last line mean? Is it redemption, or just wishful thinking? The poem leaves this unanswered as well.

Of course, having examined the what, we should look at the how. This poem appears deceptively simple. Possibly the only word in it that might cause a reader to pause for a moment is "unmaking." Unmaking, undoing, downfall. It's appropriate that this word should stand out from the others just a little. It's where the poem turns before the last four lines, which provide the counterpoint you often find at the end of a sonnet.

Sedgwick has done away with the rigid metrical requirements for the form, but there are still 14 lines, and the poem is arranged in the point-counterpoint fashion so typical of sonnets. She no doubt felt the form, or at least the gist of it, was well suited to the point she wanted to make. And so, finally, Sedgwick has made her point — but who is listening? Well, you've made it this far, haven't you? Maybe there is something to my superstition yet.

Paul Vermeersch is the Toronto-based author of Burn, a finalist for the 2001 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award, and the editor of the new I.V. Lounge Reader. He is at work on The Fat Kid, due next year.

HOW POEMS WORK

JULIE BRUCK

The Thin Man

BY DONALD JUSTICE

I indulge myself
In rich refusals.
Nothing suffices.

I hone myself to
This edge. Asleep, I
Am a horizon.

(from *New & Selected Poems*, Knopf, 1995)

In high-school English, most of us learned that a metaphor is a comparison between two things: the baby's a bud, my love is a dog, and so on. But these explanations have the rote feel of basic equations, and can't touch the intense pleasure and comfort we may take in metaphor, nor the way readers participate in the metaphor-making.

Donald Justice's little poem closes with a delicious metaphor, the kind that leaves a tiny sting of recognition. At rest, Justice's thin man is a line that could have been drawn by Saul Steinberg's extra-fine Rapidograph pen, but on a limitless, horizon-sized scale — so he's also the opposite of his waking refusals. At once, we feel the image's essential rightness and its doubleness. We "know" the fat man inside the thin one, we recognize his appetite in his infinite width. What's most amazing is the furious speed at which readers complete such comparisons, as though they were little riddles. Robert Hass once watched an audience respond to a reading of a short poem from W.S. Merwin's translations of aphorisms from Asian cultures, *Asian Figures*:

Spits straight up.

Learns something.

The audience, Hass says, began laughing almost before the poem was finished. Look at how much information is provided or withheld here, and what a good time the reader has leaping that particular ditch, at completing the connection. A precise metaphor makes the reader an active participant in the poem, rather than a passive witness: the reader must provide the missing information from his or her own experience.

Usually, a metaphor will have two parts — an object (in the Justice poem, the thin man), and an image (the horizon). For the reader to be most engaged, the image needs to be somewhat open-ended, and open to more than a literal interpretation. This, as the poet Stephen Dobyns has written, is not the same as vagueness, which has done so much to scare off readers of contemporary poetry. Justice's horizontal man presents no confusion — the image couldn't be sharper — but

its complexity keeps the reader active in the poem. This is the source of its surprise and mystery, because it's where readers make connections to mysteries of their own, tapping into "what they didn't already know they knew."

For a few weeks after September 11, a great deal of poetry zipped about on the Internet, and many net-users found poems by the Persian poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, or those of W. H. Auden in their e-mail boxes. Faced with a kind of horror unprecedented for most North Americans, and seized by a feeling of paralysis about how to respond, people seemed to hunger for the genuine comfort of metaphor, for something that could link us in our humanity, from Auden's ruminations in New York at the outbreak of World War II to Faiz's love poems. Such an electronic blitz of metaphor suggests more than an appetite for comforting Hallmark sentiments. What we sought, as we pressed "send" or read the poems on our screens, was something to speak to our inner lives, to restore our connection to a present that had become utterly alien.

Ironically, if we dig deeper into how poetry has responded to the cataclysms of the past, we sometimes find metaphor functioning by virtue of its sheer inadequacy: "The blood of children" wrote Pablo Neruda about the Spanish Civil War, "ran through the streets/without fuss, like children's blood."

Not much has changed, as I type Neruda's words at the end of another bloody year. We leave 2001 with fewer certainties, save this: Somewhere, someone is chiseling a metaphor for what it means to be alive at this moment. It seems a small, paltry thing, but as William Carlos Williams observed, "it is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." Poetry can unite and lift us out of our isolation. Peace on Earth, and may your New Year's reading bring you many, many small stings of recognition and delight.

Julie Bruck is a Canadian poet living in San Francisco.

