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A negotiation in meaning: identifying American cultural touchstones

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“A Negotiation in Meaning: Identifying American Cultural Touchstones”
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A Lack of Conversations

In 1996, a well-known advertising agency, BBDO Worldwide, conducted a survey of the most-watched television shows in the United States. The senior vice president of the company, Doug Alligood, reported that no television show—despite the popularity of *Seinfeld* and *Friends*—was a true favorite of the American public. “There is no public,” he told the *Baltimore Sun*, “There are instead many publics” (qtd. in Curtis). According to the study, *Seinfeld* failed to resonate with black viewers and Hispanic audiences. *Friends*, apparently, meant nothing to Asian audiences. And *The Simpsons* was popular only among white, middle class Americans. In fact, the agency identified different “top shows” for every demographic in the study (Curtis).

Alligood’s research suggests an American phenomenon much larger than our lack of homogenized TV ratings: Americans have no common cultural touchstones. We have no singular show, no ultimate film, no quintessential song that binds us. If somebody at a party quotes the Soup Nazi, the room isn’t guaranteed to understand the flashback to season seven, episode six of *Seinfeld*. And, more importantly, the Soup Nazi’s “No Soup for You!” one-liner does little to enhance our conversations.

Just a decade before BBDO’s reports, E.D. Hirsch, author of *Cultural Literacy*, lamented the era of his father, a stockbroker who could write “There is a tide” to his colleagues rather than “buy or sell now and you’ll cover expenses for the whole year, but if you fail to act right away, you may regret it for the rest of your life” (Hirsch 12). The reference to Caesar is lost on any non-Classics student—that is, the reference is nearly lost. *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch’s solution to defining the nation’s cultural touchstones, resolves to re-write American curriculums to produce, according to his list of terms to know, “literate” citizens.

Hirsch's canon of literature, common idioms, and essential ideas serves as an instruction manual for American teachers to inform students that our country does, indeed, possess common cultural ground. He argues that citizens who comprise a democratic nation are decision-makers—and decision-makers can understand their civic duties through a curriculum steeped in common national values or a national consciousness.

His alphabetically-ordered litany of cultural references that Americans ought to know seems dangerous because it looks a bit arbitrary; the list excludes some historical content but includes others. Hirsch defends his canon, arguing that “the concept of cultural literacy...places a higher value on national than on local information. We want to make our children competent to communicate with Americans throughout the land” (Hirsch 25). For instance, he has asked Virginian teachers to create lesson plans that focus on Abraham Lincoln rather than on local hero Jeb Stuart for the sake of national consistency. But what if students could learn more from Jeb Stuart? What if Lincoln and Stuart weren't the crucial elements of cultural touchstones?

Hirsch fails to explain how possessing basic trivia about certain events, certain novels, and certain historical figures will allow Americans to have meaningful conversations about making national decisions. Who is to tell me, a first-generation American whose parents were born and raised in India, that I should use this man's canon to seem literate, or even to seem American? His list doesn't enhance the individual American narrative, our varied, particular versions of events. And even if I studied Buffalo Bill, the Emancipation Proclamation, and W.E.B. DuBois in fourth grade like my peers, do these common elements really allow me to initiate thoughtful conversations about women's rights, discrimination in the workplace, or the nation's growing income gap?

Hirsch's cultural touchstones cannot equip us to recognize each other's complexities. Rather, Hirsch's literate Americans would uphold "classics" that value standard ideas over our individual contexts. We would not become better listeners; we'd just look for patterns of thought that upheld the history we learned in our classes. We might sound smarter quoting the Gettysburg Address than if we quoted *Seinfeld*, but to what end? In order to become smarter collective decision-makers, we need touchstones that carry conversations forward, not end them. Works of art or literature that champion an idea of national identity will alienate some groups of Americans, celebrate others, and endanger conversations around contrary beliefs.

Rather than focus on an idea of the United States, we ought to focus on how its people exchange ideas. We must introduce a common language that enables conversations about tricky ideas, frustrating policies, and our own desires while addressing the diverse make-up of our population. These touchstones should allow a jury to discuss a court case or allow a co-worker to diffuse a heated argument in her workplace. They must provide a common language for discussion no matter who wishes to speak. In a nation as diverse as ours, however, finding common cultural touchstones that encourage conversation might seem unattainable.

Why We Need Cultural Touchstones

The "many publics" described by Allgood are multiplying in the United States. According to Carroll Dougherty from the Pew Research Center, the political polarization of the American public was greater in 2014 than it has been in twenty years. The study reports that Democrats and Republicans who self-identified as "active" within their parties believed that

political compromise had nothing to do with resolving our nation's most pressing issues (Dougherty).

Compromise, to these individuals, meant pushing their parties' agendas forward with as few negotiations as possible. And, among the "politically engaged" Americans in the Pew study, 63% of "consistently conservative" Republicans and 49% of "consistently liberal" Democrats admitted that they held the same political views as their friends. The Pew Center calls these friend groups "ideological silos" of both politically charged poles. These silos have encouraged more than half of both Democrats and Republicans in the study to believe that their opposing parties are "threats to the nation's well-being." And, both members of the opposing parties stated that they would prefer to live in like-minded neighborhoods (Dougherty).

As Danna Seligman states in her thesis on political gridlock and its "moral hazard" on the functions of the American Congress, it seems that members of the two largest political parties in our nation are, in fact, intentionally snubbing each other, as illustrated by the 2013 political gridlock: for sixteen days in October 2013, the United States government shut down for the twelfth time in our country's history. The reasons for the shutdown, depending on which side tells the story--the Republicans in the House or the Democrats in the Senate--involve one side refusing to listen to the other (Seligman).

Or, consider another Pew report which concluded that "campaign reporters were acting primarily as megaphones, rather than investigators." The Pew data speaks to the dangers of communities segregated by ideology, not to mention race, income, and education ("State of the News Media 2013").

If Americans cannot talk to each other now, how will we solve our nation's biggest problems? Before we cast our votes, pass our laws, and tweet our opinions, how can we change

the way we debate our ideas? In this essay, I'm not interested in the outcomes of political decisions. I'm interested in what happens before the Senate passes a bill, before a judge condemns a criminal to death, before a couple files for divorce. I'm interested in how we talk to each other.

Negotiating Meaning with Metaphor?

I believe a common touchstone should be memorable for every American, something that breaks the ice between two strangers and helps us resolve the biggest struggle we face daily: resonating with others. English might be the chief national language, but that doesn't guarantee we're understood by other Americans. And dropping Buffalo Bill's name won't help, either.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, argue that in order for two people from different backgrounds to experience mutual understanding, both parties must know how to "negotiate meaning" (Lakoff and Johnson 231). For instance, if a woman is describing *Seinfeld* to a friend who has never seen the show, she might compare it to something her friend is familiar with—the city of New York, situational irony—or even compare one of the main characters, Elaine, to their colleague from work. She might use the phrases "It's like..." or "It's close to..." or "It reminds me of..." Her negotiation in meaning is her process of finding commonalities between herself and her friend in order to make sense of a new concept. And her friend, now conceiving the essence of the show, might want to watch an episode.

