Muscularity and Eros: On Syntax

—CARL PHILLIPS

As far as I can tell, anymore, all that poetry at the end of the day is, is patterned language. The relationship between pattern and the meaningful disruption of that pattern gives poetry the muscularity required to become memorable. The careful calibration and manipulation of this relationship is, if not entirely the definition of what seems to be meant by “the art of poetry,” then a very large part of that definition—all the rest being vision which, of course, isn't parsable: when I encounter vision, I recognize it. Recognition is a form of respect. Respect is not analysis. Neither is homage.

What do I mean by muscularity. I mean that a poem is a bodily thing. Robert Pinsky has spoken of the poem as bodily in the sense that it is made up of words that we hold in the mouth and release from it, all of this engineered by breathing; so to read aloud is a physical engagement with the poem, in the course of which we make language itself physical. But I mean something more than this, namely, that the poem is itself essentially a body, comprised of various parts that work in various relation to one another—which could also be said, I know, of machines, but because poems are written by human beings, these relationships are unpredictable. A successful poem will never feel robotic or mechanized. It feels felt.

What do I mean by a poem as a body. Think of raising your palm to your face and then turning the palm outward. To do so, various muscles shift in relationship to other muscles, tendons and ligaments serve as pulleys, the elbow bends, the hand rises, the hand turns at the wrist: but we see none of what allows this to happen. Just so with a poem. We feel that something has happened, there's movement, things change, and we're not quite sure how. But just as the body's actions can be explained, so can a poem's actions, and the effects that follow.

It all comes down, I believe, to the patterns established and disrupted within the poem at the level of, in particular, syntax, grammar, tense, point of view, sentence length, line length, and sound—which includes rhyme, meter, assonance, and alliteration. To begin somewhere, here's Elizabeth Bishop's well-known "One Art":

The art of losing isn't hard to master; so many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster of lost keys, the hour badly spent. The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster: places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or next-to-last, of three loved houses went. The art of losing isn't hard to master.
I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

–Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

It is, of course, a villanelle, which is to say it has a fixed pattern, in terms of rhyme, in terms of the repeated lines, and in terms of meter, each line a pentameter—five-beat—line. The poem presents itself, we might say, as utterly regular. And it is, when it comes to stanzaic and rhyme pattern. Another structuring element adhered to in a fairly regular way is the steady alternation of grammatical mood—i.e., we shuttle steadily between statements (declarative mood) and commands (imperatives). But in concert with these forms of regularity, there's also a breaking of regularity at work—a necessary breaking, since the risk of too much regularity (or pattern) is monotony. One element that refuses to stay static is point of view. For three stanzas, everything is delivered in the third person, at least explicitly—the imperatives imply the second person, but not so intimately as what will occur later. At stanza four, the entrance of the I makes what was academic personal. And it immediately boosts the poem's authority: we believe the statements because the speaker speaks from personal experience. But what creates the visceral turn in this poem, at the final stanza, is the turn to the more intimate second person; we are pushed from the personal I into the intimacy of the speaker's relationship to an individual you, a you associated with the only abstract things that have been lost (“the joking voice, a gesture/ I love”)—which is to say, there's a shift in pattern at the level of images, as well, from concrete (for five stanzas) to abstract.

A third shift at the final stanza is that its first sentence is the only one in the entire poem that opens with a dependent clause—it relies on our learning the subject of the sentence—I—to make sense. This is the only sentence, then, where the I is not the starting point—i.e., the self is held back, foregrounding the lost beloved. This is the work of syntax, which allows us to move words/clauses into more than one position. To be consistent, Bishop could have said “I shan’t have lied, even losing you.” Syntax offers a choice—and the choice makes all the difference. The you receives emphasis, syntactically eclipses the self, suggesting a vulnerability to the self, and in a sense enacting how haunted the self is: she has lost the you concretely, but is haunted abstractly (voice, gesture). That is, she can't forget.

