

Hugh,

January 23, 2019

This morning, I read again your poem: *The Sound That Wind Makes*. It is a most extraordinary piece of writing. One of the interesting things about it is that you did not originally consider it to be a poem. After all, there is no rhyme scheme and no regular meter. However, it does have certain elements which make it instantly recognizable as poetry—rich poetry. Most readily identifiable is the phrase *I want words to...*, repeated like the soundings of a strong, tolling bell. But even more important is the use of powerful metaphors that result in the reader's awareness that it is written with a passion that is centered in the deep feelings of the author.

### The Sound That Wind Makes (for Maya)

I want words to breathe like I do, weep when I do, and bruise easily.

I want words to dream and remember those dreams that first set me on this path.

I want words to grow old with me and become like the lines in my face and tell me  
old stories that keep my stumbling spirit from falling and new ones that tell of  
love forever young and freely given.

I want words of no regret even for the sorry waste of all I have left undone, unsaid.

I want words to hold up a mirror and see there all who at some time have gone hand  
in hand with me through this life.

O what a wondrously crowded reflection that would be, all of them in the morning  
of their lives, young and old alike.

O that words would fall like these tears and mark the page in silver and gold, the  
true colors of night, that these words would live on in their hearts and find some rest  
there, though I myself be nothing but the sound the restless wind makes on a cold  
night, the wind that sweeps down the mountainside and past all the houses in which  
loved ones have died and gathers up all those lost souls and scatters what is but dust  
and ash through the deep space of time.

Hugh Himwich, 2019

As you began what would become *The Sound That Wind Makes*, so I began the first three lines of *I Held In My Arms* without any thought of prose or poetry. I only knew that I needed to respond to the words of Susan Gubar, 74, distinguished Professor Emerita of English at Indiana University. Essayist and poet, she was diagnosed with stage-four cancer in 2008 and told that she would likely die before 2013. In 2017, she wrote a NYT's article: **Immortality at Midnight**. These are excerpts:

... Cognizance of limited time can paradoxically expand time.

There I am, then, my body seeded with cancer that has recurred and may return, whereas now the air is sweet and quiet, with only me conscious, and I can inch forward into futures I weave for the ones I must leave behind. May they prosper and thrive

through a series of tomorrows I will not experience but cherish envisioning. For they need to find—oh, please let them find!—love elsewhere and abundantly.

...

Alone but not lonely, I creep down the dim hall to study photos on a shelf: friends, children, cousins, grandchildren. All of them at various stages of evolution with their unique expressions of expectation or anxiety, curiosity or self-consciousness—standing still for the intrusive camera. Each requires a long stare. Where are they going? Will they be happy? Each elicits a smile; tears flow, but tears of joy.

In reading these words, I realized that the human spirit can be nourished not only by memory of the past and consciousness of the presence, but also by probing into the possibilities of a future beyond our own lives. I wrote three lines in 2017 and then went on to other things. I discovered them a week ago and completed the first draft in about a day. Then, after meeting with you, I began to tweak it. Among other things, I left in some internal rhymes but removed all but two of the traditional end-of-line rhymes. Why? I am not sure, but perhaps because I was comfortable for it to have the flavors of poetry without the constraints of rhyme. Constraints? Well, it is true in the greatest of poetry that the rhyming gives no indication of straining at all. But, for myself, when I find a word that is perfectly congruous with my feelings and thought, I prefer it to one that rhymes and almost reaches that point—but not quite.

## I Held In My Arms

I held our first great-grandchild in my arms;  
He looked into my eyes and heard my voice;  
He felt the warmth of my heart and breath.

He could not gaze back in time to see my past, my life-journey,  
But now he takes small steps ever forward—as I too once did—  
Into the *Story of a Life* to be composed page by page.

I write while sitting on a well-made chair built in 1798.  
My grandmother, Lizzie Hall Eaton, wrote in pencil on its base:  
*Made by great-grandfather Smith in Exeter, New York.*

From examining grave-stone inscriptions and family lore,  
I find that my great, great, great grandfather's name was Luther.  
He would have been about fourteen when he built the chair.  
In 1815, he was a juror at the murder trial of a Mohican Indian.  
Of him and his life, I know little more.

Did he foresee generations to come beyond his days?  
Did he envision those who would sit in this chair  
So carefully made, still sturdy, still strong?

On his behalf—and on my own and my kin—  
I shall imagine his life and those I'll not see.  
My mind's eye will look both back and ahead  
With gratitude for what has been and now is,  
And with Hope, Love, and Blessings for lives yet to be.