At the top of Lakoff and Johnson's checklist for a successful negotiation is "a talent for finding the right metaphor to communicate the relevant parts of unshared experiences or to highlight the shared experiences while deemphasizing the others" (Lakoff and Johnson 231). Our negotiations must come from inclusive metaphors, the kinds of experiences and images

anyone can understand. Meaning, according to their definition, “is almost never communicated...[by] one person [transmitting] a fixed, clear proposition” (Lakoff and Johnson 231). It’s a slower process in which both parties carefully find common experiences until they arrive at a common language. This seems to suggest that a vital part of speaking a common language is finding it. To achieve this language, then, we need a platform, or a kind of template, that allows us to successfully practice the negotiation of meaning with others. This template would guide us through the process of finding a common language each time we initiate a conversation. Our cultural touchstones would no longer rely on pre-determined ideas, but rather, would depend upon on the process of revealing our own ideas in order to understand and be understood by others.

In order for Americans to have conversations on level terms, we must create levelled spaces to communicate. To do so is to avoid Jack Gilbert’s fear in “Say You Love Me”:

I am haunted
by the feeling that she is saying
melting lords of death, avalanches,
rivers and moments of passing through,
And I am replying, "Yes, yes.
Shoes and pudding." (lines 7-12)

Answer: The Hoagland Solution

Only if each language is capable of the accuracy of poetry can we hope to exchange the ideas we value most, those shy and complex needs we call brotherhood and love.

--William Meredith

Poems can facilitate this negotiation between two people because they are, by nature, negotiations in meaning. Poems are templates of negotiation that we can apply to our own conversations. As a poem winds down the page, it works to explain itself and re-think what it is trying to express. This process of negotiation is the essence of poetry. Richard Jackson, in his lecture “Why Poetry Today?,” hints at negotiation in meaning as a defining aspect of poetry: “The technique of the poem ought to call itself into question, ought to turn its own revolutionary spirit on its own vision so that it does not become static” (“Why Poetry Today?”). A poem that turns on itself reveals a determination to find out what it means to itself. In this way, a poem can show us how to make sense of our motivations and desires while offering us a way to articulate these deliberations with others.

For example, when a poem’s speaker reveals her fears and hopes, she resonates with the readers’ experiences of recalling their own memories, interpreting their own emotions, and searching for a way to express their vulnerabilities. A poem can convey these complexities of emotions while channeling its negotiation in meaning through what Denise Levertov in *Poet in the World* calls a “discipline of attentiveness,” or a kind of focused, rather than dreamy, process that we can apply to our own conversations in order to express our ideas (15). A poem conveys Lakoff and Johnson’s “shared experiences” and, simultaneously, shows us how to drive language into a “unifying intelligence” that attempts to find and articulate meaning in these experiences to its readers (Lakoff and Johnson 231; Levertov 91). Not only could a group of strangers, upon reading a poem, identify with the poem’s images and narrative, but they could also trace the poem’s process of explaining why these ideas matter. Many poems, in this way, embody a negotiation in meaning that we could use as cultural touchstones. These poems offer us a

process of negotiation we can apply to our own discussions to explain what we're thinking and why our ideas matter to the issue at hand.

In his essay, "Twenty Little Poems That Could Save America," Tony Hoagland suggests that Americans should use poetry as a common cultural touchstone or platform for starting meaningful conversations regardless of background, race, or gender. He proposes a canon of his own, a list of twenty poems that he believes would resonate with the American people and be introduced to them in school, much like Hirsch's proposition. Instead of using Hirsch's list of terms to know, however, a list of poems to know offers us a way to communicate what is hardest to say, including one of the most difficult topics of conversation—describing the complexities of our emotions.

Two TED Talks, "Why People Need Poetry," given by literary critic Stephen Burt, and "Poetry That Frees the Soul" by poet Christina Domenech, tell us that poems can "[sew] up the wounds of exclusion," "break the logic of language," and "put emotions into patterns." They can become the vocabulary we use to express ourselves to ourselves and to express to others what is most challenging to articulate. While it's easy to evade our emotions in ordinary conversations, poems give us a chance to explain, perhaps with less embarrassment and stuttering, our feelings. Because poems achieve one of the most difficult negotiations in meaning—that of explaining emotions—they are precise negotiations in meaning. Each word, image, and line break intends to move a poem's negotiation forward and, in a sense, keeps the poem alive.

C. K. Williams begins his collection of critical essays "Poetry and Consciousness" with a realization that he doesn't know what emotions are. He might "know the *words* for emotions: *love, hate, anger, dread*, and so on," but he points out that "considering the central position emotions play in our lives, we have a surprisingly small number of terms to describe or embody

them” (Williams “Poetry and Consciousness”1). Ordinary language, the simple words we assign our emotions, he observes, is nothing more than a distraction from the actual experience. The stance of a poem, however, is a stance of the heart (Jackson “Why Poetry Today?”). The entirety of a poem conveys the essence of emotions. Poems, argues Williams, are “this constant flow of image and narrative...that is key...to our beginning to adequately characterize emotion” (4). Emotions, according to Williams, are “neither pure, spontaneous, nor very clear,” and thus “require a stringent attention...if the soul is to do justice to their turbulence” (8). That “stringent attention,” or Levertov’s “discipline of attentiveness,” found in poetry “confronts...emotions that consciousness most wishes to slide by...[doing] justice to the sorts of complexities” that make for “turbulent” emotions (Williams “Poetry and Consciousness” 8-9; Levertov 91). As a poem works to understand what it means, it sets an example for how to negotiate the meaning of difficult topics—emotions included—between two people.

The poems in Hoagland’s list transcend specifics to achieve William Meredith’s “shy and complex” universal language of emotional needs (qtd. in Jackson “Why Poetry Today?”). Without a way to communicate our loneliness, our grief, and our joy, how can we can pick apart the motives underlying gun control or consider bans on nuclear energy? How else can we know our own motives for supporting or decrying the *Ferguson* decision when every news channel, newspaper, and radio station offered its own version of events? Poems can re-design our discussions by re-inventing how we express our ideas. When we enter a conversation expecting to negotiate meaning with the other party, we begin to think like a poem—that is, we approach each other intending to find a common language.

Poetry: A Template for Conversations

In *Praises and Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, the 20th Century*, Terrence Des Pres distinguishes poetry from politics through Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which Heidegger describes "the poetic notion of an earth-world antagonism." Des Pres writes, "poetry defends and draws authority from the powers of the earth, while politics is authorized by any world it happens to uphold" (Des Pres 16). Heidegger's world—the chattering voices telling us how to think, informing us of acceptable, known ideas and behaviors—is temporary. It is essential, to be sure, because we interact with the world every day. But the earth is what we seek. Des Pres and Heidegger argue that we are drawn to the earth—or that the earth draws us—in order to arrive at a more meaningful existence (Des Pres 15). To attempt to know who we are pulls us closer to the earth, or an essence of ourselves that pushes back against the world's sense of who we should become or what we should think. A poem that grants us access to Heidegger's "earth" puts the "world" on pause, allowing us to experience a process of reuniting with the unsayable essence of ourselves (Jackson "Re(In)fusing Heaven").

When a poem makes room for the "earth," it also makes room for itself in an attempt to articulate what it wishes to express. Similarly, when I know that I matter—that I can exist outside of what the world tells me to be—I can begin to hear myself think. With this breathing room, we encounter what C. K. Williams calls "[describing] ourselves to ourselves" (3). Once I create a space to think for myself, I can begin to negotiate what *I* am trying to accomplish, or what *I* want to express in a conversation.

Among Hoagland's selected works are William Stafford's "Traveling through the Dark" and Linda Gregg's "Bamboo and a Bird," poems that he believes recognize the complexities of more personal experiences while allowing us to intelligently debate national issues. Hoagland

imagines two congressional aides, each from differing political backgrounds, using poetry to express their concerns. They're debating a bill that might jeopardize the nation's oil revenue:

"It's like that William Stafford poem," says one congressional aide. "What's the title — the one about the deer?"