What happens at the opening of stanza six is an example of pattern being meaningfully interrupted. The shift to the you and to abstraction occurs precisely at the moment when the speaker shows what she hasn't earlier: vulnerability. The lingering over the gesture and voice, something that the speaker still loves (present tense) after losing the you, suggests that she has not reconciled herself to this particular loss. Which gives to the final repetition of the line about the art of losing a poignancy it didn't have before. To go back to the raised arm, we might say that this poem is, stanza by stanza, a steady raising of the hand up to the face; then, at stanza six, the hand turns palm outward, as if to ward away what's not wanted, “don't hurt me.” This is what I mean by musculature, an interchange between pattern and what isn't that pattern, the calibration of that interchange so that, in terms of timing, the musculature of the poem shifts when something shifts in the poem both emotionally and psychologically. The effect is of feeling, not thinking. The speaker says what she says, but the prosody tells us what she feels. The musculature of the poem is what triggers this feeling. Meanwhile, as the surface patterning of the poem—the villanelle form—remains constant, the sentence-patterning within the poem (again, point of view, grammatical mood, and syntax) is in motion. The tension between this motion and the surface stillness is, to my mind, what gives the poem resonance, that quality that makes the poem linger beyond where it ends on the page. It has resonance the way bodies have resonance, the way machines do not.

Robert Hayden's everywhere-anthologized poem "Those Winter Sundays" doesn't hide its subject—the poem tells us straight out that no one appreciated a father who worked hard for his family:

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love’s austere and lonely offices?

“No one ever thanked him,” “speaking indifferently to him,” “what did I know/of love’s austere and lonely offices” (i.e., a father’s familial responsibilities)—all of these tell us what the poem is about. The poem’s musculature enacts what the poem is about, and makes us feel it. The subtler instance of this is at the level of syntax. Reminiscent of the final stanza of the Bishop poem, the only two sentences in which the father is the subject foreground the sentence with a dependent clause, in both cases a clause indicating time. “Sundays too my father got up early” achieves two things by its syntax. The opening of the sentence with “Sundays too” emphasizes the time—highlights it, by putting it first—that the father even did this on Sundays, which implies that he did this every other day as well: there was no respite from labor. And by opening with time, the sentence contextualizes the father within time, he is in a sense subordinate, in terms of where he appears in the sentence, to time itself, a subtle way of pointing to the fact of mortality of the father’s especially. A similar subordination to time comes at the second stanza, “When the rooms were warm, he’d call.” Again, time comes first; this syntactical arrangement also speaks to a tenderness or care, on the father’s part: lest anyone be cold, he only calls out when it’s warm for others. So, on one hand the syntax in both instances speaks to the father’s character—ever-working, tender—and on the other hand the subordination of the father, syntactically, besides positioning him within time, enacts and mirrors the family’s indifference to him; he’s an afterthought, of sorts.

Stanza one also speaks to this indifference—and enacts it—via sentence length and via sound. Note that this stanza consists of only two sentences. The first one is 4-1/2 lines long, and is the one that describes the father’s labors. It’s immediately followed by a ½-line long sentence whose brevity is thrown into stark relief, after the longer, more detailed sentence with which the stanza opened. It’s also the sentence that announces indifference—thanklessness—in response to the father’s labors. At the sentence level, we see everything the father puts into the household side by side with the next-to-nothing he gets back. To put it another way, the ratio of labor to gratitude is played out via sentence length.

This is reinforced sonically, as well. Look at the music of the opening sentence. We have the string of rhymes: “clothes” and “cold”; “blueblack,” “cracked,” “hands”; “ached,” “labor,” “weekday,” “blaze.” We have alliteration: “blueblack,” “cracked,” “ached,” “week”; “weekday weather”; “banked,” “blazed,” “blueblack.” There is none of this in the sentence that follows. No rhyme or alliteration. The word “thanked” sounds briefly musical, but that has entirely to do with its rhyming with “banked” from the previous sentence. What music it has depends on the father, on the sentence by which the father is represented.

And yet, if this poem were merely about indifference to the father’s work—it if were merely a narrative of that—I don’t think the poem would have resonance. It’s the poem’s final two lines that shift everything. That’s where the speaker moves from statements about his role within the situation (“I’d wake and hear,” “I would rise and dress”) to a question about what he understood of the situation. The poem shifts to a space of vulnerability—the speaker seems to say “my indifference came from ignorance, therefore I’m not to blame,” or “I’m not to blame, yet I feel guilty,” or “why should I feel guilty, if I’m not to blame”—any, and all, of these. It’s not clear. What is, is that we’ve moved from the declarative mood to the interrogative, from stability to opendendedness, unanswerededness. We also encounter here the poem’s only instance of
anaphora, the repetition of the phrase “what did I know,” a repetition that connotes, variously, pleading, defensiveness, despair. The combination of the grammatical shift and the sudden appearance of a nowhere-else-seen rhetorical device (anaphora), pitched against the steady declarative mood of the rest of the poem, is the catalyst for what again feels visceral at the poem’s end; the emotional register changes, from meditative examination of the exterior to a haunted interrogation of the self’s interior. It feels like stumbling into unexpected regret, which is to say, this is also what the poem is about.

