The Poetics of Trust:

An examination of the nature and significance of trust in a poem's speaker.

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"Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior
and personal which the reader recognizes as his own."
— Salvatore Quasimodo

"Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toe nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own."
— Dylan Thomas

"Well, write poetry, for God's sake, it's the only thing that matters."
— e.e. cummings

By all accounts of our world's most celebrated writers attempting to articulate the essence and purpose of poetry, one thing is clear: there is no single way to define what poetry is, or does. Carl Sandburg has long been revered for his iconic simplification of poetry as "the achievement of the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits." Emily Dickinson is as widely referenced as she is cherished for her proclamation that poetry's defining mark is its power to leave a reader feeling ice-cold and decapitated: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" But musical and

hyperbolic genius aside, what's striking about these classic elucidations is that Sandburg and Dickinson, like most of their venerated peers, felt compelled to define poetry in *figurative* terms. Striking, that is to say, but understandable. Try as anyone might to verbally pinpoint poetry's ineffable gist, the resulting notion will ever come up short; it's simply not possible for the most mystifyingly soul-stirring art form to be authentically represented with words, no matter that words are the very instrument poetry employs and exalts. Matthew Zapruder eloquently celebrates this point in his 2017 book *Why Poetry,* in which he makes a comprehensive and consummate case for poetry's requisite role in both the world at large and our individual lives, by noting, "I have found that the poems which have meant the most to me, to which I return again and again, retain a central unsayability, a place where the drama of truly looking for something essential that can never quite be reached is expressed."

But we are well-served to consider where the value lies in poetry—and all of art—for regardless of the form it takes, artistic expression intrinsically functions to satisfy two of our most basic human needs: intellectual and emotional arousal. Literature, then, is a genre of particular import, as it takes for its medium that tool of congruity which distinguishes and unifies us as a species hard-wired for curiosity, creativity, and connection—*language.* This can help explain why debates have endured for decades among theorists, scholars, and poets alike as to how this powerful yet often intimidating art form might be best represented so as to effectively champion its contribution to the world and ever expand its readership. Such debates in effect take as their ideological pivot the premise that poetry can, in the general sense, be placed into one of two opposing categories: "accessible" or "difficult." There is no doubt a spectrum of classification that bridges these interpretive extremes, and such a severe contrast can at times

inspire valuable discussion on the cogency versus the limitations of poetry's formal constructs; however, such a binary approach to qualification invariably misses the mark of purpose, as it treats poetry as a static creative product, a fruit of word-labor that will either be readily hand-plucked or require a hydraulic cherry picker to procure. The truth is, regardless of how or to what degree nourishment is extracted from a poem, the opportunity for emotional and intellectual gratification relies on some aspect of the verse assuring a reader that the choice to spend time inside the poem's imaginative, potentially puzzling world will be a worthwhile endeavor. To examine poetry's multifaceted offerings to the literary hearts and minds of the world is to understand that without the *willing investment* of such power sources of sentience, there would be no offerings to examine at all—a poem is not purely a work of art to be observed, it is an equation of arousal, a catalyst to meaning. In the reading of a poem, two "beings" connect: a single voice, or speaker (or in some instances, multiple speakers), sets forth any number of ideas, observations, insights, associations, inquiries, and images intended to produce conceptual and emotional responses in a reader. Which is to say, poetry does not exist in and of itself on a page. Poetry "materializes" when the reader's imagination meets that of the writer's, as conveyed through a poem's speaker, and as a result, the reader is altered to some meaningful degree. Poetry, then, is an interaction. Poetry engages, it communicates. Poetry is, essentially, a relationship.

The Poetics of Trust: An Evaluative Shift

To think of perceiving and appreciating poetry in a relational versus an analytical or critical sense presents not only the literary and intellectual communities, but the world of curious

readers at large, with an opportunity to reconcile those mental divides caused by presuming the value of poetry is in any way reliant upon its comprehensibility. Poet Alice Fogel addresses this notion beautifully in her book *Strange Terrain: A Poetry Handbook for the Reluctant Reader*: "Poetry comes in a vast array of styles, from plain speech and straightforward to complex or 'difficult,' including those that seem straightforward but are in fact complex, and why should we avoid one in favor of another if any might be capable of touching us?…poetry isn't here for us to 'get' it; it's here to join us on the journey we call life." In this context, we can begin to think of greeting not just poems, but *the speakers of poems,* as sentient literary beings who, like people, take time to truly get to know. Rather than view them as an inanimate, elusive entities, we can greet the speakers of poems as potential comrades or confidantes, artful allies who are purposefully inviting us to consider versified ideas and co-create meaning on this mysterious earthly ride. Matthew Zapruder echoes this point potently when he claims: "A poem is like a person. The more you know someone, the more you realize there is always something more to know and understand." A key benefit to making such an attitudinal shift in interpreting and evaluating poetry is that it helps level the playing field not simply between the general reading public and the literati, but between the reader of a poem and the poem itself; to perceive poetry as a relationship is to empower the reader and the poem's speaker with the joint task of determining if a more intimate bond is worth pursuing, or, at the very least, if any such bond is possible at all. As Reginald Shepherd explains in his essay "On Difficulty in Poetry," a poem "may not adhere to standard, linear logic, but it must have a logic of its own. The reader must reach out to the poem, but the poem must also reach out to the reader, however obliquely."