"Traveling through the Dark," says a representative from Missouri. The poem begins:

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

"That's the one," says the aide. "Yeah, that scene where the guy has to decide whether to push the mother deer over the edge of the cliff to make the road safer — even though the deer is pregnant, with a fawn inside her."

"To swerve might make more dead," says someone else.

"Yes," says the first legislator, "here we are, getting ready to choose some lives over others, to clear the road for traffic. Are we going to push the deer over the side of the highway?"

"When you put it like that," says another, "I think we should wait."

“That’s not deciding,” says a third congressman, “that’s procrastinating. I say we vote right now.”

Although seemingly outlandish and even presumptuous, Hoagland’s proposal speaks to that growing epidemic in the United States: Americans don’t talk to each other. We’re not willing to carry conversations, to trade vapid dialogues for challenging ones. The scene Hoagland creates sounds absurd because, at the moment, we have no guaranteed language to successfully exchange ideas with any other literate American. “Traveling through the Dark” gives the politicians an opportunity to negotiate the meaning behind their intentions in order to decide on the fate of the bill.

Hoagland’s example suggests that a poem can become our template, or how-to guide, for negotiating meaning internally—as in, explaining ourselves to ourselves or creating a mental state in which we can begin these negotiations—as well as allowing us to communicate our internal negotiations in meaning with someone else. In order to negotiate meaning, or find and speak a common language among ourselves, we could turn to a poem’s process of negotiation to better understand our differing viewpoints. The congressional aide might ask the “third congressman” from Hoagland’s example why he disagrees with the speaker’s hesitation to push the deer off the road. The congressman would have to reveal his stake in the debate. This question-and-answer around a line of Stafford’s poem shows us that talking about poems means simultaneously explaining, or negotiating, our own ideas as well. The “third congressman” might describe the urgency brought on by the “purring engine” and the car lights “aimed ahead,” indicating that he wants to consider policies that will benefit us in the next ten years, not a policy he believes is already dead. Someone else may disagree, but the point of the poem is not to

inspire mass agreement. The purpose of the conversation is to expose our ideas to others in a way that everyone understands.

If we used poetry as a common cultural touchstone, poems would serve as the starting point of negotiating meaning, or establishing a higher order of mutual understanding, with our fellow Americans. Once we all know the same handful of poems and experience each poem's process of negotiation, we would have a platform to discuss how the poems' negotiation in meaning relates to us. According to Wallace Stevens in his reading "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," poetry ought to "help us live our lives," not live them for us. Poetry is a guide, a template that shows us the options of negotiating meaning, but it's never an order. Conversations could start with a common poem, rather than with political rhetoric, as a springboard for negotiating meaning between two "ideological silos."

Terrence Des Pres maintains that poetry can achieve Stevens' purpose of poetry "by creating potent figures that anyone's imagination might kindle to and take hold of, language that takes a place in the mind, allowing us to anchor ourselves and "reclaim our self-possession" (25). We are drawn to the "figures," the speakers, in poems because they allow us to experience the language of negotiating meaning so that we—like the speaker—can create a space in which we "reclaim our self-possession," or begin to think for ourselves, because we have touched on Heidegger's "earth" (Des Pres 25-26).

A century earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked somewhat similarly on this "earth" and our need to express it: in "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson argues that the "value to the intellect" of any object or idea "appears only when [we] hear their meaning made plain in the spiritual truth they cover." To express something meaningful, Emerson explains, we need to be in touch with its "spiritual truth." We're not convinced of the meaning of an object or emotion, however, until we hear it in a "similitude" (Emerson "Poetry and Imagination"). According to

Emerson, metaphors in poetry are convincing defendants of meaning because metaphors are on a “[mission] to persuade thousands,” which means they must express a universal essence of the poem’s subjects (Emerson “Poetry and Imagination”). Poems intentionally negotiate meaning and thus attempt to convey that essence of their subjects so that readers from a variety of backgrounds can follow this process of negotiation. This is why poetry cannot do without metaphors. We must turn to poetry to understand how to negotiate what is most frustrating to express.

As readers of a poem, or this template for a negotiation in meaning, we enter the imaginative space of the speaker’s negotiations and share a common experience of reacting to the poem’s negotiations. This imaginative space, however, is not a world of escapism; as Kenneth Rexroth puts it in his lecture “The Function of Poetry and the Place of the Poet in Society,” “poetry that evades our being in the world affords no happy fortitude, no language to live by.” Because poems don’t experience life for us, or give us pass to hide from our experiences, they offer us a process to assign our own value and meaning to our world and to ourselves. In the example of “Traveling through the Dark,” Stafford’s poem isn’t instructing his audience what to think, it’s telling them how the speaker of the poem considered a single problem. We do leave our preconceptions of, say, oil revenue behind when we negotiate meaning alongside a fictional speaker, who is, perhaps, in a fictional world. We must, however, engage with the tension and conflict of the speaker’s world. Although we can quickly summarize the speaker’s actions, we also enter his story, briefly, to see ourselves within the text, perhaps feeling as vulnerable as the speaker. We experience the emotions in the poem, but we’re free to reconsider its value judgments. We don’t have to assign a singular theme to the piece because a poem is too flexible, too complex to dismiss as containing a singular meaning. Stafford’s poem shows us how the speaker considers an issue and draws us into a relatable, memorable story that we can apply to our own varied, complex negotiations in meaning, as the

debating politicians do in Hoagland's example. We belong in the poem, but we are not bound to its particular ideas. Not only do we, according to Hoagland's model, have a common poem to discuss regardless of the situation, but we discover for ourselves how our minds tick.

Like Hoagland, I believe poems can spark conversations among almost any literate group of people because the relatability of poetry is disarming. Hoagland's imagined conversations around "Traveling through the Dark" are useful during debates on the congressional floor as they mediate a discussion about an issue loaded with mindless rhetoric. There is, in contrast to our political gridlocks, something tender about the speaker's hand on the deer, something unforgettable about the warmth he feels on her belly. These images transcend the politicians' sworn allegiance to the GOP or the Democratic Party. Instead, the legislators enter the realm of aesthetics. Their ethical position in the poem suddenly depends on their responses to the physical and emotional essence of Stafford's descriptions, not to oil lobbyists. According to Lakoff and Johnson, an aesthetic experience "permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience" (235). Poems are spaces for any reader to internalize an image, identify with the piece's associations, or recognize an emotional tone. When the politicians exchange views on how to proceed with the proposed bill, they enter this imagined space, free from their political ideology, but just as applicable to it, in order to converse.

A poem's emotional essence, with its vivid associations and unassuming content, can't hurt anyone. The poems in Hoagland's list do not seek to shame, condemn, or proselytize. Instead, they open our senses to what makes us—and keeps us—alive. "Traveling through the Dark," with its thoughtful speaker and memorable images, gives two men (or women) across the

aisle a chance to express their concerns with the unassuming “referee” of poetry anchoring their conversation.

Using one poem to facilitate a congressional decision won’t necessarily change the outcome of a political debate, but it will allow two politicians with differing opinions to speak meaningfully, perhaps even adding a bit of dignity to the exchange. A legislator can tell a Democratic congressman from California—who may have voted against every bill he championed—that “Traveling Through the Dark” is his favorite poem. And they might even agree.