Why don’t we talk about poems in this way more often? As living things made by living beings, as assemblages of parts working in various combination to convey both thought and feeling? As bodies, with a body’s ability to betray the feeling beneath language, even as we will tell a friend sometimes that we’re doing fine, but what the friend sees is that our hands are shaking, or our eyes are watering, as if we’ve either just stopped crying or we’re about to. So the shifts toward the end of Bishop’s poem show an emotion that belies the speaker’s otherwise calm. So the changes in Hayden’s poem reveal a sense of personal culpability that the detached delivery elsewhere had seemed to suppress.

Not that it’s always about betrayal. Another thing that prosody does is confirm or reinforce–just as, say, blood pressure can show that we aren’t as calm as we seem on the surface, but it can also confirm our outward calmness. My sense is that it’s this prosodic interplay that in almost every case gives feeling–physicality–to what would otherwise just be statement. The sense of imbalance, when it comes to the father’s work in “Those Winter Sundays” versus the thanks he got for it isn’t apparent in the statements themselves–how this is stated makes us feel the imbalance, and engage with it ourselves; we spend much more time–and pleasure–inside the first sentence; the second sentence all but disappears beside it. To read that first stanza is to have experienced, through feeling, the poem’s opening argument.

Lest it seem that this approach only works with poems prior to the 21st century, here’s an excerpt from Tommy Pico’s book-length poem, IRL:

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I’m scared
of watching movies
under a down comforter
in the summertime,
with the undercurrent of AC
Being squeezed every now
and again so good
by Muse who breathes
deep, but barely knows me.
Don’t fall in love
Don’t fall in love
with Muse, duh! Muse is
embodiment of abstract
concept: Art, dance,
astronomy, drama, heroic
poetry, security, good/god, edible
underwear, pepperoni pizza, Jim Beam. You touch
his shoulder and he
scoops. Stab. You can’t hold
Muse because yr
the side piece. Art is Muse’s
main squeeze. It’s hard
enough just not being
muserable I had a
vision of love You can’t
own Muse. Muse pwns
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you Surrender implicit
in yr relationship. When Muse
is done, Muse leaves. You
are in a shawl by the fire-
place, rocking alone
again.
It’s important to be alone
again.
Just what is so scary abt
the cave? I… I can hear
my heart beating in there
and I don’t like it.

Pico’s poem is written as an extended text message, as the title might suggest. So phrasing is likely to be clipped, and to employ abbreviations where possible; at times punctuation is missing, or the system changes. For example, a period occurs at the end of most sentences here, but in a few cases the occurrence of a sudden capitalized word means a new sentence has begun, though no period suggests an earlier sentence has ended.

This excerpt concerns the unbalanced relationship the speaker has with Muse, his code name for his latest romantic crush. The speaker fears getting intimate with Muse because he knows Muse is only loyal to art, not to the speaker. This doesn’t stop the speaker from falling in love anyway, then having to experience the usual abandonment, which leaves him to another fear–of being alone with himself.

That’s what the poem says. For me, though, it’s Pico’s manipulation of line break that makes me feel it. Most of the lines are enjambed, but how they’re broken changes across the poem. The first five lines are broken in such a way that each line contains a grammatical unit intact–each makes sense on its own. “I’m scared” gives us the state of mind, then each subsequent line (of these five) is a prepositional phrase that fills in the context or conditions of the speaker’s fear. The lines are broken so that each line is an easily parsed piece of the sentence’s overall information.

