

chapter 13

## Verse Chronicle: Gravel on the Tongue

### W. S. Merwin

W. S. Merwin's new book is so dreary, I had to recite *Henry V's* battle speeches just to get through it. Merwin gave up the burdens of punctuation so long ago it's hard to remember he began as a perfectly conventional poet of the fifties, one of those sons of Auden who lost their way. But who would have thought that the later master of barefoot surrealism, who could make a phrase about stars or bones or stones (those Dutch still-lifes of the late sixties) shimmer with numinous life, who could tease a nerve out of the dull flesh of prose, would end as a village explainer, as Stein called Pound? *The Vixen* doesn't want to be read; it wants to prose its readers to death:

*and now I have come to ask you to say what will  
free me from the body of a fox please tell me  
when someone has wakened to what is really there  
is that person free of the chain of consequences  
and this time the answer was That person sees it as it is  
then the old man said Thank you for waking me  
you have set me free of the body of the fox.*

Mnemosyne is the evil goddess of these poems: the onslaught of syntax renders the life of a lost world. Merwin lived for years in a

village in southwest France, and these poems are laments for the death of old culture (there is something primitive about that region of Albigensian heresies, so close to where the Basques speak Western Europe's one remaining pre-Indo-European language). This is *ubi sunt* poetry filtered through the Romantics, and the last words of the poems are a little thesaurus of belated gesture: *forgotten, gone, autumn, waiting, past us, rusted over, vanishing, looking back, the only time, finished stars, late summer, already gone, going, remembered, afterward, disappeared, remember.*

Where once Merwin used line breaks to give mystery to his phrases, now the sentence is pursued with unmediated vengeance, as if form itself were the crime. This style foregoes all the rhythm of attention punctuation confers—of pointing in its other sense. Punctuation shocks, withholds, hesitates, retards, reviews, resurrects. The advantage of a prose landscape without landmarks—the breathlessness, the giddy rush of speech and image—seems small recompense for the losses.

One might argue that Merwin's sentences are at times the imitation of an action: "the wind-scorched leaves . . . whipped in the hissing rush / over restless litter and cracked ground until the boughs / groan crash finally snap striking back flailing." They're a textbook example of why imitation is a dead form of syntax. The technical problem of denoting the end of a thought drove medieval copyists to invent that series of extraneous and interpolated scratches we know as modern punctuation, our miniature collection of dots, slashes, and curls. (Merwin succumbs to capitals, as in the inset passage above, for the direct representation of speech—otherwise it's every sentence for itself.)

Though he describes the tangles of ivy, the flash of streams, these are dreams of experience, what experience would be if it were prettier and bought retail, like wallpaper. The past underlies the present in ghostly palimpsest, but this retrospect without governance almost requires a sentimental cast: otherwise why look so firmly back? Occasionally there's a whiff of the personal, a bright turn of nature ("the twisted flags / of dried irises knuckled into the hollows"). A few historical monologues, and the memory of a local

holocaust, show how edgy this style might become. It's easier to forgive a lack of punctuation in our ancestors.

Merwin has already written about this land in *The Lost Upland*, his stylish autobiographical fiction. He is one of our best memoirists—his prose is redolent, modest, attentive—and he is still a translator of great gifts. It isn't simply that his poems are a species of prose—his *prose* is a species of prose, and it's lovely. In his poems the writing is now so wordy and lifeless, so lacking in the virtues of prose knowledge—I've never thought before that punctuation is a moral choice. This run-on, the-sentence-is-everything-that-is-the-case style (like Molly Bloom on Prozac) is an aesthetic decision, not mere laziness. It just looks like laziness.

## Sharon Olds

Sharon Olds has Large, Important Emotions and some fairly odd ways of expressing them. *The Wellspring*, her fifth book, is a family epic, the life of Sharon Olds from unfertilized egg to wife and mother, from before the cradle to before the grave. Olds has raw, wounded energy; an almost animal directness; a savage way with metaphor—it's hard to know exactly when her lines lapse into the comic-book vulgarity that is her only medium of emotional exchange.