How Poems Negotiate Meaning: Outlining the Template of Negotiation

A poem achieves this process of negotiation in three stages: first, the poem *discovers* itself. It “enters” its negotiation by finding a space in which it can belong, in which it can “think.” Once the poem “re-claims [its] self-possession,” it attempts to explain itself, as difficult as that may be. This is how a poem *negotiates* its own meaning: it repeatedly “[turns] itself over.” That is, a poem that fights to make sense of itself, to think on its meaning, is negotiating, with each metaphor, a way to express itself to others. And, ultimately, it *articulates*, in lines housing stories and images, how it moves from one association to the next, from one emotional point to another, developing its negotiation in meaning through its form. The articulation of a poem is simply the format of the poem. The form, or the sounds and lines on the page, enhance a poem’s discovery and subsequent negotiations so that any reader can identify and, as a result, mimic the negotiation in meaning of a poem.

As readers, we move with, react to, and internalize the poem's negotiations. When a poem creates a space to think for itself, we can create a similar space in our conversations to negotiate meaning. As a poem shifts sideways and turns back and jumps ahead in an attempt to understand and convey what it thinks, we experience "the importance of the search itself" (Jackson "Re(In)Fusing Heaven 46). Tomas S□alamun observed that "searching as we are with various metaphors...shows us what a powerful thing [the search] is, what power it has" (Jackson "Re(In)Fusing Heaven" 46). A poem's search for a common language with its readers is a search to be understood. No one is exempt from this experience. When we discuss a common poem, then, the framework for our negotiation is already established. We can talk "through" the poem's process of negotiation in meaning to express our own.

Discovering

The art of finding in poetry is the art of marrying the sacred to the world, the invisible to the human.

--Linda Gregg

Before a poem can express itself, it must come into being—not, that is, as something written on a page, but a piece exhibiting some kind of consciousness that it is compelled to describe. In her essay, "The Art of Finding," Linda Gregg writes that we can identify "ideal" poems "when the language...[combines] with the meaning to make us experience what we understand. We...find this union by starting with the insides of the poem rather than with its surface, with the content rather than with the packaging." This internal content, I will argue, emerges from a poem's discovery of itself. As a poem reveals itself, it must describe this

discovery to keep itself alive. After discovering what it wishes to express, a poem attempts to negotiate its meaning with its readers in order to grow.

The discovery of a poem is the first step in negotiating meaning in a conversation: we, the readers of the poem, identify this inkling of consciousness in order to create the world through which we can discuss our own ideas. For instance, if two people experience a poem's discovery of itself, they resonate with its realm of aesthetics and can enter the poem's world, which becomes their shared space for negotiating meaning among themselves. They are discovering for themselves that levelled space in which they can discuss ideas through the precise language of a poem. In "Traveling through the Dark," the point of discovery emerges when the narrator must make a choice—suddenly, we know that the world of the poem is about the narrator's world of choices. From this point, we can talk through the poem's language to discuss the narrator's dilemma and shed light on our own challenges.

Charles Olson claims that poems are "a man's filling of his given space" (qtd. in Levertov 51). And Denise Levertov compares the poem's process of discovery to a human being's process of "individuation: an evolution of consciousness towards wholeness, not an isolation of intellectual awareness, but an awareness involving the whole self, a knowing, a touching...a being in touch" (Levertov 54). A poem that discovers itself, as established by these definitions, finds a starting point where it can unapologetically expand upon itself and maintain contact with something essential to every living thing, a kind of "being in touch." By reclaiming itself from the world—a fickle place, a temporal place, a sometimes indifferent place—and sensing the earth (a deeper "counterpoise" to the ever-changing pressures of the world, as Des Pres and Heidegger explain), a poem carves out territory for itself within the "earth." Levertov writes that "in poetry...man is reunited with his foundation of existence...There he has come to

rest...not indeed to inactivity...but to that infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations are active” (51). It seems that a poem reveals itself by reuniting with that “wholeness.” Only in this way can a poem access itself, or begin to negotiate the meaning of its existence to its readers. Similarly, as readers, we are drawn to a poem’s discovery because it touches upon universal needs or experiences. We sense this wholeness and can recognize this universality. In “Traveling through the Dark,” the narrator’s discovery that he must make a choice helps us understand where the poem is going, but it also provides us the vocabulary to begin conversations about our own choices.

Wallace Stevens tells us that we listen to the words of a poem to hear “a fidelity...an unalterable vibration...which it is only within the acutest poet to give” (“Noble Rider and Sound of Words”). What he means by this need for an “unalterable vibration,” I think, is a need to know that the poem speaks to something constant, something like Stevens’s and Des Pres’s “earth” and Olson’s idea of our “given space.” Take, for instance, the beginning of C. K. Williams’s poem “On the Metro”:

On the metro, I have to ask a young woman to move the packages beside her
to make room for me;

she’s reading, her foot propped on the seat in front of her, and barely looks up
as she pulls them to her.

I sit, take out my own book—Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*—and notice
her glancing up from hers

to take in the title of mine, and then, as Gombrowicz puts it, she “affirms herself physically,” that is,

becomes present in a way she hadn’t been before: though she hasn’t moved, she’s allowed herself

to come more sharply into focus, be more accessible to my sensual perception, so I can’t help but remark

her strong figure and very tan skin—(how literally golden young women can look at the end of summer.) (lines 1-7)

While the speaker here quite literally fills a seat on the metro, the woman in the poem isn’t the one making space for him; he is making space for her and, ultimately, for the poem. The woman’s identity grows through the speaker’s observations, first as someone he asks to move a package, then someone reading, then someone noticing him as she “affirms herself physically,” now irresistibly present, “[coming] more sharply into focus” until he can describe her figure and her skin. He is giving himself and his readers a starting point to know her. By acknowledging her, the poem discovers itself. As the speaker begins to notice her, the poem develops its consciousness, its “wholeness.” It has claimed its own place in the swift world of the metro. The narrator has transcended his temporary setting and fixed his gaze on attempting to both interpret and internalize someone else. As readers, we experience a similar need to observe

strangers as they enter our own consciousness. Perhaps it's because we are curious to see ourselves in others, or because we want to know what keeps two people apart—or both. Once we sense this poem's discovery, we can build our template for negotiations around this common experience. Through the woman, we can discuss how the poem has begun to exist, which is also where it can begin to “think”—that is, negotiate the meaning of the woman's presence in relation to the speaker.

For a poem to discover itself, it must detach itself from Stevens' idea of the “world.” In Louise Glück's essay, “Against Sincerity,” Glück separates truth and discovery from honesty and sincerity, arguing that “honest speech is a relief and not a discovery.” She remarks on how sloppily we distinguish poetry that sounds honest from what is true because “honesty and sincerity refer back to the already known, against which any utterance can be tested,” and, “unfortunately, there is no test for truth” (Glück). The core of truth, according to Glück, is an “enduring discovery which is the ideal of art.” A poem does not find itself to echo “what is already known”; rather, it touches on truth, or that “wholeness,” to make way for an “enduring discovery,” which she also describes as “elemental,” reminding us of Stevens's “unalterable vibration” (Glück). To satisfy true discovery, a poem must capture an authentic sense of belonging to, in Richard Jackson's words, “a logic that informs us...of the ‘deepening quiet’ that will only get deeper and deeper” (“Re(In)Fusing Heaven).

This “deepening quiet” opens a poem to the kinds of shared experiences and ideas that are timeless, that outlive the world the poet pushes against. Levertov, in the spirit of Glück, criticizes documentary realism, in which “poems...tell of things seen or done, but in which, lacking the focus of that...compassionate questioning, spirit...do not impart the value of such experience” (Levertov 91). If a poem is to discover itself and explore the “earth” in which it

belongs, documentary realism will not suffice because it is too close to the “world.”