HOW POEMS WORK

GLEN DOWNIE

What the Doctor Said

BY RAYMOND CARVER

He said it doesn't look good
 he said it looks bad in fact real bad
 he said I counted thirty-two of them on one lung before
 I quit counting them
 I said I'm glad I wouldn't want to know
 about any more being there than that
 he said are you a religious man do you kneel down
 in forest groves and let yourself ask for help
 when you come to a waterfall
 mist blowing against your face and arms
 do you stop and ask for understanding at those moments
 I said not yet but I intend to start today
 he said I'm real sorry he said
 I wish I had some other kind of news to give you
 I said Amen and he said something else
 I didn't catch and not knowing what else to do
 and not wanting him to have to repeat it
 and me to have to fully digest it
 I just looked at him
 for a minute and he looked back it was then
 I jumped up and shook hands with this man who'd just given me
 something no one else on earth had ever given me
 I may even have thanked him habit being so strong

— from *A New Path to the Waterfall*
 (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989)

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American writer Raymond Carver died of cancer in 1988, and this fine poem about his diagnosis resonates powerfully. Carver was famous for a style stripped of all ornament, and the simple language of the poem reassures — or perhaps deceives — readers that there's nothing complicated or difficult here. There's nothing exotic in the word choice, no surprising metaphor or unusual imagery, no self-conscious "poeticism." The language is always colloquial. But out of this plain, often blunt, material, Carver fashions some very sneaky miracles.

The deliberate avoidance of punctuation, pauses or stanza breaks in *What the Doctor Said* mimics a common complaint of patients: that doctors rush, don't take time to listen, or give us time to think. The opening run-on lines turn an attempt to break the news gradually into just the opposite; each phrase crashes suddenly into the next like a pile-up on a foggy highway: "it doesn't look good/ he said it looks bad in fact real bad." With disorienting speed, the situation seems to have worsened before our eyes, from "not good" to "bad" to "real bad." Ironically, the patient's first words after the news are, "I'm glad." It takes a split-second for us to connect this seemingly paradoxical response to the fact that the doctor stopped counting lesions after reaching 32.

From the brutal reality of too many lung lesions to count, we're dragged breathless to the doctor's response to these findings — which is, disconcertingly, not medical, but tenderly spiritual:

"are you a religious man do you kneel down/ in forest groves and let yourself ask for help . . ."

Has the doctor, moved by the extremity of the situation, suddenly dropped his customary clinical tone? Or has the patient, grasping the meaning of the overwhelming evidence, begun reporting the implication of what the doctor said, rather than his actual words? Either way, Carver the poet has definitely shifted gears.

Faced with life-threatening illness, patients often resolve to change. To the doctor's question about whether he's religious, and can ask for help, Carver the patient replies "not yet but I intend to start today." And when the doctor adds, "I wish I had some other kind of news to give you," the reply is "Amen" — an ironically religious response from the hard-drinking, hard-living writer. The poem ends on a further note of irony and ambiguity when habit forces the patient to shake hands with, perhaps even thank, "this man who'd just given me/ something no one else on earth had ever given me." Does Carver mean a death sentence? Or the impetus to change his life? The poem works because, though it appears to tell us a straightforward story of one man's situation, it actually asks us profound questions about all our lives, and what we will make of them, however long or short they may be.

Glen Downie worked for many years in cancer care. His most recent book of poetry, Wishbone Dance: New and Selected Medical Poems, was published in 1999.

HOW POEMS WORK
MICHAEL REDHILL

Coin

BY ALBERT GOLDBARTH

When the surgeons slit into my father they went to Jupiter
 they went so far, to a barren red moon of Jupiter's.
 I'd never been there. My mother had never been there
 in him, to a cave on that moon, to the runaway vein
 that snaked some inner wall. And even this they slit
 and entered, with their geiger counters that fit in a pore.
 They needed to hear its half-life keening wildly. There's
 one red anti-meson in everyone — here, at this, even
 they stopped. Here, at this, my father turned them back,
 as all of us were turned back, and he stayed
 — as everybody stays, no matter the opening up —
 alone in his pain. The microlasers won't usher you there;
 or love. In everybody, there's this final landscape
 only capable of supporting a population of one.
 I was thinking of this as the bus pulled up,
 the last bus of the night, at the hospital stop.
 It must have been the amber window squares of buslight
 in the 3 a.m. pit-dark — I saw that painting of the 18th century
 doctorpharmacist Michael Shuppach, studying
 a beaker of a patient's urine, meditating, empathizing,
 making the late Swiss afternoon light do great
 disclosing swirls around that honey and its sediment,
 more intimate in ways with this woman than any
 deep sexual splitting-apart or any kneeled confessional
 admission . . . down to the single citron valence-of-her,
 in its nakedness, in his crystal. There's
 one golden anti-meson in a life; and here, even he stopped.
 There was only one passenger riding the bus: one face
 staring out of a window. Someone
 needing a bus at 3 a.m. with a story of why
 — for a second, before I stood to board and then
 decided not to board, our eyes met,
 starting a common exchange. — Then
 the face shut like a change purse, over
 its single coin minted on Jupiter.