Look how this changes at line six. First of all, we’re in a fragment–already less stable than a sentence–and secondly each line ends in such a way that we can’t linger, we’re forced, grammatically, to go to the next line in order for grammar to resolve itself. This adds both momentum–speed–and instability, compared to the opening sentence. What that sentence’s prosody suggests to me is that stability is required, to offset the fear. What the following fragment tells me is that instability enters any scene hand in hand with Muse. The speaker exhorts himself not to fall in love, but the poem just then tumbles into steady enjambment, almost every line broken at a point that requires immediate descent to the next line for grammatical closure–we fall, as it were, down the page, our reading is the enactment of the experience being described. To accentuate our inability to pause at a line break, the poem begins, at the exclamatory “duh!” of line twelve, to employ increasingly a full stop in the middle of the line:

underwear, pepperoni pizza, Jim
Beam. You touch
his shoulder and he
scoops. Stab. You can’t hold
Muse because yr
the side piece. Art is Muse’s
main squeeze. It’s hard
enough just not being
muserable I had a
vision of love You can’t
own Muse. Muse pwns
you Surrender implicit
This strategy is abruptly abandoned as soon as Muse exits the scene, and we return to stability—what sounds first like refrain, with the quatrain whose lines end, not coincidentally: “alone,” “again,” “alone,” “again.” Then, in answer to the question “Just what is so scary abt/the cave?” we return to the kind of lineation that opened this excerpt—these last three lines all break where the grammar breaks. We’re returned to stability of line—again, as if to offset fear, what the excerpt opens and closes with. We might say that fear is the frame that contains any contact with Muse. That’s what the prosody says, in addition to what the poem says.

There’s much that could be said here, too, about Pico’s mashup of ‘high’ and ‘low’ diction, or about his frequent employment of chiasmus or near-chiasmus, each of the following lines containing frames:

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Don’t fall  in love  Don’t fall  10
  in love  Don’t fall  in love  11
  with Muse  duh  Muse is  12
  own Muse  Muse pwns  27
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But enjambment is the main prosodic tool employed here in the service of conveying meaning that sometimes reinforces statement, and sometimes contradicts it. Reinforcement and contradiction are forms of gesture. This is how gesture—which is muscular—works. This is also how the tone with which we say a thing works. Tone, too, is muscular.

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For many years I’ve spoken of an erotics of syntax without writing it down anywhere, apparently, what I meant by it. Here’s what I mean.

We recognize pattern only after having been conditioned to it long enough to see it as pattern, a comfort, which we miss when we’re abruptly released from it. A poem is a system of patterns by which information gets delivered in a manner specific to each poem. Another way to say it is that pattern is a system of restraint and release: we’re held by pattern, then periodically released from it. Via the poem, the poet controls our passage down the page both in terms of what we get to know and how we know it. To this extent, poetry is not just a bodily thing but an erotic one. As with eros, the first aim is to get another’s attention; after that, there’s the business of sustaining attention, which can mean providing enough mystery to arouse curiosity, but not so much mystery that curiosity gets displaced, instead, by frustration. Of all the elements that a poem comprises, syntax is the most erotic, for syntax is precisely what allows information to be withheld and unexpectedly delivered; grammar lacks this flexibility—this athleticism—this power of manipulation.

I suppose the idea of syntax as erotic originated from my thinking that a sentence can be very straightforward or it can take us on a bit of a journey—and for whatever reason, the analogy of extended foreplay came to mind, with the sentence’s eventual resolution as a form of climax. But perhaps that narrows or limits what I mean about syntax. In its ability to determine when and where information gets delivered, syntax is a system of privilege, or engages in such a system, i.e., it privileges one piece of information over another piece, ideally in service of how we are meant to understand and experience (the two are different) a poem’s content. But in this ability to create hierarchies of information, syntax is concerned with power (as is eros, of course), which is to say at some level syntax is always more than just erotic; it’s by definition political.

Of course, the chief role of this manipulation of syntax is to serve the poem’s artistic purposes and whatever argument it might have. Here’s Shakespeare’s sonnet 73:
That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang;
In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self that seals up all in rest;
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed, whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by;
    This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,
    To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

The first line could have been phrased in at least three other ways:

Thou mayst in me behold that time of year
In me thou mayst behold that time of year
In me thou mayst that time of year behold

All that’s required, grammatically, is for the phrases “that time of year,” “in me,” and “thou mayst” to remain intact; but they can be arranged, via syntax, in various ways. So why this way? Shakespeare’s arrangement makes time the entry point—not the lovers. And when we get to the lovers, the thou comes first, then the speaker. Paradoxically, the thou has priority over the speaker because of youth; presumably, the speaker is closer to death, will soon be no longer—and this is because of the fact of time, with which the line began. Syntax here establishes for us the hierarchy of the poem: time triumphs over human life; youth triumphs over age by having more time left with which to resist mortality.