In this new paradigm of poetic analysis, a meaningful, and more effectual, question emerges. We no longer ask what makes poetry successful by strict compositional or technical standards alone; achievements of craft are regarded, but as a priority, we now wonder: "*What drives a successful relationship with a poem?"* Through this renovated entryway of critical inquiry, the process of evaluating poetry becomes experiential, and engaging with even the most enigmatic lines of verse grows more intuitive when we recognize that the most foundational quality, or building block, to any thriving human relationship can also be seen as a viable measure of literary success, as similarly, it underpins every reader-speaker alliance. And whether this transcendent force of interconnection greatness arrives by way of a bird or a plane…a spear of summer grass or a red wheelbarrow…an apparition of faces or a road not taken…a speaker's words will evince that core quality any reader will identify deep within as the indispensable hallmark of a successful relationship: *trust.*

In the literal sense, trust is defined as a "firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something." As trust takes meaningful shape in our everyday lives, it can be thought of as that base element of human connectivity that belies thought and energetically tells us, "Say *yes* to this person, place, or thing. Your point of view is valued. Your presence will be safeguarded, and there will be a return on the investment of your time, heart, and mind." When a poem fulfills its oath of artistic excellence, *this* is the affirmation we sense. Irrelevant is the degree to which we like or comprehend what we are reading; if a relationship with a poem is to be emotionally rewarding, we will trust that as its speaker invites us to meet and consider any number of imagined people, places, and things, our realness as a human being will be honored,

and we will travel to one or several "places" (emotions, insights, questions, images, sounds, etc.) that feel nourishing, whether we experience the mental ride as bumpy or scenic.

To suggest there might be an alternate way to go about approaching and engaging with poetry that is at least as effective as more traditional modes of literary analysis is an exciting, but by no means modest, proposal. If intellectuals, scholars, and general readers of poetry alike are to regard trust in a poem's speaker as a new standard of evaluative excellence, the ways in which a speaker functions to either enhance or inhibit a reader's relationship with a poem must be demonstrable on a technical level as much as valued ideologically. As our examination looks to outline a serviceable blueprint for such understanding, two core tenets of trust will be identified and examined. But first, there is a factor of great and distinct substance within our emerging poetics that must be elucidated to ensure its power is regarded with the proper degree of keenness. For, as Mary Oliver points out, "We don't follow poems as arguments, step by step. We grasp them entire, and what we first grasp is tone."

How Tone Functions (Or Doesn't) in the Poetics of Trust

In its most central role as a literary device, a poem's speaker is that sentient being we imagine to be saying the piece out loud, the "voice" that is shepherding the ideas and feelings of the poet to the reader. While the speaker's point of view is commonly exhibited in the first person (be it through an actual or an implied "I"), the possibilities of perspective can run the imaginative gamut, ranging from omniscient observer to inanimate object, extinct animal to table salt, and etc. to anything goes. But regardless of whether a speaker's identity is vague or clear, the voice of a poem embodies—and so, conveys to a reader—the poem's tone, a literary device

that holds unique value and power in the poetics of trust, as tone can at once be impertinent to or serve as the impetus for a successful relationship with a poem.

In human speech, tone is considered a paralinguistic, a type of vocal communication that is separate from language (other examples include volume, pitch, inflection, clarity, and speech rate). Tone of voice signals valuable information to a listener, it transmits how the person speaking feels about a particular topic, idea, event, situation, or person. Countless feelings can be represented through the tone of a person's voice. Common descriptors of tone include joyful, sad, angry, confused, and enthusiastic. But as humans are complex beings, attitudes taken towards people, places, and things are vast, and tone often calls for more nuanced identifiers, such as ambivalent, detached, resentful, caustic, ironic, naïve, whimsical, or patronizing. Regardless of how clear or obscure a speaker's disposition may be, a listener will inherently (albeit at times, unknowingly) draw conclusions about a speaker based on the mood that is created through vocal tone. One can, for example, either state that it is raining out as the matter of unemotional fact that it is, or share such news with an anxiousness better suited for reporting that the world has come to a drenched, plan-dented end. Such attitudinal expressions are significant in that they decisively influence the nature and direction of a listener's interest in a speaker. If a listener's curiosity is piqued by a speaker, will it be in an inviting, trust-building way, or one that's charged with skepticism, and insecurity? Will this person share their umbrella with me, or will they walk ahead of me, in the interest of self-preservation? In a poem, the tone of a speaker serves the "listener"—its *reader*—in this same way. It is simply the method of transmission that is different; in real life, tone is channeled through spoken words, in poetry, the conduits of tone are diction, syntax, imagery, and form. In either world, the speaker is the

initiator of tone, and so, is endowed with the power to either foster or inhibit an emotional connection with an audience.