Charles Adams Eaton 2019

Now regarding the constraints that rhyme imposes, consider these two poems by William Ernest Henley:

### INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

“Invictus” is interesting on many levels. To begin with, it is an excellent example of the use of rhyme and rhythm. There has been the suggestion that he wrote it after having his foot amputated. Ouch! No wonder he is biting his teeth. “...*the Horror of the shade...shall find me unafraid.*” Right. And how’s that actually working for you, William? Shall we not see you hesitate at the edge of the Abyss? Just a little, oh manly one? Just perhaps, we may hear you cry out in full-chested confidence as you casually stride over the edge:

“...**the Captain** of my soouul”

Now, to be absolutely fair to W.E.Henley, we should read his other great poem on death:

## Margaritae Sorori\*

A late lark twitters from the quiet skies:  
And from the west,  
Where the sun, his day's work ended,  
Lingers as in content,  
There falls on the old, gray city  
An influence luminous and serene,  
A shining peace.

The smoke ascends  
In a rosy-and-golden haze. The spires  
Shine and are changed. In the valley  
Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun,  
Closing his benediction,  
Sinks, and the darkening air  
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night--  
Night with her train of stars  
And her great gift of sleep.

So be my passing!  
My task accomplish'd and the long day done,  
My wages taken, and in my heart  
Some late lark singing,  
Let me be gather'd to the quiet west,  
The sundown splendid and serene,  
Death.

William Ernest Henley \*Henley's daughter Margaret died at age 5

They are both magnificent poems, but the plaudits have gone to *Invictus*—perhaps because it glorifies endurance and defiance in the face of insuperable challenges. Beats me. I'll take the paean to Margaret any day. There is no rhyme, and the rhythm—although as subtle, silent, and insistent as a heartbeat—does not reveal itself in any obvious meter.

You would do me a favor, Hugh [actually, you would do yourself a favor] if you were to listen to Leo Delibes' *Flower Duet* from his opera *Lakme* as you read this poem. One really good recording is on YouTube. Search for "**Lakme flower duet Sabine**" Go ahead, do it now. Keep listening through the first minute until you come to the melodies that you have long known and loved. The whole thing is only about four minutes long. A fair translation of the text as Lakme sings with her servant while gathering flowers by the river is this:

Under the dense canopy\ Where the white jasmine Blends with the rose\  
On the flowering bank\  
Laughing at the morning\  
Come, let us drift down together\  
Let us gently glide along\  
With the enchanting flow\  
Of the fleeing current\  
On the rippling surface\  
With a lazy hand\  
Let us reach the shore\  
Where the source sleeps\  
And the bird sings\  
Under the dense canopy\  
Under the white jasmine\  
Let us drift down together.

Go on, listen to it. Please.

Now I return to *I Held In My Arms*. I have considered your critique that it is “caught between poetry and prose”, and you are exactly right. Therefore, I first removed all but two instances of end-rhyme. Then I considered changing the appearance of the structure by converting it into six linear sentences. However, it has many of the same elements that led me to suggest that you change the linear structure of *The Sound That Wind Makes* into the visual appearance that would clue the reader that “this is a poem”. So I left the structure as is.

I was greatly moved by the poetic prose of Susan Gubar in *Immortality at Midnight* and wanted to have the same resources to give freedom in my writing. I will also add that my use of punctuation reflects the fact that I intend them to be clues as to how it should be read aloud. I always read poetry aloud (in my head) paying attention to all the indications of pause, emphasis, pace, etc. So when I use semi-colons in the first two lines I mean to suggest both pause and light conjunction. To me, this means one sentence in three lines in which a complete breath is taken after each punctuation mark.

Now, if you were to read my poem aloud while listening to Lakme’s flower duet, you would likely say to yourself: *Ahh, so that’s it. This is what Charles is hearing with his Mind’s Ear.* The poem accompanied by musical harmonies completes the expression of that which cannot be complete with words (or music) alone.”

By the way, I believe that the reader as well as the writer is allowed “poetic license”, or freedom of interpretation. So, when I hear the flower duet, I understand that they are drifting with the flowers on a rippling river. They then want to “reach the shore where the source sleeps”. Having canoed rivers since I was at least five or six, I can assure you that the river sleeps only under two conditions: 1) when it reaches a large body of still water, and 2) when there is a cut-bank—perhaps behind a sandbar. Inasmuch as they are “Under the dense canopy” and will then continue to “drift down together” they are surely by the river bank. [Once Philip, Olga, Pauline, and I were going down the Pine River when a sudden rain shower caught us in the open. We came to the first calm water under a giant pine and stayed till the rain was over. Weren’t touched by a drop.]

I, however, prefer to exercise license to interpret the lack of current as the consequence of emerging from the river at last and entering the ocean itself, with no shores to step out on, and bobbing above an abyssal deep. So, if I were to read *Margaritae Sorori* paired with Lakme’s *flower song*, I would have the sensation of a complete expression of my feelings toward human life and death. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

Now, let me give you an example of how I think that a very great poem is slightly constrained by the discipline of rhyme. And that poem is—(wait for it):

#### REQUIEM

Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me;  
"Here he lies where he longed to be,  
Home is the sailor, home from sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill."

Robert Louis Stevenson

What a marvelous poem! By the way, I googled the poem and the first site I opened had the 7<sup>th</sup> line as: "Home is the sailor, home from *the* sea," [apparently a printer's error]. Only a landlubber would fail to realize that sailors "go **to** sea" and "come home **from** sea". Stevenson wrote carefully and deliberately.