Olds is so raptured by family (her book *The Father* was one long autopsy), it almost excuses her rather creepy voyeurism—relentlessly high-minded, as most lowly things are. She invades her parents' bedroom with the cheerful officiousness of a social worker:

*Today, I thought of that blood, rippling out,  
and the blood that seeps up, out of the side  
of a trout when a pressed-down blade breaks through,  
silvery salty sweet fish  
of my mother's maidenhead. It was in the dark,  
the harsh shantung blinds drawn down, the  
ruffled curtains unloosed at the waist.  
She was naked with a man for the first time,*

*the intricate embroidery silks of her  
 pudenda moist upright alert  
 terrified, thrilled, each hair  
 reaching out and curling back, she was  
 there in the bed like her own parents,  
 there at the center of the world. Now  
 she was the loaf laid into the pan  
 raw and being fed now into the bright oven.*

This must be the poetry Freud had in mind, a poetry completely devoured by the family romance. But it would be a mistake not to admire the confident violation of our well-meant privacies and well-earned proprieties. That gutted trout, for instance, is a bad joke about a bad joke; but the withheld metaphor is as calculated as an analyst's fee. Olds exceeds your worst dreams of "honesty," and it seems to cost her nothing—her poetic voice is numbing as Novocain, deadening to anything it might say. (Plath and Sexton were mere innocents compared to her.) She's like a girl dancing too long in a peep show—her naked skin has become her clothing. But a loaf in a pan!

For bad taste and preening Isadora Duncan passion, for a ballet of steely insecurities and a twinge of moral ugliness, Olds can scarcely be bettered. If she writes of an abandoned farmhouse, it's abandoned because the army has taken the Japanese-American owners away. We are all on the right side now—it's easy to be, fifty years after the war. What would be hard would be resisting the temptation to secure your moral authority by condescending to the dead, to your parents ("ignorant people"), to people in the grip of war's irrational fears. She's the Tammany Hall of venal sincerity.

She'll write of her son, "I think of your penis, its / candor and virtue"; or of her mother, "Half of me / was deep in her body, dyed egg / with my name on it, in cursive script"; or of a dead gerbil, "trans- / mogrified backwards from a living body / into a bolt of rodent bread" (*transmogrified* isn't the word she wants, but neither is *bolt*—a bolt of bread!); or, imagining herself inside her father's testicles, "My brothers / and sisters are there, swimming by the

cinerous / millions” (*cinerous* may be the word she wants, but it’s hard to imagine why). She’s never gotten over the idea that her children were once inside her—she writes as if she wanted them there still.

There’s a great need for erotic poetry in English; our poetry is all emotion without sex (sexual intercourse may not have begun for Larkin until 1963—he was *joking*—but for most poets it hasn’t started yet). Olds is our poet laureate of oral sex, and as erotic as a greasy sock. She reports on her private acts with innocent *joie de vivre*, but they’re mechanical as a scratchy old porn movie—there’s something sad in the sleaze. She has taken voyeurism a good deal farther than most poets, but it’s herself she loves watching.

It makes matters worse and not better that Olds is a poet of no mean talent. No one without some of her gifts can be a good poet, but a poet with all of them can still be a bad one. Just when you’re caught by a turn of phrase, thinking she’s not so dreadful after all, she’ll write something that leaves you dumbstruck: “In the middle of the night, when we get up / after making love, we look at each other in / complete friendship.” It’s not like being told about sex by your eighth-grade health teacher—it’s like watching your health teacher demonstrate it.

### Virginia Hamilton Adair

Virginia Hamilton Adair is eighty-three, and the poems in *Ants on the Melon* have emerged from a long self-exile. She seems like an Ovid come home from the Black Sea after everyone has forgotten him, speaking a language slightly fussy, preserving in amber its archaisms and conventions. Adair published poems in *Saturday Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *New Republic* in the thirties and forties, so she wasn’t working in a vacuum—she had a long and mostly content family life on the edge of academia, and suffered one great tragedy in the suicide of her husband, a historian. She is now blind.

Adair was born a little after Elizabeth Bishop and a little before Amy Clampitt; a reader cannot help remembering, from the cir-

cumstances of this belated first volume, that Clampitt didn't publish her own first book until she was sixty-three. Parts of Adair are remarkably close to Clampitt: the love of nature and narrow landscapes, of the Wordsworths, of life in London (and travel in general). They are not at all similar as poets—Clampitt was word-drunk, a baroque free-verse poet of great flair and daring (and much repetition); Adair is smaller and mustier, given to whimsy, stultified and arthritic diction, and often placid rhyming. At her worst, she sounds like a parody of a parody of Yeats:

*My life's great tower fallen, from base to rafter,  
Across this deranged bed with its blot of blood,  
Appalling lover, where are the flowers of our laughter,  
The bright river of your thought in flood?*

She'll write of surfers "oaring with their arms / toward the horizon whence comes their hope" or, of a drowned girl:

*No push of pulse, no battle in the blood  
finally disturbed the saline melody  
when last the swell through dissonance of surf  
bore her, loose-fingered and with heavy hair,  
to resolution on the empty shore.*

At times you're back at some debutante's 1929 ball, hours after the Crash. Resurrected here are the tones and structures of the period when Adair began to write—not those of early Auden or Stevens or Frost or Eliot, the great exceptions, but of the mass of poets now forgotten, who thought themselves original and wrote like everyone else.