Documentary realism’s process of “honesty,” as Glück might phrase it, “has that ‘photographic’ fidelity...[which is] insufficient for the complexity of our experience” (Levertov 91). Levertov insists that true self-expression has little to do with “blowing off steam” in the way that Glück’s “honest speech is a relief”; true self-expression is born from “an intrinsic need of the creative to give expression to its being” (Levertov 96). Her definition informs us that a poem’s discovery gives rise to its existence and, as a result, its expression.

Consider, too, the first two stanzas of Czeslaw Milosz’s “Campo dei Fiori”:

In Rome on the Campo dei Fiori

baskets of olives and lemons,

cobbles spattered with wine

and the wreckage of flowers.

Vendors cover the trestles

with rose-pink fish;

armfuls of dark grapes

heaped on peach-down.

On this same square

they burned Giordano Bruno.

Henchmen kindled the pyre

close-pressed by the mob.

Before the flames had died

the taverns were full again,
baskets of olives and lemons
again on the vendors' shoulders. (lines 1-16)

Where does the poem find itself? In the middle, literally, of the “baskets of olives and lemons /...on the vendors’ shoulders,” the full taverns, and even the image of the flames, the carelessness and ignorance marking the Campo dei Fiori. The poem pushes against the world of the Campo dei Fiori, and the lines that describe this world press against Giordano Bruno, who is sandwiched between the indifferences of the city. The poem has started its own fight by identifying that the experience of witnessing Bruno’s burning transcends the bustling world of Rome. Now, the poem has an “unalterable vibration” to follow. I should note, however, that the discovery of Bruno’s burning as something essential to the “earth” could not express that “deepening quiet” without contrasting its ties to the “earth” from the sounds described in the Campo dei Fiori. A poem’s relation to Heidegger’s “earth” requires its “world,” too, so that the poem may negotiate the meaning of what it wishes to express. Even when a poem speaks from the “earth,” it must explain elements of its discovery in terms of the “world” because we operate in the “world.” As we discuss our own negotiations in meaning through a poem, we will alternate between that essence of a universal experience and the “worlds” that complicate and determine how we react to this essence. That tension of the “earth-world antagonism” generates, as I will discuss later in this essay, the form of a poem, a relationship between sounds and structure. As long as a poem remains loyal to its origins—that “intrinsic need to give expression to its being”—a poem can open itself up to an “enduring discovery” that offers a way for Americans from differing backgrounds to exchange ideas (Levertov 93; Glück). If American

readers are receptive to this discovery, they, too, will have a levelled space organized to negotiate meaning through Bruno's burning.

Negotiating

Experience...comes to have greater scope, greater depth, greater intensity...[this is] primarily the function of poetry.

--Kenneth Rexroth

Although bound to an essence of Heidegger's "earth," a poem does not dig its heels into its initial discovery—it seeks to express it, to share itself and make meaning out of that "unalterable vibration." Longinus describes poetry as a "transport, a metaphor that takes us to another realm...with different values, visions, rules...this other realm...threatens the established order" (Jackson "Why Poetry Today?"). The language of perceived certainty, found in opinion columns and talk shows, dangerously redesigns our environment of uncertainty. It's in the "earth"-like space of poems that we aren't reporting to someone else's politics—we're listening for our own. In this way, a poem does reclaim itself. We also sense a pattern, however, of fresh, unorthodox ideas that encourage us to grow closer to what we believe rather than accept what we're told to think, and this process of understanding what we believe—to fight the "world"—initiates the process of expressing what we mean to ourselves and to others. And, as Rexroth distinguishes poetry from other forms of negotiations in meaning, poems hone the descriptions of emotions and experiences to effectively explain themselves with "greater scope" and "intensity" ("The Function of Poetry and the Place of the Poet in Society").

That sense of belonging to the earth sparks a “hunt,” in Sūlamun’s words, to not “express what you already have, [but to hunt for] the inexpressible...like the beast in the woods that the hunters always know only by its tracks” (qtd. in Jackson “Re(In)Fusing Heaven 44). Poems thrive on chipping away at “what [we] think but [cannot] say” (McHugh 3). To allow for discovery, poems must defy “surface content,” which explains why poems resist the nature of Heidegger’s “world.” When poems ring with Stevens’ initial, “unalterable vibration,” they also reveal new ideas, new rules, and emotions previously unattended or purposefully ignored. Oftentimes, what these discoveries reveal are difficult to pinpoint and even harder to explain, the way conversations can grow frustrating when no one seems to understand us. Poems seek to address this frustration through a hunt for the right metaphors, through a negotiation with, or explanation to, their readers.

A poem’s genius rests in its ability to negotiate its own meaning. In a sense, it exists to re-create itself line by line, as if, after resonating with that “unalterable vibration,” it must tell us about the vibration or seek to reproduce it. Poems allow us to experience the “inexpressible” nature of Heidegger’s “earth.” In his 2002 P.E.N. lecture “The Writer’s Responsibility,” Richard Jackson reminds us that “the writer’s responsibility...is something that does not see an end, but is a continual process of questioning, of transforming despair into hope, terror into vision, of linking one human heart with another.” Poetry exhibits a heightened state of self-awareness; a good poem turns on itself to entertain new meanings in unexpected places.

C. K. Williams praises the “intensity of the metaphor” he sees in poems that “fuse the unlikely with the undeniable” (“Poetry and Consciousness” 9). The “intensity” of a poem’s metaphors shake us awake and remind us how to re-think ideas that have settled comfortably in our minds. Once a poem loosens our grip on accepted ideas, we’re ready to consider what else

the world might mean to us. Like a therapy session, reading a poem requires “unending negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning of [our] experiences to [ourselves]” (Lakoff and Johnson 233). Poetry describes the hesitation and confusion that cloud a single feeling or idea. A poem’s form of questioning and re-positioning becomes a gentle guideline for exploring new perspectives or expressing ideas to someone who is unfamiliar with our interpretation of an issue. Once we’ve created a world for levelled conversations, a poem’s ability to negotiate meaning shows us how to describe our own ideas within this common space. A poem works as a template for conversations because it provides us a common space to start a thoughtful discussion and a guide to maintain that discussion. As a poem re-thinks, or negotiates, how to best express its ideas, we encounter the metaphors through which we can search for a common language with others. We encounter the “hunt.”

A line of poetry that challenges the ideas in the previous line is on Sālamun’s “hunt.” In one stanza of Hannah Gamble’s “Leisure, Hannah, Does Not Agree with You,” Gamble hunts for wholeness:

My house disgusted me, so I slept in a tent.

My tent disgusted me, so I slept in the grass. The grass disgusted me,
so I slept in my body, which I strung like a hammock from two ropes.

My body disgusted me, so I carved myself out of it.

My use of knives disgusted me because it was an act of violence.

My weakness disgusted me because “Hannah” means “hammer.”