However, Stevenson wants to show the return of the sailor/hunter to lie "where he longed to be" as a coming home from sea and hill. "Hill", the last word of the poem, is extremely important; it needs to pair with the end-rhyme in the first quatrain. "Will" seems to be the best possible available word. But... Is "will" the best word for the mood, spirit, and feeling of this poem? I suggest that it is almost the best word, but not quite. It does have the advantage of rhyming with "hill", but I feel that in *Requiem*, Stevenson seems able express joy and gratitude for life in its completeness (*Glad did I live and gladly die*)—and an awareness that he is now near the end of the great arc of life. Perhaps if Stevenson were writing in prose, he might say: *I have had a rich and complete life; I am grateful and give thanks for every part of it but now I am home at last, and I am willing to yield myself into the harmony that is the final chord in the symphony of life*, or perhaps something a little less flowery. If he could have found an encompassing word that expressed the above and at the same time rhymed with "hill", he surely would have used it—and avoided the impression of macho chest-beating, spitting in the wind, and shouting against the hurricane's howl.

The familiar use of "lay me down" (as in: *Now I lay me down to sleep*) has a gentle softness that is dramatically missing from *And I laid me down with a will*. In this case, the past tense indicates an action already taken with definitive intention and force. It does not go so far as to have overtones of suicidal intent (Hmm, or does it?). At any rate, he lies prostrate either within the grave or on its edge. Perhaps this is precisely what he felt and wanted to express. I certainly don't know. Stevenson wrote it in 1874—twenty-eight years before his death in 1903. In 1873, he visited William Ernest Henley in the Edinburgh Infirmary where they became good friends and literary collaborators. Then he went to the French Riviera to recuperate from his tuberculosis. Stevenson, health improved, returned to England in 1874.

So... I accept and affirm the glories of poetry. All I'm saying is that committing to the discipline of rhyme results in smaller assortment of words by which to achieve the poets aim. Am I being picky picky? Quibbling? I don't know, but if that's the way you see it, I'll accept being a quibbler. One thing I do know, I believe that I shall forsake the constraints of rhyme unless overwhelmed by poesy bubbling up within me, enjoy the feeling of delight in the accident of unexpected rhymes and rhythm, and discipline myself both to think and express myself in the tightest of prose. O.K., I know that the above writing is not particularly tight, but my intent is to express myself in words that are as close as possible as my own actual feelings and thoughts.

*Charles*



2019-02-01

Hugh, The attached pic is of a painting by Edward Robert Hughes inspired by Henley's *Margaritae Sorori*. Hughes titled the painting with the last two lines of the second stanza: *Night with her train of stars/ And her great gift of sleep*. You will not be surprised that the poem has also been put to music. [The duet from *Lakme* would also be fitting, I think.]

I checked up on "Invictus" and found that, yes, Henley had his left leg amputated below the knee at age 16. The cause was from complications of tubercular arthritis (diagnosed when he was 12). For the same affliction, he was again hospitalized from 1873 to 1875. It was in 1875 that he wrote "Invictus"—one of a whole suite written while in the hospital.

Henley wrote *Margaritae Sorori* in 1886. We easily assume by the title that it was written after his daughter Margaret died. But she died in 1894. In reading the last stanza, it is clear that he is writing about himself (*So be my passing!/My task accomplish'd and the long day done...*), and this last stanza became, appropriately, the epitaph engraved on his tombstone. I must assume that on the death of his daughter he knew of no finer words to memorialize her than these—and therefore gave it the title we now know.

By the way, Margaret was a good friend of J.M Barrie whom she called "fwendy wendy" (i.e."friendly"). It appears that she was the inspiration of *Wendy Darling* in Barrie's *Peter Pan*, but she died before it was finished.

Here is another of his poems written in hospital:

### Grave

St. Margaret's bells,  
Quiring their innocent, old-world canticles,  
Sing in the storied air,  
All rosy-and-golden, as with memories  
Of woods at evensong, and sands and seas  
Disconsolate for that the night is nigh.  
O, the low, lingering lights! The large last gleam  
(Hark! how those brazen choristers cry and call!)  
Touching these solemn ancientries, and there,  
The silent River ranging tide-mark high  
And the callow, grey-faced Hospital,  
With the strange glimmer and glamour of a dream!  
The Sabbath peace is in the slumbrous trees,  
And from the wistful, the fast-widowing sky  
(Hark! how those plangent comforters call and cry!)  
Falls as in August plots late roseleaves fall.  
The sober Sabbath stir —  
Leisurely voices, desultory feet! —  
Comes from the dry, dust-coloured street,  
Where in their summer frocks the girls go by,  
And sweethearts lean and loiter and confer,  
Just as they did an hundred years ago,  
Just as an hundred years to come they will:—  
When you and I, Dear Love, lie lost and low,  
And sweet-throats none our welkin shall fulfil,  
Nor any sunset fade serene and slow;  
But, being dead, we shall not grieve to die.