

MTB : – Middles & Turns



Hi everyone, it's Peter from Australia, behind the bar once again. For those of you with good memories, we've recently covered '[endings](#)' and '[beginnings](#)' as well as Grace's post on setting for poems. So tonight, I thought we'd do the middle bits of a poem – and particularly turns in poetry – where a poem shifts gear or opens windows as Jane Hirschfield says in her book *Ten Windows*

'Many good poems have a kind of window in them — they change their direction of gaze that suddenly opens a broadened landscape of meaning and feeling (p. 151).

'Whether large or small, what I am calling a window can be recognised primarily by the experience of expansion it brings: the poem's nature is changed because its scope has become larger. (p. 153)

High Voltas

The shape of some middles are required by the form of poem you're writing. For example, sonnets typically have a 'volta' (Italian for 'turn') in them. This usually occurs between the octave (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the next six lines) in Petrarchan sonnets; or in the final couplet in an English or Shakespearean sonnet.

Here's [Shakespeare's Sonnet 18](#). For the first eight lines the poet is making an argument about beauty and his lover; then at line eight the argument turns with a preposterous assertion that his lover shall continue beautiful undimmed by time. In the final couplet the poet explains that as long as his poem (O vanity!) exists and is read, then you, my beloved, will live on.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;...
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Compare this to Gwendolyn Brooks' [the rites for Cousin Vit](#)

Carried her unprotesting out the door.
Kicked back the casket-stand. **But** it can't hold her,
That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her,
The lid's contrition nor the bolts before.
Oh oh. Too much. Too much. Even now, surmise,
She rises in the sunshine. There she goes,
Back to the bars she knew and the repose
In love-rooms and the things in people's eyes.
Too vital and too squeaking. Must emerge.
Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss,
Slops the bad wine across her shantung, talks
Of pregnancy, guitars and bridgework, walks
In parks or alleys, comes haply on the verge
Of happiness, haply hysterics. Is.

In this sonnet the turn is right in the second line almost as if Cousin Vit couldn't wait. '...**But** it can't hold her...' Cousin Vit is so full of energy and life that not only can death not contain her but she also bursts the conventional sonnet form. ([Michael Theune](#) has written extensively on on voltas in sonnets).

Turns are not confined to sonnets. Even highly structured forms such as the triolet or haiku have turns. For example, Ezra Pound's famous 1913 haiku-esque poem [In a Station of the Metro](#)

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Talk about a window opening, a perspective shifting.

A good turn or looking out the window

Turns or window openings reflect changes in the natural world. As American poet [Laurie Perry Vaughan](#) writes,

"Turning as the main movement of a poem is readily identified with nature. Maple leaves turn. Seasons turn. A chrysalis turns to a butterfly. Evening turns to dusk before turning to morning...the turning in the poem, gives the art pulse, a life blood— and hopefully elevates our resting pulse as we write or read or listen. (p.6)

Here's English poet Philip Larkin with [High Windows](#) (CAUTION: Strong Language)

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,

And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

The turn is there at the end of the fourth stanza – ‘And immediately...’ all that bitterness and regret which the poet has built up over the preceding stanzas evaporates and we’re looking in a different direction, perhaps at eternity.

Once you know what to look for, turns are everywhere in poetry. Try this: take a highlighter (or pencil if you’re genteel with your poetry volumes) and go to your favourite poem and mark the point(s) at which the poem turned, where the window opened.

What does a turn do for a poem?

Sometimes they come when you’re lulled into a sense of knowing where a poem is going – and then ‘bam’ you’re hit by a powerful shift to what the poem is really about. Sometimes it’s comforting or leads to an answer to the poem’s problem. Consider British poet [Henry Reed’s](#) 1942 poem on military training.

Naming of Parts

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all the neighboring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

The turn in this stanza occurs at the end of the fourth line – ‘Japonica / Glistens like coral in all the neighbouring gardens...’ This is repeated throughout the poem. So, the poet’s answer to the military training (and the war: ‘what to do after firing.’) is turn and consider the fleeting fleshy beauty of the camellia in the gardens (which in itself may be a metaphor for unarmed innocents harmed by war).

Where a poet places the ‘turn’ or window depends on their subject matter and how confident they are that the reader will stick with them (think back to [my session](#) on beginnings and hooking a reader into reading further). I think in this example, Jane Hirshfield trusts us to stick with her in her [Poem with Two Endings](#)

Poem With Two Endings

Say ‘death’ and the whole room freezes –
even the couches stop moving,

even the lamps.
Like a squirrel suddenly aware it is being looked at.
Say the word continuously,
and things begin to go forward.
Your life takes on
the jerky texture of an old film strip.
Continue saying it,
hold it moment after moment inside the mouth,
it becomes another syllable.
A shopping mall swirls around the corpse of a beetle.
Death is voracious, it swallows all the living.
Life is voracious, it swallows all the dead.
Neither is ever satisfied, neither is ever filled,
each swallows and swallows the world.
The grip of life is as strong as the grip of death.
(but the vanished, the vanished beloved, o where?)

Normally, 'death' would be reserved for later in the poem when the reader is settled, so the poet quickly comforts us with some odd, humorous images – moving couches, lamps, a squirrel being watched. But the turns keep coming. There at line 13: 'Death is voracious...' and paralleled in the next line, 'Life is voracious...'. And the final turn, in brackets right at the end... '(but the vanished, the vanished beloved, o where?)'. Marvellous stuff isn't it?

So now it's your turn.

Let's look to our middles and see if we can build in exciting turns, open a new window, pick a sonnet or a haiku, write in blank verse or pentameter, just show us your best turns (just like Christopher Walken in the Youtube clip below)..

You know what to do –

- Write your poem.
- Post it on your blog.
- Link it up to our Mr. Linky. (Don't forget to check the little box to accept use/privacy policy)
- Importantly, visit other blogs, enjoy some amazing poetry
- and above all have fun.

And while you're doing that, here's some music

Weapon of Choice, Fat Boy Slim featuring Richard Walken