Line two makes similar use of syntax. Why not—meter aside—have said simply “when yellow leaves do hang,” and have omitted “yellow leaves, or none,” and have gotten more quickly to the verb upon which the line’s meaning literally hangs? One reason is that that space within which the verb gets withheld shows the speaker thinking: he at first aims for a period when leaves still have some color and are on the tree; then a moment of self-correction: no, when no leaves are on the tree. Then there’s the realization that what’s meant is an in-between time—the tree neither in full leaf nor bare, but a few leaves left. This juggling among subjects—the order in which information gets delivered—enacts the mind figuring out exactly what it means. Meanwhile, the syntax, by presenting this information at a distance from what it modifies ("That time of year")—as opposed to

That time of year when yellow leaves, or none,
Or few do hang, thou mayst in me behold

—gives the moment its own line, highlights it, enough for us to see the idea of in-betweenness, a theme that structures all the rest of the poem: in quatrain two, we get the in-betweenness of twilight, between sunset and black night; in quatrain three, the in-betweenness of a glowing ember—not fire anymore, not ash, either.

Syntax doesn’t have to mean inflected word order, though, or dependent clauses. Look at this sentence that opens Hemingway’s novel A Farewell to Arms:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.
Like the Shakespeare sonnet, this sentence begins with time; in this case, time is a container, i.e., it contains all of the action of the rest of the sentence. Living occurs in a very specific concrete place (a house in a village, etc.), all of it contained by the abstraction of time. So time gets privileged, thanks to syntax. But syntax also determines the order of the rest of the sentence. Hemingway could have written “we lived in a house in a village that looked to the mountains across the river and the plain,” for example. Or “in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains we lived in a house.” But the syntactical arrangement he lands on creates the cinematic effect of panning out: the house is contained by the village, the river hems in the village, the plain contains the river, the mountains mark where plain falls away. So the vision keeps opening outward. And somewhere here it’s implied that human life is small–lived individually within two things that are indifferent to human existence: time, and the natural world/landscape. “We lived” is the crux of the sentence–its action–but it’s all but lost between time and a landscape that continues, literally, long past the fact of human life. A very simple sentence, but the syntax allows the novel to open with some implications that will resonate for the next nearly 300 pages.

So syntax doesn’t have to be overly complex, or involve an especially long sentence. Greater length does, however, increase the sentence’s opportunities for musculature, as in the second sentence of Sharon Olds’s “Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once.” Here are the first two sentences:

I have never written against the dead. I would open my shirt to them and say yes, the white cones still making sugary milk,

but when Grandfather’s gold pocketwatch came in by air over the Rockies, over the dark yellow of the fields and the black rivers, with Grandmother’s blank face pressed against his name in the back,

I thought of how he put the empty plate in front of my sister, turned out the lights after supper, sat in the black room with the fire, the light of the flames flashing in his glass eye in that cabin where he taught my father how to do what he did to me, and I said No.

Olds’s stanza breaks alone highlight the musculature’s turns: “but when”…"I thought"…and then the final turn of “I said//No.” But muscularity is also at work in how Olds extends the material of each of the stanzas. Essentially, the second sentence says: when the watch arrived, I thought of the behavior of the grandfather it once belonged to, and I refused all of it. But the extended second stanza gives strange agency to an inanimate object and charts its pilgrimage and provenance; meanwhile, the extended third stanza adds layer upon layer of disturbing memories of the grandfather—the syntax of listing, the movement from the flames to the eye to the cabin to the subordinate clause that speaks to abuse without every mentioning it—all of this creates suspense, yes, but also seems to enact the emotional buildup toward refusal, anger: the speaker finds an agency that had once been lost to her.

Syntactic work can be brief, though, as well, and not associated with emotion, necessarily. In Ed Skoog’s “Waves,” syntax creates an arrangement of information that becomes itself an implied meditation:

I combed my mother’s hair when she could no longer speak.
My son, almost helpless,  
drifting out of the sky  
into sleep’s tall waves,  
reaches out and combs  
my hair. I don’t speak  
by his low bed, a lamb  
with batteries stirring  
an ocean between us.

It could have opened this way:

I combed my mother’s hair  
when she could no longer speak.  
My son reaches out and combs  
my hair. He’s almost helpless, etc.