But while tone can greatly influence whether a reader feels eager or trepidatious about spending time within the evasive terrains of a poem, it is not *detrimental* to a reader believing that engaging with the words "expressed" by a poem's speaker will be mentally and emotionally satisfying. In short, a speaker's tone can help to build, but is not a definitive agent of, trust. Tone's fundamental purpose is to tell the reader *how* to engage with a poem, not *if* they will. A speaker's attitude is, in a sense, where the "operating instructions" of a poem lie, in that the mood it establishes helps the reader to know how to feel when entering a poem's world, or at least, helps a reader to evaluate if engaging with the poem will be a mentally demanding or relatively uncomplicated enterprise.

Certainly, there are times when the tone of a poem will be the identifying mark of a trustworthy speaker. Within the first four lines of Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," the speaker emits a tone that is at once confident, joyous, and liberated, and the subsequent mood is exhilaration, almost celebration:

> Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
>
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
>
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
>
> Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,

A reader is "instructed" to feel allured and enlivened at the start of this poem. These simple, electrifying lines of verse summon wonder and vitality, as if the speaker is subtextually saying,

"Stick with me, comrade, I've got your innately adventuresome back." This poem retains such a tenor across the entirety of its fifteen exuberant sections, and the thematic explorations of self-esteem, independence, determination, and equality offer many rousing, life-affirming ideas as a return on the emotional and mental investments made by its reader. By its closing lines, "Song of the Open Road" has effectually presented us with one of poetry's most honorable voices:

> Camerado, I give you my hand!
>
> I give you my love more precious than money,
>
> I give you myself before preaching or law;
>
> Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
>
> Shall we stick by each other as long as we live? (27-31)

While Whitman's virtuosity as a literary matchmaker is worth celebrating, such a clear and vibrant exhibition of how tone can directly influence a reader's trust in a speaker is not common. As noted earlier, in most cases, the mood of a poem is not a key determinant to how a reader feels about a speaker, so much as an indicator of how a poet feels about the subject of any particular poem. But there is one aspect to tone's paradoxical role in the poetics of trust that is as nuanced as it is significant: a reader can sense unpalatable tones and still feel a speaker can be trusted to honor poetry's noble contract of delivering a fulfilling emotional or intellectual experience (an outcome that reflects the more holistic barometer of literary success this examination aims to promote, in that it defies the limited perception that a poem need be "accessible" to be good). A relative, real-life correlation can be made here in calling to mind some family member, friend, or neighbor whose company is generally unsatisfying or energetically draining, perhaps even irritating, but with whom the care of a child, pet, or home

could be entrusted. As a means to best illustrate how tone does not function conclusively to either foster or thwart a relationship between a poem's reader and speaker, we can look to the following opening lines of "Objects," the first of three sections that comprise Gertrude Stein's 1914 debut book of poetry, *Tender Buttons:*

> A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS
>
> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a
> single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All
> this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The
> difference is spreading.
>
> GLAZED GLITTER.

Respected widely and for nearly a century as a masterpiece of Cubist literature, the entirety of *Tender Buttons* is stitched together by intensely disjointed lines of verse such as these. Despite the work being regarded by many literary artists, critics, and scholars as one of the most important works of Modern poetry, the syntax of *Tender Buttons* is undeniably demanding. As a result, the speaker's tone is most often vexing to the ordinary reader, who would not be unjust in describing it as convoluted or nonsensical, preposterous, cerebral, or even pretentious. Such timbres, while not necessarily endearing, are also not decidedly inferior, and so, such perceptions do not dictate that the work is unworthy of a reader's mental and emotional investment. As Brenda Hillman agreeably notes in her essay, "Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Contemporary Poems": "It is a healthy thing for us that poetry engages with complexity…to

engage the mysterious or the difficult is not such a bad thing. It is mysterious and difficult to be alive and to express why."

With these analytical complexities in mind, a striking observation can be made if we zoom out and use a more impartial lens to identify the speaker's tone in "Objects." At no sacrifice to an appreciation for the poem's disorienting verse, it is possible and would be equally as apt to interpret the speaker's attitude not as nonsensical, but as *unorthodox*, not as erratic, but as *musical*, not as preposterous, but as *astonishing*, not as cerebral, but as *confident*, not as pretentious, but as *stirring*. If we regard the poem's tone in such alternate, more welcoming ways (which are striking in their own right, as they can simultaneously be attributed to *Buttons'* demanding speaker and the easy-breezy narrator of "Song of the Open Road"), it becomes apparent that a gratifying relationship with the poem, built on trust in its speaker, is wholly possible, however efforted it may be; a carafe may be a blind glass, and verbs may make only cameo appearances in "Objects," but there is no double-crossing to be had here, our speaker will relentlessly deliver the element of surprise.

