

## A Symposium on Sentiment: An Introduction

For a few years, I have sensed a growing resistance to sentiment among poets I know, including my graduate students. Once upon a time, a long time ago, poets didn't fear Feeling; writing a poem that made someone cry was considered heroic, and "sentimental" was not a pejorative but a compliment. Modernism, of course, cooled the heart of poetry; confessionalism warmed it up; and post-structuralism threw a bucket of ice water on it. In the decades since, poets have become, among many other things, ever more scientific, funny, mathematical, irreverent, and wise to the ways of history and culture. They deploy fragments and black humor and song lyrics and binary code and generally keep on reinventing language and using and subverting old poetic forms in interesting, often beautiful ways. Yet the current reluctance to engage strong emotion feels to me unrelated to the splendor of innovation. It also feels like something more than the latest twitch of a historical pendulum that swings between hot and cool.

Is there an emotional guardedness in the prevailing strategy of surrealism and in the lacquered, impenetrable irony of many poems we read in new books and little magazines? Is my own taste for non-linear, fragmented poems connected with a resistance to sentiment? Maybe poets are just tired of the language of sentiment—maybe we need more, new ways to feel. Or perhaps certain language-oriented, or cerebral, or highly ironized, stylized poems *are* engaging feeling, and we need sharper sensors to perceive it.

This symposium began as "Hot/Not," a panel on sentiment that I co-chaired with poet Sally Ball at the Denver AWP conference in 2010. Sally and I were curious about what might be going on behind the feeling that feeling is best avoided. We sensed a longing for emotion in conversations about how "easy irony" and "mere cleverness" come at the expense of moving a reader (I wasn't sure what poets meant when they said "easy irony" and "cleverness," so I have asked the writers in these pages to clarify). I perceived a craving for fondness and endearment in the sudden ubiquity of the word "little" in poems. Has darlingness become a stand-in for love?

The panel was well attended, and many people came up to us afterward to ask whether the essays might be available in print. What follows are those essays (from almost all of the poets on the panel—Sally Ball, Sarah Vap, Jenny Browne, and me) plus pieces from two presenters (Kevin Prufer and Rachel Zucker) on a sentiment panel at Harvard last fall.

Vap, whose poems include religious language and images (a risky strategy in an anti-emotional moment), talks about the danger of sentiment for women poets. She says poets need to risk shame, or they will succumb to a “great dulling force” pulling poetry toward a safe center. Zucker recalls how, in the ’90s, in the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, writing about feelings was out of vogue. She had to forge a new relationship with raw emotion, make it work in her poems without depending on subject matter (her body, her marriage, her miscarriage) for emotional impact. Prufer suggests sentimentality is bad when it undermines emotional complexity. A good test for useful sentiment in a poem, he says, is to gauge whether it complicates, rather than simplifies, our emotional response to the world. (I’m reading between the lines, but I think Prufer tacitly implies that irony and surrealism, when leaned on too heavily as a substitute for emotion, are the new sentimentality.) Sally Ball allows that poets have reason to distrust sentiment but that some degree of openness is necessary if poems are to register what thrills or scars us. For Jenny Browne, poems without an emotional component are unmemorable; they sidestep the “mess of being human.” For my part, I went back to the cold-seeming, experimental poems I like best to see how it is they manage to move me. (In the process, I came up with a definition of something called “muscular sentiment,” the presence of which allows all kinds of poems, experimental and not, to access to openness without sinking into icky sweetness. But that’s a subject for another day.)

—JK

# Terribly Sentimental

Rachel Zucker

I started writing poems in fifth grade. I loved that no one could tell me that the way I felt, or the way I wrote about how I felt, was wrong, because poetry had no rules and was the genre of freedom. Eleven years later, getting an MFA at the Iowa Writer' Workshop, writing "about" things or feelings was out of vogue. That jived with a notion I had developed by then: the power of poetry—what made poetry better than prose—was that poems could enact experience, whereas stories merely recounted experience. Stories were "about," and this aboutness was built on a kind of lie or artifice. Poems were "of" or "out of" and could be true or accurate. I aspired to make poems that enacted experience, which included feelings, but I eschewed "aboutness." My poems were not (I believed) "about" my feelings or even about me.

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My first book, *Eating in the Underworld*, is a series of poems told through the narrative arc of the myth of Persephone. The back story of the poems includes being the daughter of a powerful mother, falling in love, depression, craving power, and the event and aftermath of the death of my best friend's boyfriend, who died in bed with her when they were both nineteen. Almost no one knows this back story because, by speaking through Persephone, autobiography is subsumed or strained out or refracted in the poems.

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In 2001, my friend Arielle Greenberg asked me to submit poems to *How2*, an online feminist journal. I wanted to write a poem about the recent birth of my second son, Abram. I had never read a poem that described a self-immolating, reality-fracturing birth like the one I experienced. When I wrote the poem, though, it was too clean, too linear. The poem kept telling the story of the birth but wasn't getting at the experience of it. In struggling with that poem and in coming to a version that felt close to true, I found my poetics and the theme and title of my second book: *The Last Clear Narrative*. Pregnancy and birth literally doubled and broke me open and split me into two selves. Birth and motherhood fractured my sense of self as a constant, whole entity and my ability to make a linear narrative out of my experience. It was critical to me that the poem

*not* be sentimental because I felt I hadn't been told the truth by anyone—not by my mother not by other women not by literature—about motherhood, childbirth, being a woman, being an individual, being a daughter. I wanted to write experience in a way that felt accurate. I viewed sentimentality as the antithesis of accuracy. I needed to write a broken poem because that's what that birth was for me: broken. I wasn't trying to write an "experimental" poem because it was in fashion. I was trying to make poetry that was accurate, because to do otherwise, to write the clean, linear poem, was to participate in a culture that tries to silence women and misrepresent women's experiences.