The meaning of my name disgusted me because I’d rather be known
as beautiful. My vanity disgusted me because I am a scholar. (lines 1-8)

Her ear is to the ground, and she hears the “unalterable vibration,” but how can she express it? She is disgusted by her “world,” discarding what she believes will uncover something “whole,” only to find her attempts are not enough. She cannot rest, and neither can the poem. She even finds a way to carve herself out of her own body and hate her own name, and still, she realizes that she is a scholar. Her own disquiet about her beauty is petty, anyway. Where can she turn? She does not stop removing these perceived layers of filth, until she senses, in the final line of the poem, that she is “whole only in that [she has] built [her] person from every thought [she has] ever loved,” and that the poem’s negotiation of wholeness comes together in the fragments of herself. In order to convey this wholeness, though, she must express the ideas she believes prevent her from achieving wholeness. As she discards one image for another, we pick up the words from the previous lines, linking them to the next idea—until she looks back to see the connections as well. This is how the search has power, as S□alamun tells us. Gamble could explain herself in one line—that she is whole from “every thought [she] has ever loved,” but without the process of negotiating the meaning of wholeness, we cannot know her frustration and shame, emotions that are too difficult, if not impossible, to fit into a single line.

Contrary to the myth of poets scribbling out poems in a matter of minutes—to keep the emotions and experiences “raw”—the process of writing a poem demands an effort of the intellect. Dylan Thomas notes that poetry requires a deliberate filtering, or discipline, to “go through all the rational processes of the intellect...to make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from the subconscious” (189). “I do not mind from where the images of a poem are dragged up,” he adds, but maintains that “one of the great main uses of the intellect is to select...those [images] that will best further [a poet’s] imaginative purposes” (Thomas 184). Gamble’s lines, although they seem to encompass an overwhelming account of emotions and ideas, articulate how understanding follows

frustration when the mind doggedly attempts to find “wholeness,” while the experience of processing her negotiation imparts precise emotions, something we undeniably feel and can even relate to.

Poetry intends to negotiate meaning, which is why it can capture and convey deeply felt experiences to readers from a variety of backgrounds. Poems highlight the source of our emotions and heighten our awareness of narrated experiences. C. K. Williams seems to echo Thomas in explaining how, when writing a poem, the images he attaches to emotional experiences, “the participation of [his] senses,” the language he uses to comment, criticize, and reflect—plus “an awareness that the emotion is not a normal moment of passing consciousness”—create a poem intended to educate any soul in a sort of “emotional training” (9). According to Williams, if a soul is not educated, its emotions run unchecked. It ought to learn from the poem’s deliberations how to make sense of its experiences (8). Poets must take their inner voice and evaluate, re-evaluate, and approximate “a record of [their] inner song”—that is their responsibility to their readers (Levertov 24). Not only can a soul follow a poem, but so can a conversation. With a poem as a template to negotiate meaning between two people, even a disagreement can become constructive—at least each party has a better sense of what the other wants or what the other needs to say.

Articulating

[That] the forms of poetry...are arbitrarily determined is of utmost importance, because it is the tension between the artificially determined conventions and the necessity of language and experience that the music of poetry arises...[that] is one of the most important informing elements of poetry.

--C. K. Williams

The form of a poem elicits a psychic energy, a kind of instinctive expression of itself that manifests in sounds and structures. Levertov likens a poem’s form of negotiation in meaning to

music. She believes form, or the process of revealing content, is a “[revelation] of inherent music” (Levertov 12, 54). Stevens, too, writes that a poem’s “music carries us on and through every winding” negotiation (“Noble Rider and Sound of Words”). A poem is an ideal template for negotiating meaning because its form unifies that psychic, intrinsic sense for the “earth” with an “eternal movement,” as Adam Kirsch’s *New York Times* article “How Has the Social Role of Poetry Changed Since Shelley?” explains. Kirsch writes that we can hear how sentences and ideas “talk” to each other. As negotiators in meaning ourselves, we need a form of negotiation that is easy to intuit. Both the sounds and structure of poems confirm that poetry can serve as a national template for negotiating meaning.

The music of sounds—the emphasis on rhythms, pauses, and syllables—influences a poem’s pacing. We can interpret the intended meanings of these sounds through a poem’s structure, or the way a poet chooses to form the lines on the page. Charles Simic writes that “[he] wants the line to stop in such a way that its break and the accompanying pause may bring out the image and the resonance of the words” (“Supplemental Document”). It’s in the hesitations, the quiet breaks between a poem’s expression, that we have time for each idea or emotion to resonate with us—or, at the very least, the line breaks offer us time to react to the poet’s words. The music of a poem is eager to share, in a language more elemental than the meanings of words, the essence of its discovery. Sounds, while primitive, embody information inherent to expressing a poem’s heightened awareness of negotiating meaning. In *Poetry International*, Richard Jackson discusses how Stanley Plumly suggests that lines are “vertical rhythms” that inform “a sense of how we’re proceeding down the page...at the rate which we are allowed to dwell on or apply the next perception” (Jackson “Introduction: William Matthews’ Lovable Weather”). Simic’s idea of rhythm complements Hass’s in that “rhythm is always revolutionary ground...is always the place where the organic rises to abolish the mechanical and where energy announces the abolition of tradition. New rhythms are

new perceptions” (qtd. in Jackson “Why Poetry Today?”). Their combined senses for rhythm illustrate how the sounds—or “new rhythms”—within a poem allow the poem to “turn on itself,” to negotiate what it means, while the placement of these sounds within the poem—that “vertical rhythm”—show us how the poem deliberates so that we may experience and mimic this negotiation rather than simply witness it.

The form of the poem expresses that tension in Heidegger’s “earth-world antagonism.” This is how the poem speaks to its readers—it must express this tension between those discoveries of the “earth” and its sense for meaning within the language of its “world.” William Matthews tells us that form “[raises] talk above babble,” and “[talk]...[tethers] the severities of the forms to the mess of emotional life...It’s a two-party system, and each party needs a loyal opposition” (qtd. in Jackson “Introduction” 134). A poem has no form unless it struggles between two dimensions—one, the ideas of the “world” and a need for expression on physical paper, and the other, the slippery, emotional experiences that evade paper and are closer to the “earth.”

In his second well-known lecture titled “Unacknowledged Legislators and *Art pour Art*,” Kenneth Rexroth asks his audience, “What is communicated in poetry?” He quickly answers, “Whole universes of discourse.” Dylan Thomas calls this discourse in his own writing an “[expression of some] lyrical impulse...some divinely realized truth I must try to reach” (Thomas 183). In order to express and embody that “divine expression,” a poem must, as we have established, negotiate its meaning in an attempt to grasp ideas and sensations nearly impossible to mark on paper. As it finds metaphors to best identify itself, it transforms its emotional patterns into sounds that resonate with each other, which transforms them into music, which becomes a “lyrical impulse.” As the frequencies of these metaphors amplify, the poem

might maintain that “unalterable vibration” long enough for us to sense “some divinely realized truth,” or a kind of “wholeness” of the poem.

Finally, the structure of lined poems—“the serpentine line of verse”—displays that “vertical rhythm,” of a “questing, tentative, discursive” poem (qtd. in Jackson “Introduction” 134). “The line in verse goes out from the margin, turns back, goes out again,” writes Matthews on lined poems. A poem that is on a quest to express itself to its readers requires a form in which it can “turn back” if it needs to, and must have an opening to “[go] out again” to find more metaphors to make sense of itself. In the case of the prose poem, too, we sense a similar turning that is in the spirit of a lined poem—we cannot, from a glance, however, see the poem’s movements as those in a lined poem. In this way, form is more than just the placement of lines; Matthews sees form as “something that underlies the surface format: it is an arc of possibilities that the poem sometimes satisfies for emotional effect, sometimes frustrates for ironic effect” (Poetry Int’l). Form’s effect as described by Matthews, goes back to Levertov’s “unifying intelligence,” or music. Thus, the only way we can experience a poem’s negotiation in meaning is through its form. Deborah Bogen’s poem, “Leo as Sketch Artist,” shows us how form conveys a sense of flight—not of flying, but of lifting off:

A man sells birds so the rich can breakfast,
birds so the poor can feast

Leonardo buys, but does not breakfast.