Too much of Adair's work is fustian amateur poetry of that bygone age. But some of her graces come from that age—enough time has passed for those old conventions to seem fresh again. There's an inconsequent clumsiness in most of her poems, but much verve, too. She sets a melon rind on an anthill, and sees it blacken

*with antmen out of hand  
wild for their melon toddies*

*just like our world next year  
no place to step or stand  
except on bodies.*

The “toddies” are giddy (her sprightliness is almost Bishop’s), but they prepare that sudden descent into Swiftian ferocity in the last line. You think you’ve understood the limitations of this poet, and it takes you aback. She has a good ear for speech (a conductor says, “If you hungry, we wire / ahead to a widow lady, fixes / a fine box supper for you-all”), but almost never employs it (an ear for speech is not the same as an ear for diction—we’re often deaf to our own diction). What Adair has presented in lines and stanzas, and once or twice in almost a whole poem, is a gift whose demands were callously ignored.

The biographical afterword, by her kind and solicitous friend Robert Mezey, suggests just what one *ought* to think—that, by not publishing, Adair escaped the need to uphold a reputation or respond to reviewers, to preserve favor or court expectation. I would say that it kept her from the jolt of challenge, that it insulated and stifled her. What would one give for a few more poems in the voice of her Eve?

*Not sure how I got there,  
But a perfect location: smogless,  
Free food & 4 unpolluted rivers.*

*The man I took to at once—  
Our bare bodies made us forget  
Our parents (if we ever had any).*

*Adam was given a desk job, naming  
Species; I typed the name tags,  
Kept the files, fixed coffee, dusted,*

*Found the best plants for food, picked  
Perma-press leaves for rainshawks  
& little aprons to keep off gnats.*

.....

*The snake was sure I'd ratted on him  
& bit me. Adam stomped him. Now his kids  
Can't play with our kids any more.*

*We were evicted from Eden Gardens.  
Those goons with the flamethrower!  
You better believe we went quietly.*

Despite the near-religious wonder elsewhere (there are some dire poems about Zen), the moony ghost-struck plangency and a diction nearly ludicrous, Adair has more jazzy surprise—though always, always in fragments!—than poets half or a quarter her age. Piecemeal there's a rare spirit at work.

## Mark Doty

Mark Doty's *My Alexandria* won awards from the National Book Critics Circle and the *Los Angeles Times*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and most recently won the T. S. Eliot Prize in Britain. I'm perhaps the only reader who disliked it, who thought it a bland and dispiriting example of contemporary free-verse *Life and Times*. Being gay and writing poems is an important occupation just now, but wasn't it an important occupation for Whitman, and Housman, and Auden? Being gay didn't stop Auden from writing good poems; I don't know why it should stop Mark Doty.

*Atlantis* is a confident performance—confident in the way that comes in middle age to poets who have won a few awards (that's when overconfidence comes, too). The poet begins to trust the contrariness of his impulses, begins to speak against himself. Doty has a life, and the life is written to the terms of his art:

*My salt marsh  
—mine, I call it, because  
these day-hammered fields  
of dazzled horizontals  
undulate, summers,  
inside me and out—*

*how can I say what it is?  
Sea lavender shivers  
over the tidewater steel.*

*A million minnows ally  
with their million shadows  
(lucky we'll never need  
to know whose is whose).*

This has his self-absorbed, whimsical, and irrelevant grace, taking pleasure in the passages of nature. The voice, in rhetorical questions and parentheses, keeps breaking in on itself. “I could go on like this,” he says a few lines later, and the trouble is, he does. He doesn’t know when to stop talking, and the poems natter on, little shivering shallows of talk. His poems tend to be about pointless walks through town or visits with friends, walks and visits so sweetly dopey you feel mean for pointing it out—at best they’re little descriptions of nature in a sub-Marianne Moore mode, without her refreshing and cruel eye. His poems have instead that kitchen-pantry-by-Ralph-Lauren look.