This arrangement immediately would have brought to the fore a parallel: just as I combed my mother’s hair, so my son combs mine. Which would be perfectly fine, but it’s a little easy, to my mind, and risks seeming sentimental. In the poem as actually written, the information works like this:

\[
\text{I} \rightarrow \text{mother} \rightarrow \text{helpless/no speech} \quad \downarrow \\
\text{me} \leftarrow \text{helpless} \leftarrow \text{son} \\
\text{(not speaking)}
\]

Via the act of combing, we are directed from the speaker to the speaker’s mother, who is associated with the inability to speak, a form of helplessness here. This leads straight to the speaker’s son, immediately associated with helplessness, combing the hair of the speaker, who is associated with not speaking, recalling the mother who doesn’t speak—but because she can’t, not because she chooses not to. Yes, in this arrangement son and speaker (the son’s parent) are paralleled. But so are the speaker and the speaker’s mother. And so are the grandson and grandmother. They are genetically related, but it’s also helplessness that binds them. Meanwhile, the syntax that allows for the son to be so removed from the act of combing, in the second sentence, is where we get the information that seems to set up a conceit of the poem henceforward—drifting, which leads to waves of sleep, which will get reinforced by and echoed in the “ocean between us” with which the poem ends.

We might say that, in that second sentence, the syntax distances the combing from the son so as to prevent too easy an equation with the speaker’s gestures; and it creates space within which the poem’s governing image—the act of combing hair—gets balanced by marine imagery, which also allows us to think of hair in terms of waves, of certain ocean waves known as combers, also of combing as something that people do, combing the beach, and that sea creatures do, combing the ocean floor.

Can syntax be relevant to a poet who works largely in fragments? Yes. But because fragments are grammatical units lacking one of two things required for a sentence—a verb and a subject noun—the fragments tend to be dependent on an understood subject noun or verb, which is the work not of syntax, but of grammar. Fragments require grammatical context; this they borrow—almost always—from the nearest preceding complete sentence. Here’s Linda Gregg’s “We Manage Most When We Manage Small,” for example, which consists of six sentences and nine fragments:

What things are steadfast? Not the birds.  
Not the bride and groom who hurry  
in their brevity to reach one another.  
The stars do not blow away as we do.
The heavenly things ignite and freeze.
But not as my hair falls before you.
Fragile and momentary, we continue.
Fearing madness in all things huge
and their requiring. Managing as thin light
on water. Managing only greetings
and farewells. We love a little, as the mice
huddle, as the goat leans against my hand.
As the lovers quickening, riding time.
Making safety in the moment. This touching
home goes far. This fishing in the air.

We know that, in the first fragment, what Gregg means is “the birds are not steadfast,” and likewise, “the bride and groom are not steadfast either”—that is, we carry the verb and adjective of the initial sentence over to the two fragments, which themselves would have no clear meaning otherwise. Later, when we encounter “But not as my hair falls before you,” we understand Gregg to mean “The heavenly things ignite and freeze, but not as my hair, etc.” In this case, we simply see the fragment as an extension of the sentence, prevented only by punctuation from being an actual part of that sentence. This particular kind of fragment governs the rest of the poem.

But syntax can still be useful, even crucial, within the fragments. Perhaps the most striking instance here is in lines 2-3:

Not the bride and groom who hurry
in their brevity to reach one another.

Gregg could have placed “in their brevity” after “to reach another,” emphasizing, by having it end the line, the brevity of the lovers. In the actual arrangement, though, the union of the lovers is literally interrupted by brevity—the syntax has a narrative of its own, then. The sentence doesn’t speak to how love is thwarted by mortality, but the syntax does.

Notice the muscularity, apart from syntax, that manifests itself here as the steady but unpredictable interchange of complete sentence and fragment, an interchange that contributes to the poem’s meaning. For me, the narrative at the level of sentence and fragment is that we are forever striving for a completeness that routinely breaks down; union, in the form of marriage in particular (and the end of a marriage is a large part of the subject of Too Bright to See, which opens with this poem), is one idea we have of completeness. The poem opens with the completeness—stability—of a sentence, and immediately succumbs to fragment—instability. And it closes in the same way. As if to say that this is the inevitable trajectory, no matter how hard the patterning within the poem tries to resist this trajectory, enacting our human refusal to believe we can’t find, and hold onto, something like stability within union with another person.