He carries the cages to meadows

where, pencil in hand,
he frees them to *watch as they rise*.

And it's not like the dreams in which *he* flies,

not like those phantoms the tick-tock brain
concocts. It's fast,

full of effort, bodies that love the earth
persuaded by wings.

So he makes his eye the camera,
freezes each frame,
adjusts for light,

and catches something, down stroke
to tail wind, sinew strength, muscle mass.

Each time, he catches something,
his pencil scratching, and his eyes tearing

like a madman, like a man
who won't eat what is good for him. (lines 1-20)

Until the fifth stanza, the poem's rhythm is fairly regular, slow, even. The familiar, steady pace established in the first stanza leaves room for this discovery of flight, which the poem conveys with irregular rhythms that speed up the way birds suddenly flap their wings. The first stanza gives us a sense of the "world" against which Leonardo—and the idea of flight—must push. After a pause, "Leonardo buys, but does not breakfast," and we enter a new world with new rules; the poem discovers itself here. The stanza that begins "where, pencil in hand," we hear an irregular beat, like the chaotic sound of flapping their wings just before liftoff. And, sure enough, "he frees them," as the poem allows us to hear the birds' release above the meadows. The first three stanzas "build up" to chaotic flapping in this way. The first stanza gives us a steady beat, a loose iambic pentameter in the first line followed by a line exactly half of the first's rhythm, signifying that the poor rarely feast. The first line of the second stanza, "Leonardo buys, but does not breakfast," maintains that initial, steady rhythm—although the idea of buying a bird for an alternative purpose subverts the traditions of Leonardo's "world." The next line responds to this irregularity in content—its rhythm is anapestic. That is, "He carries the cages to meadows" contains two feet in which two unaccented syllables follow an accented one so that we hear the perversion of the original rhythm. The line does not abandon the poem's steady rhythms entirely because Leonardo must remain on the ground and watch the birds rise—until he identifies, or "catches" the flight he seeks, the poem will slow again, and we notice that the third stanza is paused, or grounded rather than liberated, by a period.

In the final line in stanza four, we can hear another attempt at flight through the irregular pause after "It's fast." The line "full of effort, bodies that love the earth" moves away from the style of a sensible, rhythmic sentence. Instead, the line quickens its pace, although the assonance

of “full of effort” and “bodies that love the earth” check the poem’s speed once again. Another thwarted flight, all conveyed by the poem’s sound and structure.

When Leonardo finally captures flight in his notebook in the final two stanzas, he still cannot leave the ground—he is still “a man / who won’t eat what is good for him.” The pace of the poem accelerates with that irregular rhythm as “his eyes tear,” the stanza breaks abruptly, only to be picked up again in a faster-sounding stanza: “like a madman, like a man”—nothing seems to stop this poem from lifting off, that is until we hear the final line that, like the “world” interjecting, wishes to remind us that Leonardo cannot follow the rules: “Who won’t eat what is good for him” does not, however, hold the same, steady rhythm as the first stanza. It’s an attempt to ground Leonardo again, but the irregular sound of the sentence in comparison to the beginning of the poem tells us he has, indeed, discovered a freedom of his own—a flight of sorts.

The lines in Bogen’s poem contrast in sounds to maintain a tension between Leonardo’s (ironically) “earth”-like connection to flight and the determination of the “world” to keep him grounded. The poem does rely on words to convey its negotiation in meaning, to express the ideas of flight, of feeling caged, of feeling frustrated—but we feel the sounds before we make sense of the words. In this way, the poem expresses its intrinsic, lyrical impulse to tell us, with rhythms, what it means to achieve flight. “Leo as Sketch Artist” shows us how poems are designed to negotiate meaning.

A poem’s form packages a template that not only uses precise language, but manipulates our sense for sound so that we may perceive its negotiation before we become conscious of its ideas. Poems with precise form are templates that lay out precise negotiations in meaning. And the easier it becomes for readers to interpret this negotiation, the easier it becomes for them to apply the poem’s process of expressing ideas to their own conversations.

To make a point about form's effect beyond surface format, here is Russell Edson's prose poem, "The Taxi":

One night in the dark I phone for a taxi. Immediately a taxi crashes through the wall; never mind that my room is on the third floor, or that the yellow driver is really a cluster of canaries arranged in the shape of a driver, who flutters apart, streaming from the windows of the taxi in yellow fountains...

Realizing that I am in the midst of something splendid I reach for the phone and cancel the taxi: All the canaries flow back into the taxi and assemble themselves into a cluster shaped like a man. The taxi backs through the wall, and the wall repairs...

But I cannot stop what is happening, I am already reaching for the phone to call a taxi, which is already beginning to crash through the wall with its yellow driver already beginning to flutter apart...

We can see how the taxi of canaries seems to disappear, only to reappear, as if the poem is following Matthew's "serpentine lines" typically associated with lined poetry. The essence of negotiation still exists—just as the first stanza goes on, breathlessly, as if it is still speaking, or the canaries are still chirping, into the ellipses, only to rewind in the second stanza, then reappear in the third stanza "with its yellow driver already beginning to flutter apart..." The poem's ellipses are an essential component of its form. The ellipses serve as "replay" buttons in which the speaker can come back to the idea of canaries, not to watch the same event of canaries—because he is not rewinding time, which continues to move linearly—but to re-negotiate what it means to summon this taxi, then dismiss it. The ellipses set a pattern—after only three stanzas—

that the speaker will probably, again, “reach for the phone and cancel the taxi,” but time does not stop, adding to the absurdity of the piece. Form, in this prose poem, shows us how poems that are not broken by lines can still embody Matthew’s “arc of possibilities,” or offers us Rexroth’s “whole universes of discourse” (“Unacknowledged Legislators and *Art pour Art*”). For a poem to discover an idea and negotiate its meaning, it demands a form that efficiently expresses its emotional shifts in sound as well as in thought. The form of a poem presents a subtler negotiation that hums underneath its ideas while directly influencing a poem’s effect on how we absorb and interpret its negotiation in meaning.

“American Canon? Not Yet”

If we follow Hoagland’s model, we must introduce, to students and everyone else in the United States, a list of poems that are ideal models for negotiating meaning. Instead of providing that list, which would be an entire thesis on its own, I have selected a single poem—a favorite of mine—that might better illustrate how this poem could serve as a template for negotiating meaning in the context of a national issue. What would a conversation around this issue sound like if I talked through the poem to express my ideas? Thus far, my argument has attempted to show how any poem with the ability to express its metaphors according to the *discover-negotiate-articulate* thesis should facilitate a more meaningful conversation regardless of the topic, which is why I hesitate to focus on a canon rather than expand on how this process of negotiation works. This poem, in addition to following the proposed model, also contains simple language, is an acceptable length for Americans with short attention spans, and does not, I hope, contain experiences or images too specific that it isolates whole groups of readers.

Richard Jackson in his lecture, “The Writer’s Responsibility,” recalls the irony of a John Ashbery poem titled “The One Thing That Can Save America”—he remarks on the poem’s outcome: “what can save us never arrives.” If we are to use poems to facilitate conversations, poetry will not save us. Rather, the people who use poems, who connect with certain lines and react to the emotional essence of a stanza, will create, ideally, smarter conversations to make well-informed decisions.