Ultimately, the consideration of tone in the poetics of trust is meant to demonstrate that regardless of where a reader's interest in a poem lies, a relationship with a poem will in some way be influenced by a speaker's tone, however subtly or overtly, positively or discordantly, as is the case with any human relation. Poetry is, again, an interactive experience, and tone is that distinctly powerful device through which a speaker's trustworthiness can be either lucidly exhibited, artfully suggested, or ultimately deemed absent by a reader. But where tone can be paradoxically instrumental or irrelevant to a poem's speaker earning a reader's trust, "trust in what?" is the inquiry that propels our investigation to the juncture of two compositional paths of

purpose that represent its answer. And as we embark on a thoughtful inspection of each path, or "tenet" of trust, we can take as our ideological beacon an assertion made by Steve Kowit in his essay "The Mystique of the Difficult Poem":

> Though my first reading of a poem is likely to take pleasure in the language, the tonalities, the music and linguistic sparkle, the intelligence and taste behind the phrasing, nonetheless I find myself unlikely to finish reading a poem if it becomes apparent that the poet has no intention of communicating much of anything beyond all that language. Far be it from me to invade his privacy.

While Kowit's claim is biting, the implication that a successful relationship with a poem relies on its speaker being a dutiful agent of meaning is the conceptual seedbed that yields the two tenets to the poetics of trust: *benevolence and invitation.*

Benevolence: The Core Virtue of Verse

As an intimate, trusting bond between two beings takes time and shared experiences to form, a first reading of a poem can be likened to a first encounter with a stranger. A lot rides on the nature of engaging with someone we've just met, and this is true as well when processing the voice of an unfamiliar poem's speaker. The more a person, or a speaker, presents a disposition that is amiable to us (or peculiar in a curious, inviting way), the more likely we are to consider spending time with them in an effort to get to know them better. In sticking with this analogy, the second reading of a poem can be thought of as casually meeting up with a new acquaintance. Whether it's for a cup of coffee, a drink at a bar, or a walk through a park, engaging in any such informal rendezvous provides a pivotal opportunity to learn more about a person's character and

values. Similarly, the second reading of a poem offers the chance to better discern the tenor of its speaker. If the tones, ideas, inquiries, and insights that are presented are perceived as favorable, or again, alluring, the reading will help to build trust. As discussed earlier, at this point, the *desire* to further engage with a poem may or may not be present. But for the promise of a vital reader-speaker relationship to exist, some radio dial of purpose will be evidentially set to a reader's emotional antennae. We can appreciate a poem without feeling inspired or stimulated by its tone, or subsequent mood. Similarly, a poem's speaker can be deemed upstanding, yet unappealing. The potentiality of a successful relationship with a poem is not unearthed when affinity is felt for its speaker or subject matter, but when a reader experiences a satisfying (or stimulating) return on the emotional and intellectual investments made in the words on the page. Essentially, the outcome of arousal or satisfaction is a signal that the all-important "what" we as readers are seeking to trust in is at play within the verse, the indispensable human trait that even the most intimidating speaker of a poem can embody: *benevolence*.

To take a closer look at how benevolence functions critically in the poetics of trust, it is useful to first explicate its meaning as a literary principle. In the material world, benevolence operates both internally and externally; it is at once the disposition to do good and acts of charity or kindness. To be benevolent is to personally appreciate and actively honor the needs and perspectives of others. There are few attributes as valuable to humanity as benevolence, and it is easy to see how the inclination to give can be viewed as a chief asset to art, given that in its most literal sense, art is an activity that produces imaginative works intended to be cherished for their beauty or emotional power—an outcome that relies upon the presence and perception of other sentient beings. Reginald Shepherd, again in his essay "On Difficulty in Poetry," has this to say

on the artist's primary impulse to connect: "If one truly cared nothing about making contact with others…there would be no reason to make art. One could simply commune with oneself within the confines of one's own mind." With regard to poetry, Wallace Stevens makes an estimable case for goodwill being an artistic liability when he aphoristically notes that the role of the poet is to "help people live their lives," and that the purpose of poetry is to "contribute to man's happiness." Of course, to suggest that every poet shares the same goal or to oversimplify poetry's reason for being is not the intention here. Nor is it useful. To associate Stevens's claims with the poetics of trust is to conscientiously posit that poetry's ultimate offering to the world is humanitarian in nature, whereby its capacity to foster "happiness" as an ideal state transcends any fleeting, subjective feelings of joy or pleasure, and is instead concerned with a deeper composite of properties that cultivate well-being on an altruistic level. For poetry to help people live their lives, it must artistically—that is to say, figuratively, ironically, musically, and structurally—advocate, however indirectly, qualities and ideas that are held not only to an individually gratifying, but a universally beneficial, standard. Still, it is important to remember that poetry's capacity to subtly champion moral values (let alone pure, imaginative delight), is only possible in collaboration with any single reader's willing attention. As Paisley Rekdal observes, "Poems are made of words and thus can activate nothing without a reader's consent… What is a poem, ultimately, but the reader's fantasy of her own humanity?" Virtues such as truthfulness, gratitude, compassion, humility, curiosity, joy, hopefulness, presence, wisdom, and imagination are among the moral constituents of character that lend meaning to such fantasy; together, they make up the inner-circuitry that charges a benevolent life, and so, underscores the ideas most ardently championed by our noble "spokesvoices" of literary art. And it is a precious,

albeit strange, truth to behold that in art as in life, the welfare of humankind is more genuinely served on the intimate level, when synergistic personal connections are made through *individual* channels of expression. A poet's channel of connectivity is verse, and readers of all backgrounds and interest levels are more likely to feel nourished when investing thoughts and feelings in language that serves as a portage for benevolence—or, more precisely, in *speakers* who can be relied upon to deliver valued emotional and conceptual payoffs through the words on the page.