— from *Heaven and Earth: A Cosmology*
University of Georgia Press (1991)

Albert Goldbarth's poems hurt me. More than any other living American poet, he has a way of getting to me through his intellect, his language, his amazing polymathic ways. And then, once in, he deals a hammer blow — some connection, some bald moment of feeling — that leaves me awestruck. In *Coin*, he explores (weaves in and out of, riffs to, satirizes) the essential aloneness of human beings. He starts with his father — smart enough not to talk about his father's unknowable heart in any metaphoric way — this is the raw body: we see its red hallways, its filaments being parted and still refusing to give up its secrets. Not to doctors, not to loved ones. Because there is a "red anti-meson" in all of us (a meson is a tiny unstable particle made of one quark and one antiquark); something unseeable, unmeasurable and yet extant at the centre of us all.

Goldbarth's wide-ranging mind keeps pace with his language. His images dazzle. A buslight segues into early science practice, a beaker of urine distilled into "the single citron valence-of-her."

Through glass, an early doctor sees into this "golden anti-meson," then the poet views a yellowy face through a window. The quick-change of Goldbarth's mind gives us a poem of such lexical vigour that it stuns. Red and gold, blood and skin, the surface of Jupiter. One poem is not enough to show this poet's range. I could fill a page with lines from other poems that leave me gasping: "Plate tectonics: like blackened pieces/ of sweet pork crackling, the continents slide/ on their underside greases," and "Keats: in a little diorama-box I keep in my head,/ he's writing. London's summer light is made a firm oar-handle/ through the shutters, and its paddle-end is dazzlingly lifting/ words to the white page surface." A similar process must enact itself on Goldbarth. A poem like *Coin* has no antecedent. Bursting from some place only the poet can get to, it gathers up an armful of familiars and renders them into something utterly unique.

Michael Redhill's most recent collection of poetry is Light-Crossing.

HOW POEMS WORK
CHRISTIAN BÖK

 from
Avail

BY DAN FARRELL

My feelings of anger do not interfere with my work. In order to have good health, I have to act in a pleasing way to other more powerful individuals. At times I think people are trying to annoy me. I feel more angry about myself these days than I used to. More people than usual are beginning to make me feel angry. I am so angry and hostile all the time that I can't stand it. From time to time my feelings of anger interfere with my work. I feel that others are constantly and intentionally making me angry. I feel so angry that it interferes with my capacity to work. I feel unhappy about my physical health. My feelings of anger prevent me from doing any work at all.

— from *Last Instance* (Krupskaya, 1999)

Avail, by Dan Farrell, is a long poem that itemizes each response made by hospital patients when they were asked to fill in a medical questionnaire about their physiological health and psychological status. *Avail* provides a candid litany of woe, expressed in the flattened monotone of apathetic annoyance.

The poem redundantly paraphrases the same few feelings of chronic discomfort and aimless irritation, as if to show that the discourse of complaint has its own unique genres of hackneyed expression. The statements may originate from a diverse variety of respondents, but the reader nevertheless feels tempted to attribute each of these sentences to a single person — presumably the poet himself.

Avail evokes the kind of ennui that might plague suburban slackers at the dawn of a new millennium. The poem presumes that, in the modern milieu, our anxiety has become a kind of mass-produced, mass-marketed commodity that we experience with obligatory detachment in the hope that such anxiety does not interfere with our ability to work.

The poem suggests that the expression of such painful emotion has become so compromised by the confessional, if not narcissistic, routine of therapy that poets can no longer say anything truly authentic about their own emotional existence. The very act of trying to do so already functions within the generic purview of feel-good self-help.

Avail in effect parodies the ade-

quate, but mediocre, style of lyrical writing often produced by graduates from the average literary workshop. The poem suggests that the genre of the lyric has quite literally become a form that poets fill out, like an application, pencilling in the appropriate emotional responses somewhere in the blank space provided.

The conventional expectations of readership often demand that such poetry do little more than express the sentiments of its producer rather than produce a dissonance in its consumer. The reader almost begins to take on the role of a sociologist, filing away each emotional affidavit after having judged it accordingly for both its intensity and sincerity.

Avail questions the degree to which such emotional catharsis benefits the writer. The poem in fact suggests that the lyric may no longer avail us of its benefits because the lyric has now woven a veil that conceals other kinds of unusual feeling, thereby denying us the prohibited experience of other, more radical, more surreal, states of mind — ones that do not lend themselves easily to recognizable articulation.

The poem attempts to analyze the creative, literary potential, inherent in such unpoetic feelings as prolonged boredom and lethargic disgust. The poem conducts its experiment in a mood of scientific detachment, as if to suggest that intense passion can only interfere with the completion of such work.

Christian Bök's book of poetry, Eunoia, has been short-listed for this year's Griffin Prize.