Sense & Nonsense: Thinking Poetry

Gillian Sze

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I discuss poetry as an important style of thinking and exploration. Poetry, I maintain, is a leap, a risk, a gambit that opens unexpected linguistic possibilities and imaginative opportunities. Based on my own experience of teaching poetry, I suggest strategies in this essay for encouraging students to take the kinds of risks that engender sense and confront nonsense. The central claim of this essay is that by creating new and surprising associations, poetry teaches us different and more interesting ways to live in and understand the world.

Snow

Ask me where I was born. I'll say, *Winnipeg*. Think, *Winter-peg*. Bring to mind an expanse of white. A blustery cold. A heap of snow on the roof of a barn, its red paint faded by December. You saw that in a postcard somewhere. Or maybe it was from a free nature calendar put in your mailbox from some real estate agent. Be glad you didn't grow up in the middle of nowhere. Be glad you weren't buried by snow. Shiver at the possibility.

Ask me where I was born. I'll say, *Winnipeg*. I am a prairie cliché. I will first think of the mosquitoes and the plus forty heat and then the minus forty freeze. I will, admittedly, think of snow. I will remember first snowfalls and the yellow streetlight aglow at ten p.m. The slow flakes caught in the glimmer and a quiet that feels like sleep. I will remember shoveling a path from the back door to the gate, getting right down to the grass and piling snow high above my head. I will remember that time when I was nine and walked back home from school, the boulevard lengthened by

white. My older brother kept back a couple houses behind me and aimed snowballs at my head the whole way until I arrived home crying, ears red and the back of my neck numb and wet.

Poetry, at least its effects, is much like snow. Sometimes everything is subtle; the words come in slow motion, meditative and soft. It even needs the right light. Other times it is a more vicious attack: you are hit with the ferocity and rawness of its elements. Perhaps Denise Levertov put it best when she described poetry's function as something "to awaken sleepers by other means than shock" (as cited in Morley, 2007, p. 200). There is, after reading a poem, a change. A shift in landscape. We all know how it looks the next morning after a night of snowfall: a frosted pane that affords a view to what is often described as "*a blank*et of snow," or what I like to focus on: a *blank*, or "having empty spaces."

William Carlos Williams says that, "a poem is made up of words and the spaces between them" (as cited in Barnstone, 2005, p. xliii). What is this space that poetry offers? Creative space. Emotional space. Reflective space. A space to profess. A space of sheer possibilities. "As the world shrinks, imaginative space becomes more important," states Jeanette Winterson (2005). We have all witnessed this shrinking. I won't list the many social platforms and networks that have become embedded in our daily routines. Some of us have Blackberries that notify us of traffic blocks up ahead just as we board the bus. Some of us have seen the photo of Demi Moore bent over while steaming Ashton Kutcher's suit on his Twitter. All of us are in contact with Google.

I am not suggesting that anybody throw their belongings out the window of their second-floor apartment and hit up the woods far from Wi-Fi. Nor am I promising any student that he or she will be the next Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore or Yehuda Amichai. What I want to clarify is simple: the pause that poetry offers. All art requires alertness. Reading a poem, writing a poem, even thinking about writing a poem requires one to pause and think. In a time where we are blasted with all types of notifications beeping and buzzing in our pockets, art, including poetry, is, as Robert Frost describes it, "a momentary stay against confusion" (as cited in Morley, p. 200).

A Quick Portrait From Our Anxiety

"Compared to what I do, what you study is more difficult," a medical resident once said to me at a party. He went on to explain that in med school, learning is

mechanical: one absorbs and then spews out the same material come exam time. "But you people read, digest it, interpret it and then produce something that includes something of yourself. Give me a 7 a.m. surgery any day." For all of our sakes, I hope a passionate doctor is far from being a robot in his or her education. Nevertheless, one has to wonder what he found so fearful about the process a literature student goes through—how the exhaustion of reading could be more terrifying than blood. What is it about language that can bring one face-to-face with an internal landscape and then emerge with "something of oneself"? Why doesn't calculus carry the same effect? To figure out how a poem works is for a student to connect with it on some emotional level. A creative writing teacher trains students to *read*, to *write*, and (perhaps above all) to risk: that is, for a young reader to confront a strange inner landscape and to experience the inexplicable events of sense.