Li-Young Lee presents us with a masterful example of how such faith is validated in his poem "From Blossoms." Overcome by not merely the joy of tasting "succulent" peaches bought at a roadside stand, devoured "dusty skin and all," our speaker in "Blossoms" reflectively expands the cause for delight to include the wide, divine array of elements and efforts that must be in critical place for a "brown paper bag of peaches" to exist at all in the world, all of which are figuratively consumed—and so, venerated—with every literal bite of peach. Across the poem's four short but exuberantly life-affirming stanzas, our speaker's vivid deconstruction of the otherwise common undertaking of eating a fresh piece of fruit elevates observation to insight, and with the last two stanzas, through the seamless merging of simple and ceremonious language, offers a kind of inverted benediction to the reader, as if to say: *rest assured that there are countless sources of joy to be relished in this web of meaning called life; relish them fervently, but know that the value of all earthly experiences lies in the single fact that death may without notice rob of us the chance for but one*:

> O, to take what we love inside,
>
> to carry within us an orchard, to eat
>
> not only the skin, but the shade,

> not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
>
> the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
>
> the round jubilance of peach.
>
> There are days we live
>
> as if death were nowhere
>
> in the background; from joy
>
> to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
>
> from blossom to blossom to
>
> impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

While Lee's example of a speaker who makes good on the promise of readerly nourishment can be viewed as a worthy ambassador to the poetics of trust, such an illustration is not meant to suggest that poetry's payoffs are commonly extended through blatantly uplifting notions or exhilarating, galvanizing verse. On the contrary, a poem's benevolence is most often impressed upon a reader indirectly, and through the finessed rendering of complicated, disquieting motifs, including those darker, undesired sides of the human experience that are in fact just as—if not more—prevalent as those governed by light, such as fear, hatred, pain, despair, anger, and grief. The first two stanzas alone of "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke powerfully demonstrate how even the most distressing subject matter (in this instance, alcoholism and child abuse), when in the compositional care of a deft, beneficent poet, can be so vividly animated as to arouse empathy (for children living in physical fear of their parents, for

victims of either affliction), and gratitude (for the preciousness of life, of loving parenthood) as the primary emotions in a reader:

> The whiskey on your breath
> Could make a small boy dizzy;
> But I hung on like death:
> Such waltzing was not easy.
>
> We romped until the pans
> Slid from the kitchen shelf;
> My mother's countenance
> Could not unfrown itself.

While these brief examples help to identify how the themes of poems are invaluable conveyors of literary benevolence, it's central to note that there are several devices through which a speaker can demonstrate benevolence as the baseline for trust, be it done so directly or subtly, steadily across a poem, or retroactively at its end. To help illustrate this point, we can turn again to Whitman, in this instance, to an excerpt from the poem "Song of Myself," in which an energized speaker presents language that is sonically and conceptually gratifying, and also works to build trust rather explicitly from line to line:

> Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,
> Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
> You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of
> your life.

> Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
>
> Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
>
> To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout, and
>
> laughingly dash with your hair. (1228-1233)

The benevolence that impels these lines is palpable; it is evidenced as much through the sensory pleasure derived from the verse's shimmering musicality and vivid imagery as it is through the intellectual and emotional returns gleaned from a masterful display of figurative language. On the aesthetic level, the delight begins as our speaker ushers us through the breezing internal rhyme of "dream'd….dreams," "gum…from," "habit…dazzle," "light…life," "holding… shore…bold," "sea…me," and "laughingly dash," and continues as we're directed to envision two key, vivid images in purposeful tandem—a person floating in shallow water, gripping a plank for dear life, and then, one who bodaciously dives into deep sea water, emerging with an ebullient hair-toss and roar. But while these sonic and visual impressions provide readerly fulfillment in and of themselves, they also serve as conduits of meaning; it is through these literary devices that our speaker messages the conceptual profit of the stanzas: *to simply be human is to feel dreadful at times, but each of us simultaneously possesses the mental power to engage with life as a miracle of wonder and possibility.* Beyond the immediate feeling of empowerment this idea is designed to provoke in a reader, other virtues are being indirectly affirmed and encouraged, including self-esteem, curiosity, passion, empathy and gratitude (the truth that no one in life is guaranteed the physical and mental health required to make such perceptive shifts enriches the stanza's overarching message). Altogether, these eight lines of

verse alone can be regarded as a highly charitable work of literary art in that the sensations and themes communicated through the poem's speaker fulfill the fundamental promise extended to a reader in the poetics of trust: "your emotional presence and your choice to spend time with this verse is valued, it will be honored with meaning." From there, and only there, can a successful relationship with a poem emerge.