AIDS hovers at the edge of these poems like an unbidden guest. Doty doesn’t stand on a soapbox—he lost his lover to the disease and in many poems seems bewildered and stunned. His friends are victims, but he doesn’t convey their lives especially well; their stories are sad, professionally sad, but they’re also dull. We’ve become accustomed to the narrative of AIDS, to the arguments and denials, the rapid diagnosis and slow grief, to the whole architecture and religion of the disease. All the privacy has leaked out (when a subject has been too long public it becomes professional). The pressures are all toward genial confession; and when confession is genial, it isn’t confession any more—it’s public relations.

*This is what I imagine will happen,  
the spirit’s release. Michael,  
when we support our friends,  
one of us on either side, our arms  
under the man or woman’s arms,*

*what is it we're holding? Vessel,  
shadow, hurrying light?*

The poet and his friends suffer devastating loss. Your heart goes out to them; but he still isn't able to turn loss into poetry, he's only able to make it "poetic." And this often involves a revelatory flash of light. After *day-hammered*, *dazzled*, *haloed*, *brilliance*, *gleam*, *flashing*, *brightness*, after *flame* and *brilliant* and *flickering* and *coronas* and *licks of fire*, after *haloed*, *luminosity*, *brilliant*, *glitter*, *sunstruck*, *luminosity*, *radiant*, *iridescent*, *rainbowed*, *iridesce*, after *shimmer* and *flashing* and *rainbowed* and *brilliant* and *gleaming*, you're only a dozen pages into the book, with Roget's barely thumbed through.

The light show, the clutter of rhetorical questions (over a hundred of them, often huddled together as though they might get lonely), attempt their dramas in a poetry essentially passive: in the face of death, Doty has a deadpan flatness and loss of affect (other poems are scored by Rodgers and written by Hammerstein, as if at any moment Doty might get down on his knees and sing "Oklahoma!"). In a momentary gleam of description ("veiled like the marsh / gone under its tidal sheet // of mildly rippling aluminum") or an act of sexual cruelty, you see the harshness of desire the contemporary rhetoric is holding back; mostly you get lines like "you can see every bloom's // the multiple expression / of a single shining idea, / which is the face hammered into joy." Then it's on to a talking lighthouse.

## Louise Glück

Poetry is a species of fiction, but also a species of autobiography. The reader is dispossessed of the facts, and the dispossession makes poetry more permeable to myth and parable. Louise Glück has taken sustenance from myth in a poetry sometimes starved of all else: her hollow-voiced language is as full of self-conscious angst as a Bergman movie. *Meadowlands* is about the death of a marriage, played out against the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

In Glück's poems myth must be considered broadly, as the devastation of historical narrative by religious longing—Christian, pa-

gan, what matters is the refraction of the sins of the present through the sins of the past. She is an underhanded and suggestive poet, and when she titles a poem “Cana” you cannot expect to find a Jesus there. Cana was the site of a wedding where a miracle occurred, a minor and perhaps silly miracle by a god. The poem talks vaguely of forsythia, an estranged lover (or husband, as other poems make plain), of “emblems of light / which are more powerful, being / implicitly some earthly / thing transformed.” This collapses the notions of a god made man, a wedding at which the sign of that godhood is manifest, the fall toward martyrdom that the first miracle signifies, and the transformation toward which all religion (and all love) yearns: one thing turned into another is the silence beneath the sacraments. It’s a lot to suggest that your husband assumes the guise of Christ, but Glück is subtle in her means and bitter in her suggestions.

The dozen poems at the heart of *Meadowlands* are brute dialogues of marital squabbling and pure meanness, more vengeful than anything Glück has written:

*I said you could snuggle. That doesn't mean  
your cold feet all over my dick.*

*Someone should teach you how to act in bed.  
What I think is you should  
keep your extremities to yourself.*

And again:

*You should take one of those chemicals,  
maybe you'd write more.  
Maybe you have some kind of void syndrome.*

*You know why you cook? Because  
you like control. A person who cooks is a person who likes  
to create debt.*

These lines are the husband talking, but the wife is no better. They’re quarrelsome, childless, deeply unsympathetic adults (though they don’t act like adults)—you can imagine what the sitcom will be like, but it would have to be written by Albee and star Taylor and

Burton. Little said by this couple is said without intent to wound (they're like Greek warriors, armed to the teeth). In a dozen lines you learn more about them than you ever want to know; they're appalling, but they're also sad and ridiculous.