"The heart is a rage of directions," Leonard Cohen writes (1988, Poem 50). One can simply get lost. But for now, tell me what you feel and know. It is easy to type "TMI" to everything else we encounter. Here's a suggestion: paparazzi yourself. Here's a promise: nothing is too nonsensical. Just give me something derived honestly from a moment of thought. Think about this week's grocery list. Ponder its items and their possible connections to old love tokens. Tell me what scares you. All the ugly we avoid. As Robert Bly once said, "A poem is something that penetrates for an instant into the unconscious" (as cited in Gioia, 2005, p. 398). One easy way to begin is by reading the poem, "After The Event, But Before The Thing That Happened," (p. 3) the first poem in Stuart Ross's book, *Farmer Gloomy's New Hybrid* (1999). A series of sentences beginning, "I ran from…" The speaker runs from a range of material objects ("lightning," "legless duck," "incorrect professor"), states of growth ("adolescence"), and ideas ("collapsing democracy," "Immanuel Kant," "cost-effectiveness"). Get students to write their own. Begin running away from something other than "home." The most popular ones I hear are "math," "exams," "recess." Experiment with juxtaposing the believable with the impossible. Find humor between the sacred and the profane, the expected and the unexpected. Run from sheer curtains, a mallard, *90210*. Run from Sunday school, recurring nightmares of drinking blood, familial pressure. The result of writing out of one's own anxiety can be therapeutic and cathartic. More often it opens a unique space for perspective, discovery and a better understanding of self. This "I ran from" exercise allows students to take a moment and think about themselves in a way that is undemanding, confessional, and discreet. Tell me what you run from—no explanation needed. Let the reader try to find you in the spaces between the sentences.

Anything Else but Jack in the Box

They say our mother's heartbeat is our first encounter with rhythm. Watch a child sit silent, enchanted by nursery rhymes, Mother Goose, all those counting songs emitted from a doll by the push of a button hidden in its stuffed hand. Rhythm resonates. Like most adults, it doesn't take us very long to summon up the verses of our childhood. But let's get to the strange. None other than Shel Silverstein amply provided the earliest visceral reaction I've had to poetry. It blew Mary and her little lamb out of the water. Any Mary can have a pet lamb. But give me Silverstein's Melinda Mae who spent her life eating an entire whale with the diligence and determination of a scholar or Olympic swimmer. When my teacher read that to the class, my seven-year-old stomach turned and nausea overtook. I couldn't read it without feeling sick and, at the same time, I couldn't stop reading it.

How shall we revitalize our world and provide new ways of seeing? "Surprise in language is poetry's open secret," states David Morley (2007, p. 194). Not only in the use of language ("whale-road" as a synonym for sea) but also new associations for words we thought we knew, a parallax. Take a heart attack, for example. Any medical dictionary will tell you that it is "the death of heart muscle due to the loss of blood supply," but Larissa Andrusyshyn's poem, "The Heart Attack" (2010, p. 34) offers another perspective:

The Heart Attack

jumps as if from behind a parked car,
wears the long coat of a ringmaster,

is not invited to the performance review
or the birthday party or the long drive home in traffic.
He'll come anyway

for the elevator repairman who drops to his knees
and in the long strange silence
becomes sad, succumbs

like the elephant does as he is led to a stool
and told to stand there in a brightly colored hat.

Set in a carnival landscape, the heart attack sheds its expected state as trauma. There is no mention of blood or muscle. It is both ringmaster and entertainer, both in control and passive. Yet the reader not only feels sympathy for the elevator repairman whose suffering is felt in "the long strange silence" but the poet is also aware of the possibility that if personified, the heart attack is a pathetic character, standing always accused and alone.

To be alert in writing is to be alert in all senses (including nonsense), to be free in imagination, to remove all filters (especially the one that makes us say, "This sucks") and encourage utter liberation. What happens to our imaginations as we grow older? After working with adults, I wondered if a creative reservoir could solidify like stiffening epoxy. Perhaps bombarded with clichés, Hallmark cards to say it for you, age and increasing responsibilities, a number of us access that world less and less. My friend, artist Roberutsu, once said, "Survival first, art second." I would have to agree. Not everybody will be an artist. Needless to say, even fewer will become poets. Don't argue in haikus and search for an apt image to express your frustration, but the mere task of finding precision and originality in expression, how is that not a responsibility to ourselves as thinking creatures?

Monkey Bars

You face the page and tell yourself that you are going to write something. Anything. Or maybe someone else instructed you to do so. They opened up your cage and said: *Fly. Go.* Chances are, you won't get anywhere. There's too much freedom, too sweeping a space for you to navigate through, not a single landmark in sight.

Complete liberation doesn't always work and there are times where you won't be suffering or feeling any heightened emotion that prompts you to put your thoughts down creatively. "A poet finds himself caught in some baffling emotional problem," says Robert Graves (as cited in Geddes, 1973, p. 507). Sure, fair enough, but poet or not, playing with words is everyone's right. Writing poems won't make one a poet. Let's shuck off the exhausting theories surrounding Poetry with a capital P and just have the language play for us.