While the verse samples included here as a means to authenticate benevolence as a literary precept are minimal, we can begin to see how Wallace Stevens's pithy yet sweeping notion that poetry is above all a force of humanitarian greatness in the world aligns with the valuable premise this examination aims to uphold: evaluating poetry in *relational* terms can be a uniquely empowering and enriching experience for readers of all experience levels. For when a poem's speaker can be held accountable for exhibiting benevolence through compositional choices made by the poet, trust is fostered, and the resulting bond between a reader and speaker holds the potential for lifelong returns of substance. But while benevolence can be embodied by a poem's speaker in diverse and observable ways, there is a more nuanced quality that functions in critical partnership with benevolence to drive a successful relationship with a poem, the second tenet to the poetics of trust: *invitation*.

Invitation: The Secret Agent of Trust

The efficacy of a poet's intention to present ideas, insights, questions, images, and sounds that will stimulate valuable thoughts and feelings cannot be overstated as we consider what drives a reader to feel trust in a poem's speaker. That said, it is virtually impossible for a reader's interpretations and perceptions to align precisely and unfailingly with those that any given poet

intends. Fortunately, this consequence is not the trailmarker of trust to be pursued when "getting to know" a poem's speaker. Rather, the point at which the potential for intimacy with a poem is revealed is when a reader senses an invitation is being extended by a speaker to consider meaningful notions—be they sized small, medium, or transformational. With this point, we can again welcome Steve Kowit as an unknowing advocate of trust in a poem's speaker as an evaluative standard. With the following proclamation, Kowit in essence argues that inviting a reader to consider ideas as a means for enrichment should not be a fortuitous outcome of poetry, but its singular aim:

> Let us, by all means, have a poetry of the most incandescent verbal pyrotechnics, of the most restlessly experimental and original design. Let us have poems that astonish the reader at every turn. Let our poets attend to making it new with nearly as much fervor as they attend to making it true. But on those occasions when we fail to communicate, let us no longer imagine we have succeeded at something larger and grander.

But there is a complexity to how the quality of invitation operates within poetic verse that is worthy of explicating, as a reader's trust in a poem's speaker may be jeopardized based on its handling. In the general sense, when we read a poem, it is instinctive to presume that the aspiration to communicate certain ideas and incite certain feelings was a prerequisite to its creation. This is not necessarily the case. If we think of benevolence in the common sense, for any one person to act in service of another's well-being, the state of well-being must first be known and valued within, and this cannot occur without an underlying regard for one's self, or self-esteem. But to know and value thyself in the context of our shared human experience, is a

virtue. To center one's choices or expressions around the interests of the self alone, is a flaw. Hamlet's famous query, "to be or not to be" was meant in the rhetorical sense; essentially, it serves as an invitation to consider more universal themes such as the fragility of life, the value of life, the common struggles of the human experience, and man's search for meaning and purpose, to name but a few. Had Shakespeaere intended the line to mean only and pointedly "to be or not to be *Hamlet*," it's doubtful the play itself would have had so far-reaching an impact as to become what is arguably the most known and revered theatrical works of all time.

To transfer such concepts to the literary realm, if benevolence is to be honored as the bedrock of trust in a poem's speaker, a poet must create a representative who emits authority, who has a distinct voice and exudes confidence in what is being expressed on the page, but who versifies ideas through the *invitational* lens of self-examination—a harbinger of insight, not the estranging lens of self-indulgence—a pathway to egotism. As Alice Fogel posits, "Poetry is not just an outpouring of feelings into words; diaries are good places for that." It is important to note that any attempt to distinguish between such attitudinal lenses is in no way a commentary on a poet's character; considering the degree to which a speaker is inviting a reader into the details and ideas of a poem is meant only to facilitate a more relational method of evaluation. No poet consciously chooses between constructing a self- or-other oriented speaker, but even if that were the case, such a choice would be irrelevant to whether a reader senses their presence is a valued "guest" within the world of a poem, as the source of that assessment must be evinced in the verse.

To demonstrate how the tenet of invitation can be inferred when reading a poem, let us take as our exemplars two poems featuring speakers of contrasting dispositions. The first poem,

"Clavicle," by Louise Mathias, shall be used to exhibit an uncharitable, more self-oriented speaker; the second poem, "I Still Have Everything You Gave Me," by Naomi Shihab Nye will display a benevolent, or other-oriented speaker:

"Clavicle"

Lonely, wasn't it.

Here comes your father, wearing his exit trousers.

I knew a lot about bones, back then. Trying to not

imagine the end of sleep.

Folding my gloves so the fingers were basically gone.

Imagine somebody speaks, but they've not got hands.

Flute and *ravine* and *permission.*

Imagine this box of feathers

contains the only love that's left.

"I Still Have Everything You Gave Me"

It is dusty on the edges.

Slightly rotten.

I guard it without thinking.

Focus on it once a year
when I shake it out in the wind.

I do not ache.

I would not trade.