Syntax accounts for the startling opening of francine j. harris’s “suicide note #10: wet condoms.” Note how the first line, syntactically, could have appeared at the end of the opening sentence:

Dear Blank,

If I start this off by saying he takes his wet condom when he leaves
then it’s more about him, less about the desire for evidence, more about trust, less about the edge of the mattress and the falling sky, less about the moment the litany turns to shatter inside the overhead light. Or the last time I saw my mother. more about a zygote in the toilet or an infant he and I might have held. less about the neighbor taking out the trash under my window, less about the burn in my stomach.
Notice, by the way, that the grammar of the first sentence goes on to govern almost all of the rest of the stanza, which is all fragments. So for example, when we get to the first fragment, “less about the moment the litany turns,” we understand that “it’s” precedes it. In the case of “Or the last time I saw my mother,” we plug in “it’s” and “less about” from the preceding sentence. Again, this is the work of grammar.

But syntax accounts for arrangement; it’s why the first sentence’s material is arranged thus: it’s more about A, less about B, more about C, less about D—a rocking between more and less, back and forth, is established: a parallelism. In its way, the sentence’s regularity is comforting, because predictable. Here’s where a meaningful disruption of pattern occurs. Tracking the instances of more and less down the page, we get the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more</td>
<td>about him</td>
<td>concrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less</td>
<td>about desire</td>
<td>abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more</td>
<td>about trust</td>
<td>abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less</td>
<td>about mattress and sky</td>
<td>concrete/abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less</td>
<td>about the moment</td>
<td>abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less</td>
<td>about the last time</td>
<td>abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more</td>
<td>about zygote (or imagined infant)</td>
<td>abstract?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less</td>
<td>about neighbor</td>
<td>concrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less</td>
<td>about burn in stomach</td>
<td>abstract/concrete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Going down column A, the drift is toward less-ness, with more-ness rallying briefly, then succumbing. One translation is that there’s a downward trajectory in terms of what things mean to this speaker (and/or what she seems to want to make them mean), i.e., things seem increasingly meaningless.

Part of how things mean, for human beings, is through sensory proof. What’s concrete is clear; much blurrier, abstraction. When I look at column B, I find another pattern, a shuffling between concrete and abstract. In the first four instances, it’s as if the desire is to contain the abstract within the concrete (thanks to the particular syntactic arrangement of chiasmus, which creates a double frame of information; then abstraction takes over for two moments. At the zygote, it’s hard to tell—is that concrete? The infant seems to be, until it’s modified by “he and I might have held”—so it’s hypothetical, abstract. One more instance of the concrete (neighbor/trash), and finally the containment of abstraction within the concreteness of the stomach. We might say, then, that the shuttling between what’s knowable and what isn’t is only resolved, for this speaker, by the containment of what’s unknown within what is known. But—and—isn’t that what it is to be a human being, with both the burden and boon of self-consciousness? Which is to say, harris’s poem speaks both from an individual sensibility in an individual situation, but toward a larger, more shared experience.

Patterns like these—the sorts of patterns I’ve been thinking about throughout this essay—are always there to be found, but I don’t want to suggest that this is how I read poetry. I read it for how it makes me feel, physically. I only started noticing certain patterns, and departures from them, when I wanted to understand why I felt as I did. Consciousness of these patterns isn’t required to appreciate a poem. Anymore than I need to understand that it’s a particular chord change or combination that makes me want to cry at one part of a favorite song. But if I did understand, it would be a way to appreciate the musician’s artistry.

And yet…

Is artistry the right word? At one level, I suppose it has to be, but artistry suggests to me a consciousness of what one is doing. But that isn’t, in my experience, how poems get written. Rather, I just write my poems—and sure, there’s revision, I might rearrange words to avoid redundant sound patterns, or revise unneeded language away. But I don’t consciously think about all the things I’ve discussed here.
I mentioned earlier the difference between what we say and how we say it—the how variously reinforcing or arguing with the what. As Solmaz Sharif has said, “It matters what you call a thing,” since a word can imprison, can erase otherness, can also grant power. It matters, too, how the calling happens, how we say a thing—and most important, perhaps, is the priority we give to a thing, where we locate it, within a sentence. Those choices are the work of syntax, but of course the writer chooses how syntax will be used. I think it’s fair to say poetry is always, at the level of prosody, confessional. It’s a record of our method of saying a thing, and that method is governed by individual sensibility, by choices we may not consciously make, but we do make them. Possibly the most disturbing thing about prosody—but about syntax especially, because it involves choice—is its utter fidelity to our innermost—truer?—selves. We sing—and we are betrayed.

Carl Phillips is the author of thirteen books of poems, most recently Wild Is the Wind (FSG, 2018). He teaches at Washington University in St. Louis.