Glück seems to realize how airless and closeted these scenes are, and much of the rest of the book returns the marriage through Odysseus and Penelope, the straying husband and patient wife. Glück also assumes the voices of Circe and Telemachus, as if she were, or wanted to be, at once wife, mistress, and the abandoned child of her own childless marriage. Even at her most passionate Glück is a thin and bloodless poet (each character allows a different form of self-pity). She doesn't seem to mind that casting her husband as Odysseus and herself as Penelope might be grandiose. Freud meant that we enacted the myth, not that we became the myth.

Glück's style, a deadened management of the senses, steals the emotional resonance from these marital remains. Her harshly beautiful lines are the living impulse of claustrophobia—they lack image, figure, anything to move them beyond their own small means. When she tries to analyze despair, she sounds like an issue of *Psychology Today* (“I realized I *was* / actually a person; I had / my own voice, my own perceptions”). The poems work hard to evade responsibility for this moral landscape. They seem, in their trashy tabloid way, more like “Oprah” than opera—Odysseus and Penelope are just one more couple who need counseling.

## Seamus Heaney

As a title, *The Spirit Level* is a typically Heaneyesque bit of whimsy: a carpenter's worn tool, wood and brass and a bubble in liquid (the dust jacket makes it so), it is also a supernatural idea, the very plane or level of the spirit, even a moderation of spirit (Heaney is our Lucretius of spirit). Heaney, his Ireland still half medieval, half modern, loves the moment when the religious wells up within the secular—it is the political disaster of Irish life. In Heaney there are always two worlds, and his idea of carpentry would be a device to make the canted spirit level again.

Heaney has become an institution now, and dangerous in the way institutions are: his Nobel Prize marks him wrongly as a spent force. As a poet ages he has to fight against his own inclinations, even his own past—not just what has made him what he is, but the made past of his writing.

Heaney's poems start almost anywhere, like the unguarded and mild banter of conversation. We've seen these poems before, in other versions: elegies for friends (the "held-at-arm's-length dead"), turns on classical themes, poems about the land (ploughing up a field often means ploughing up a poem about poetry), transformations of everyday objects. Heaney can be as routine and predictable as Hardy, but as shocking and bewildering as Hardy, too. The routines are part of the deception (sometimes even the deceptions are part of the deception). A poem about a whitewash brush, so mild and homely Heaney seems the Andrew Wyeth of domestic interior, builds slowly toward an unbearable murder. The whitewash is a metaphor ("Of course," you want to mutter—but it's not *just* a metaphor): in Irish politics, what would have been pastoral is too often elegy.

Even his classical themes (his long sequence "Mycenae Look-out" is a camp version of the *Agamemnon*) speak from the Greek past to the Irish present:

*The little violets' heads bowed on their stems,  
The pre-dawn gossamers, all dew and scrim  
And star-lace, it was more through them*

*I felt the beating of the huge time-wound  
We lived inside. My soul wept in my hand  
When I would touch them, my whole being rained*

*Down on myself, I saw cities of grass,  
Valleys of longing, tombs, a wind-swept brightness,  
And far-off, in a billy, ominous place,*

*Small crowds of people watching as a man  
Jumped a fresh earth-wall and another ran  
Amorously, it seemed, to strike him down.*

The “time-wound” is a bit of Heaney’s guff, but how strange and unlikely the ending! The quiet manner of these poems is often part of their secret working.

Heaney can raise a lyric uproar when necessary—his “down-pour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash” delight in the warble and wastage of language. He still nestles adjective after adjective one against the other (“slabbery, clabbery, wintry, puddled ground,” “grey-blue, dull-shining, scentless, touchable”), as if tapping bricks into mortar—though he isn’t a laboring man, he has a feel for doing a job of work.

You get a little tired of the country sentiment (the last poems are all wet weather and moss), of the good and uncanny nature of things; but Heaney always reminds you there is evil in things, too. He has a remarkable way of opening up the sides and floor of a poem:

*It was more  
Hans Memling’s light of heaven off green grass,  
Light over fields and hedges, the shed-mouth  
Sunstruck and expectant, the bedding-straw  
Piled to one side, like a Nativity  
Foreground and background waiting for the figures.*

This looks easier to do than it is to do. The painter’s moment is the moment during, or just after; Heaney wants the moment just before. Heaney is rarely a visual poet; it’s his other senses that are preternaturally active. Many of these poems live on a sound, or a taste, or a texture, and his language is all gravel on the tongue: we haven’t had as personal and craggy a poet since Auden (I’m talking about the verse, not their good looks). If at times the writing seems reflexive, that’s not a bad thing for a poet in middle age to be: his verse has become as natural as breathing.