The salience of inspecting these poems in tandem to illuminate the discordance between a welcoming vs. an inhospitable speaker lies in the fact that several compositional choices within the works actually harmonize them: both poems depict the speaker in the first person; both poems critically allude to an off-page "you"; and both poems center themselves on vague associations between past and present occurrences. Still, aspects of these commonalities ultimately function to distinguish how a poem's speaker can either hinder or encourage readerly trust. In the opening line to "Clavicle," the speaker deems some past experience as "lonely," in conjunction with the question "wasn't it," a baffling phrase of some possible pertinence given that it is punctuated with a period and can be viewed as either self-talk or an address to another person. We are then thrust back to the present tense with the phrase "here comes," followed by

the possessive pronoun “your” as a determiner to “father,” leaving us again unsure as to whether the implied being “you” self-refers to the speaker or to some other person. Unfortunately, there’s no time to even subconsciously ponder the cast of puzzling characters. With the next line, our attention is shifted back to the speaker, and some circumstance of the past, with the line “I knew a lot about bones, back then.” As we read on, no clear purpose is offered for this insight, and there is no assurance as to whether it is a literal, figurative, or sarcastic statement. It can be appreciated that the speaker gives us the concrete detail of *bones* to link back to the title image, but it is difficult to understand or imagine why. At this point in our scrutiny of “Clavicle,” the primary impression is that it’s challenging to feel secure within the world of the poem—which isn’t a decidedly bad thing, as much as an evaluative caution light in the poetics of trust. It is hard to invest interest in, let alone trust, a speaker who is jetting us in and out of the past and present with great velocity while sharing disjointed autobiographical details (a past attempt to not imagine “the end of sleep,” a folding down of the fingers of gloves), only to then be directed to envision a series of intensely disparate images and abstractions (a person without hands, a flute, a ravine, permission, a box of feathers), only to land on an obscure reference to a rather devastating notion—the “only love that’s left”—with no clue as to how this love might pertain to the speaker, who we are apparently expected to care about given their leading role in the first stanza. Let us clarify again that in considering these points, the aim is to not to pass judgement on a poem (or poet), but to delineate verse that appears to be rendered through a distancing compositional lens. By qualifying this reading as an experience with an inhospitable speaker, the goal is to reinforce the value of those speakers who function to ensure a reader’s entry into a poem is not made in vain, that the ideas presented are designed to incite mental and emotional

gratification, and enrich a reader's well-being. To be sure, there is no implicit danger in the use of obscure pronouns, disparate imagery, and abstractions in a poem; on the contrary, such devices help define poetry as a literary genre. An analysis such as this is not meant to imply that the central idea of a poem should be transparent, for example, by line three; however, the more readily a reader feels confident a speaker will deliver the central *promise* of a poem—a payoff of emotional, intellectual, or sensory gratification—the more successful a relationship with a poem will be. As we segue to investigate the speaker of "I Still Have Everything You Gave Me" as one who makes good on this promise, we can take as our first attestation the vague pronoun use that is common to both works.

In "Clavicle," the question "who is the 'you' in this poem?" proves unresolvable, not just in the literal sense, but in any inferred, contextual way that might help justify how the imagined person relates to the speaker (or, if it *is* the speaker), an insight that would subtly but effectively encourage a reader to trust that the poem is of benevolent design. But in "I Still Have Everything You Gave Me," with the title alone, the "you" is swiftly identified (and reinforced through the recurring "I" of the speaker) as an individual who at some prior time bestowed to the speaker many things that became a single commodity of profound, unparalleled value—not material, but emotional, philosophical, or spiritual in nature. This important idea is put forth through three savvy choices that work to keep a reader oriented to how the "you" and "I" service each other in the poem, which at once humanizes the otherwise vague characters and helps to evoke faith that some reward of meaning lies ahead: 1) the use of the singular pronoun "it" to refer back to the "everything" of the title (which naturally reads like a plural noun, and would seem better referenced as "all of the things" or "the many things," etc.) to imply that several anonymous

items were transformed into a single, seemingly venerated artifact, as if to (sardonically) say *you don't know it, but the everything that matters in life, and the entirety of who I now am and love, came from knowing you*; 2) the invention of two artfully succinct closing lines to indicate with fiery cadence how sacred the "everything" is; by expressing utter contentment and implying "I wouldn't trade it for the world," the speaker evinces the critical significance of the past "you," providing context that signals a regard for the emotional investment of the reader; and 3) the transmission of meaning through associated allusions—there are no concrete images in this poem, all a reader learns is that the "everything" once given to the speaker is now rotten and dusty, instinctually safeguarded, and respectfully shaken out annually in the fresh air, but in presenting this sequence of figurative notions, the speaker exemplifies grace, as each one is purposefully anchored to the title's exclamation, a vital distinction from those notions that float independently through "Clavicle." Through the union of these three gestures of compositional care, a reader's mind feels affirmed and secure as it ventures inside the sparse stanza, or "room" of the poem, and the conditions for trust are set, a factor that proves worthwhile when the underlying wisdom gleaned by Nye, perhaps once housed in a diary, is channeled through the words on the page: *losing people in our lives can be painful, but the value of having known them may in time be revealed as immeasurable*.