The Cripple with Beauty and the Butcher with Love -- Linda Gregg

Eight years later the woman is given
a house for five months at the edge of town
in the desert. It’s August and the desert is green.
When rain falls, she drives beyond the dark clouds.
Past an antelope resting, legs under it,
head raised, white marks. Drives slowly around
a turtle. If the man lied about love,
or even if it was true, there was immense damage.
When she awoke she was at the beginning where
love ends. Beauty everywhere on the road.
Silence inside her body in the clear
evening air, near the Mexican border.

My motivation for applying the *discover-negotiate-articulate* model through this Gregg poem is to allow for different readers to identify different points of discovery and different interpretations of this poem's negotiation. I don't think these differences are problematic. In fact, I think they provide more fodder for negotiating meaning in various conversations. The more we explain ourselves through this process, the more we reveal which words and emotions in the poem stand out to us. Once we explain our reasoning for picking line three over line four as the poem's point of discovery, we've begun a negotiation in meaning "through" the poem that will carry into our individual contexts.

I'd like to show you how I might use this poem to negotiate meaning with some national data on American women and depression. Drs. Carolyn M. Mazure, Gwendolyn P. Keita, and Mary C. Blehar, authors of the conference proceedings of the American Psychological Association's "Summit on Women and Depression," revealed on page ten that American women are "at least twice as likely as men to experience a major depressive episode within a lifetime." In fact, their summit proceedings confirmed that "[depression in women] occurs across educational, economic, and racial/ethnic groups...personal costs associated with depression include...risk for poor self-care" (10). In order to open a conversation about mental health and American women, we might turn to Gregg's "The Cripple with Beauty and the Butcher with Love."

I'm first drawn into the poem because of the woman—it looks as if she doesn't yet have a full form, or as if she isn't a whole description of a person. The poem seems to struggle with finding her and introduces her in the passive voice "Eight years later the woman is given / a house." How might someone identify this character in the poem? How might they relate her to someone they know who has depression? I might ask the person with whom I'm discussing this

summit data to consider the woman in the poem. Who is she? They might tell me that she is lonely. I would ask how they know this. They could point to a variety of different entry points into the poem—different ways the poem discovers itself. One way to enter the poem is to see a half-identifiable person, someone we don't know enough about in order to really describe. The frustration we feel about a poem that introduces its character in the passive voice gives us pause. If we know she is sad, or depressed, or restless, but we don't know why, how can we try to know her? And, more importantly, why does not knowing her full story frustrate us? We can begin our conversation with this discovery—our attempt to know the woman in the poem.

Our negotiation about depression quickly becomes about an individual. We're not simply discussing the problems that the summit data provides—we're talking about the nuances this data cannot provide. We do not know if the woman in the poem is clinically depressed. In fact, we are forced, in the poem, to pick apart her conflicting emotions in order to understand her character. If we would like to design smarter solutions for people who comprise the statistics in the summit data, we might apply our process of negotiating the woman's identity in the poem to a patient's identity in a clinic or to a family member who has been diagnosed with depression. What kinds of ways do we consider the woman in the poem that could apply to the people we interact with daily? How else can we know depressed women other than the fact that a doctor has diagnosed them with depression?

This is one example of how a conversation around Gregg's poem can quickly shift focus from an issue to a potential solution, or at least a different perspective. The more we talk through this fictional space, the more we negotiate the motives behind our frustrations with the poem's initial fuzzy outlines of the woman. From this point, we can better analyze what the other person in this conversation thinks, fears, and wants. As we reveal ourselves through the

world of the poem, we exchange ideas and feelings that might have previously been difficult to expose.

Let's say we stick with our initial point of discovery—that we wish to “know” this woman better. If the person I'm conversing with remarks that she seems lonely, we would try to find out how the poem negotiates this idea of loneliness. We might begin the process of following the poem's process of negotiation through exploring this woman's identity. What do I seem to know about her so far? I sense that the woman is making quiet decisions in the stillness of the road and that even the slightest upset of what is static (a resting antelope, a stationary turtle) might crush her. She almost seems unwilling to intrude upon the place she lives: when the storm clouds arrive, she drives away from them. When she notices a deer, it is still, setting a tone for the comfort she seeks, perhaps wishing that her legs could rest motionless like the deer's. And because she refuses to harm the turtle and makes a distinct effort to “drive slowly around” it, not simply drive around it, I think she fears she will commit some violence against a space that she perceives is still, that she would like to maintain as is. What behaviors in depressed patients do psychiatrists usually see? How are the ways the poem negotiates meaning in her behaviors similar to describing how women are less likely to take care of themselves? Can we better empathize with the women from these summit studies through the narrative of this woman?

Is the woman in the poem not just avoiding the turtle in the road, but avoiding her own self-care? The poem, like a human being, cannot directly tell us why we feel a certain way or avoid certain ideas or prefer certain people over others. Rather, the poem winds through the woman's habits, guiding us through a negotiation we realize is piecing the identity of this woman together. Not knowing her background might still be problematic for many readers, but

watching her behavior on these long drives might help us see her better. We depend upon knowing her now rather than before. We must use what we can currently perceive—which might be another negotiation for real-world conversations.

Our negotiation with her identity continues. Her past, or in this case, the “world,” tugs at her—and she remembers that “if the man lied about love, / or even if it was true, there was immense damage.” These lines literally break her meticulous behavior. Her recollection of that “world” with the man shakes her awake because she realizes something she did not before: it doesn’t matter whether the man actually lied. What does matter is the pain she feels from that sense of betrayal. Similarly, how can we show women with depression that they don’t have to feel ashamed, or feel that they must minimize their sense of belonging in order to survive?

Her negotiation in meaning becomes my negotiation in meaning—I want to know how she moves from cautiously peering out at the road to recognizing its full beauty. My need to know how the poem negotiates in steps says something about me: if I want to know how the woman realized that only she could validate her emotional state, or how she could see, for the first time, “beauty everywhere,” it’s because I’m seeking something similar. Maybe I do “drive slowly around” issues that I need to pick up and move off the side of the road instead. Maybe I’m looking for “beauty everywhere” because I only see the points on a road—a deer, a turtle, a slow-moving landscape—rather than a vision that embraces a larger scope of the road. Do women with depression wish to experience “beauty everywhere”? Do they want to know the silence inside themselves? Maybe we’d rather not look at the road in that all-encompassing way. Maybe it’s easier to focus on the turtle, then the antelope—to take small things in one by one. Either way, why? We’ve entered the realm of the poem, which means we’ve entered the realm

of metaphor. As we channel our conversations through these metaphors, we can find different ways to articulate our own insights.

Once the woman knows that, regardless of her history, the emotional marks left behind are real and are not meant to be pushed away, her movement is no longer restless, but has purpose. She can start over “at the beginning where / love ends” and a new kind of identity begins, one in which she doesn’t concern herself with moving from one destination to the next (or spotting an antelope and a turtle and reacting cautiously with each new checkpoint on the road). The stillness from the road turns to silence inside her body. Even the road she drives on expands, offering a route to the border—offering new pathways.

The poem seems to open itself up to infinite negotiations and points of discovery, but that offer more tools to develop a complex, thoughtful conversation around an issue that is rarely discussed in mass media. The poem gives us a way to open spaces for communication through metaphor, through a process of negotiating meaning. And because every poem negotiates meaning differently, we can find poems that work well for different conversations, different occasions, and different people. In fact, even if every American possessed a personal canon of poems in order to successfully negotiate meaning with others, the very conversation of negotiating the meaning behind our choices might foster more thoughtful discussions about our selections.

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