I try to build monkey bars for the students—and this, on its own, requires creativity and quick thinking. I set horizontal mounts for their hands to go, but let them swing however which way they want before reaching the next bar. The space

from one swing to the next is theirs. In one game, the alphabet is set as my bars. Telling them to write a twenty-six word poem, each word following the letters of the alphabet, may result in the following:

aardvark battles cow down.
even fat goats have iguana jokes.
kangaroos love mice.
not only ponies quack.
run! silly tapeworm,
under valley with xono you zebra.
— Danielle Penney, 11-years-old

Danielle, one of my campers at Centauri Arts Camp, decided to stick to an animal theme and had she written this poem in free verse, she may have never found these strange little gems such as: "not only ponies quack," and a very fine internal rhyme: "fat goats/iguana jokes."

For those young writers who still think poems need only be about death, misery and heartbreak (and a fair share of them are), pull them away from such lines as: "I loved you. Why did you leave me? I *loved* you. Love love love. For *you*." Tell them to compose a poem about love or any other emotion of their choice without using the word "love" (or their chosen emotion). Tell them that you want to see *it*—that pebble stuck in their shoe that they have to shake out. Stir up surprise; give them a kick in thought and articulation. Make it a little difficult for them. Let them whine and tell you it's impossible.

Finally, after some groans, witness them produce the following. This is an excerpt from another poem written by Danielle: a speaker's final thoughts before dying.

a hand print:
the time I pressed my hand into the wet cement to leave a print that's still there today.

donuts:
my regular diet as a wanderer.

the waves of the water:
the time I fell asleep on the beach and was almost taken to sea by a giant tidal wave.

Mixed with sentiment and humour, this camper does an exemplary job at seeking out the concrete, bringing to life the speaker's memories and suggesting the significance of his or her existence. Simultaneously, in a mature turn, she touches on human temporality in the hand's impression and the tidal wave.

Back to Snow

In April, I did a reading in Toronto in celebration for Poetry Month. I was on a panel with four other poets and someone in the audience raised the question: *What should poets do for society?* One of the poets took up his microphone and responded: *I think the question is: what should society do for poets?* He went on to say that we should aim to produce creative individuals. Art is to be alert—it is also to be sensitive to surroundings, to self, to beauty. It is to suck us out of dullness and at the same time, it is to find secret buzzing in the tedious.

How did I answer the question that day in Toronto? I am rarely prepared for a question that seems to be looking for a momentous answer. Somewhere in my response I mentioned that during the golden age of Chinese poetry, poets were important state officials but, somehow, six hundred years later, poets were ranked ninth on the social ladder, between beggars and prostitutes (Barnstone, 2005, p. lxvii).

"For poetry makes nothing happen," says W. H. Auden (Geddes, 1973, p. 134), an oft-quoted sentiment. What's the point? Aside from the importance of thought, surprise, play and pleasure—basic components of poetry accessible to all—*I* continue to write because I am driven by my need to connect sincerely. Paul Horgan (1988) says it flawlessly: "Art is an analogy of life by example and parallel: I will be *felt* and *known*, so that *you* may *feel* and *know*" (p. 96). It is always a game between me and the reader, the poet and me. More than that, it is a means in which one can do the most travelling—in ideas, emotions, places, and time.

Poetry doesn't do anything. It is somewhere between necessity and fulfilment. It is much like snow. Not everyone needs to live with snow. Go live your placid lives in Florida or Arizona. People do it—all year. But ask me what stops my breath. I'll say, *Poetry*. Think, *Poetry?* Bring to mind the grueling English classes in high school when you were forced to memorize and recite a minimum of three of Shakespeare's sonnets. Or that poem your Grade 8 teacher told you to write, something *A-B-A-B*, something *like* or *as*, something exaggerated. Or that essay you wrote where you

analyzed some poem about spring being like a hand. Think about how it went way over your head. Maybe this afternoon you'll flip open William Carlos Williams' *Imaginations* (1970). Your eyes will land on the words: "Five miscarriages since January is a considerable record Emily dear" (p. 77); or, further down the page, "Syphilis covers the body with salmon-red petals." Wonder how syphilis can produce such beauty on one's body. Wonder what sort of sicko would suggest such a thing. Decide to tell your friend about this. You won't reach him because he's hiding in his room, which he does every Friday the 13th. Maybe you'll finally tire of your friend's behaviour and decide to make up your own superstitions. I don't know. I think you can see where I'm going with this.

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Gillian Sze is the author of three chapbooks published by Withwords Press. Her poetry collection, *Fish Bones* (DC Books, 2009), was shortlisted for the QWF McAuslan First Book Prize and her work has appeared in a number of national and international journals. She is co-founder of *Branch Magazine*. She has taught creative writing at the Centauri Arts Camp, Blue Metropolis, and through QWF's Writers in the Community program. Gillian has a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Concordia University and is currently pursuing a PhD at Université de Montréal.

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www.gilliansze.com