Fundamentally, comparing and contrasting these two poems in the manner put forth here is an attempt to demonstrate that if a poem feels overly private, such an impression can be a signal to interpret the work as uninviting, and worthy of inspection to discern if or where the verse might provide evidence to such a claim—and where it does, the more egocentric a poem, the more challenging it will be for a reader to identify some gateway that will lead to trust in its

speaker, some aspect of the verse that will serve as an invitation to enter a poem and participate in its meaning-making, alongside of the speaker-as-hospitable host. Ilya Kaminsky keenly expands on the idea that readers of poetry possess an inherent desire to receive such an exclusive invitation, and that any poet of note will possess the desire to extend one:

> "Every great poet is a very private person who happens to write beautifully enough, powerfully enough, spell-bindingly enough that they can speak privately to many people at the same time. That to my mind is the definition of an original poet. Not play for the sake of mere play. And not a public pronouncement either, but a very private speech that the form teaches you how to partake in – and that becomes the reader's own private speech."

In the poetics of trust, the disparity between an inviting and an egoistic speaker can be of severe, often detrimental consequence to building a successful relationship with a poem. Inside Kamisky's perceptive claim there kindles an allusion to the tenet of invitation, a subtle nod to the proposition that a reader will feel more inclined to "befriend" poems that evidence a poet's interest in not only the reader's emotional and mental investment, but *participation* in the verse; that a speaker is benevolently, no matter how enigmatically, extending to a reader the exclusive message: "Please, come inside, stay ahwile…I've got some ideas, and I'd love to get your thoughts on them."

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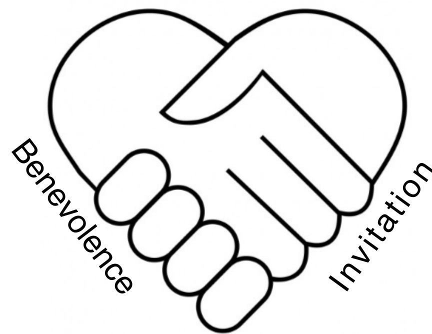
Before transforming his groundbreaking research into the 2014 book, "The Science of Trust," John Gottman, leading American psychological researcher and clinician, had studied

thousands of couples across thirty-five years in a quest to discern what makes relationships work. As reliable patterns in observational data emerged across decades, it became clear in a scientifically measurable way that *trust* was the most essential characteristic to all successful relationships. As psychologist Kevin Arnold notes, Gottman's work "details the crux of the question we all ask of each other: 'Are you there for me?' This question invades all aspects of our relationships. You can hear the question when the cat vomits on the floor after a long day, when you have a car accident, or when one of the children becomes ill and misses school. The question underlies what we use to define trust, implicitly and unconsciously." If we adopt this human model of evaluative inquiry to the literary realm, we can see that it perhaps functions more powerfully in the poetics of trust than our original, established query, *what drives a successful relationship with a poem?* For, as this examination has submitted the answer there to be trust in a poem's speaker—as achieved through the versified display of benevolence and invitation—we can now turn to the speaker of any poem and ask: *Are you there for me?* And as



we venture to discern that answer through a poem's constructs on the page, our minds will hold the map, our hearts the mining lamp, and the act of working to interpret and analyze poetry will feel more gratifying and produce more genuine results. After all, we will in essence be upholding

the preeminent literary truth, as rendered by Lucille Clifton: “Poetry is a matter of life, not a matter of language.”

Interestingly, Gottman’s trailblazing findings can be purposefully linked back to Clifton’s claim, as well as Wallace Stevens’ assertion that poetry’s role in the world is above all humanitarian in nature. As Gottman notes, “Trust isn’t just important for couples. It’s also vital to neighborhoods, states, and countries. Trust is central to what makes human communities work.” Can it not be said that poetry is a human community? Every reader is a human being. Every speaker of a poem is an entity labored to the page by a human being. Doesn’t it follow, then, that for a poem to be deemed a true success, it must be evidened that the relationship between a poem’s reader and speaker is rooted in trust? Further, if we recognize trust as a foundational factor to any two human beings successfully promoting the welfare of one another (and so…of a town…a neighborhood, a family…strangers on a train…children not yet born), can it finally be said that trust in a poem’s speaker also fosters the most benificent outcome of engaging with literature—that all positive returns made on the investment of any reader’s time, heart, and mind are charitably repurposed back into the corporeal world. Which is to say, that all of the truths, emotions, insights, joys, and curiosities that are catalyzed by a successful relationship with a poem become part of a reader’s inner-circuitry of meaning, and so, this one individual then holds the power to imblue such qualities into the heart and mind of another, and that human into another beyond that, and etc. until diverse communities the world over are inspired to take poetry’s guiding tenets of benevolence and invitation as their own—whether it is done so knowingly, or not. For as James Baldwin allusively affirms, the capacity of any single poem to *be there* for a reader is one of the greatest humanitarian acts imaginable:

"The conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place."

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