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My third book, *The Bad Wife Handbook* is, in part, a defense of my second book and an experiment with extreme directness. I tried to be more and more direct about what did or didn't happen in *my* life while trying to still be accurate—not sentimental. The book is about desire, lust, motherlove, the conflict between the "I" and the family/world. I had started writing *about* things as a kind of rebellion and also because the alternative was to actually *do* things, and that would have meant leaving my husband and children. I was still trying to avoid sentimentality, but the poems were steeped in sentiment in the sense of having opinions ("my sentiment exactly") and feelings, and certainly in the sense of "from the senses." My knowledge and experience come from my senses.

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Digression: Last semester one of my graduate students wrote language-driven poems that were smart and evocative but not moving. When I asked the students to write about the thing they were most afraid to write about, this student wrote a very spare, direct, narrative poem about her father dying during the night when she was a child. She read the poem, and the class responded with surprised silence. She said, "I've never written about my father's death . . . even though my whole life changed then. I just figured it was too sentimental. Is it? Is it terribly sentimental?" I was shocked she had never written about her father's death. She is in a graduate poetry workshop and she had never written about this before?

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As I get older, I become more and more interested in what poetry can *do*. And not just in what poetry *is*. For example, when Arielle, the poet who invited me to write the defining poem about my son's birth, gave

birth to a stillborn baby three years ago, someone sent her a Mary Oliver poem that became very dear to her. I was ashamed that previously I had dismissed Oliver as a “populist” poet and taken a deep breath when a student wanted me to teach Oliver instead of someone more “serious.” The fact that Oliver’s poem *comforted* Arielle, even a little, is worth so much to me now.

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I have less and less patience with poems that don’t engage sentiment—both in the sense of opinion and of feeling—and with poems wherein I do not perceive the presence of a feeling, as well as thinking, human being. My students, though, are often afraid of sentiment and certainly sentimentality. I used to be uncomfortable with the idea of poetry of witness, a sort of A.A. poetry, but now I think I prefer that to language-driven poetry that wants to be person-less.

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One could argue that my recent book, *Museum of Accidents*, is all and only about finding a way to say, sincerely, that I love my husband—to proclaim that most banal of heterosexist clichés and make it really mean something. I want a poetry that can say such things. One also could argue that my book is all and only about my miscarriage—the disappointment I felt, the loss—as related with *sincerity* and *accuracy*. I wanted the reader to feel bludgeoned, to feel sick of me of my body of my baby loss, because that’s how I felt, and because the whole culture told me to shut the fuck up about how it felt to lose that pregnancy. Friends, strangers, movies, books all said Don’t talk about the loss of your child and what is and isn’t a child, ew, yuck, sorry but you have two kids and at least you know you can get pregnant and you didn’t want that baby anyway, just shut up, they said, move on. I want a poetry that can say how it feels to be told to shut up and a poetry that will not shut up and will not even let the reader “identify” with me or even really feel sorry for me because that’s too much distance. The poems in *Museum of Accidents* are sentimental because I write *about* things and am revealed as a person “excessively prone to feeling” (as Webster’s says) and as someone who wants to make others feel things too.

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Now that I have given birth three times and been present at friends’ and clients’ births, I know what none of the poems or stories made clear

(were they lying? not listening?). Birth is beautiful and spiritual and mundane and shitty (literally). It is hard work—the lowest and highest—and that’s what I’m interested in writing. Not birth per se but the realness of experience. I want to write with shame and honesty and humor and ambivalence about and out of experience. Arielle and I recently co-wrote a book called *Home/Birth: a poetic*. During a round of midnight-hour proofreading the editor told us that every time she reads the manuscript, she bursts into tears. I’m proud of having written something about birth that makes a woman who has not given birth cry. Sentiment and sentimental. About.

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If someone asks my favorite poem, I usually answer “A Baby is Born Out of a White Owl’s Forehead, 1972” by Alice Notley. The poem begins, “At this time there are few poems about pregnancy and childbirth,” and I love Notley’s last line: “but first, for two years, there’s no me here.” That’s how I felt for two years after my second son was born. I was grateful to have had those lines. The sentiment was *true* and kept me afloat when I felt alone and lied to about how boring and soul-crushing it can be to raise young children. Recently I went back to Notley’s poem and saw, underlined in my own hand, two other lines I had completely forgotten, “Of two poems one sentimental and one not / I choose both,” and I started to cry because that’s everything I’ve ever tried to do in my poetry.

## Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame

Sarah Vap

I have, for several years, found myself defending sentimentality’s presence and legitimacy in poetry—and especially, I have found myself defending the risking of it. By sentimental I mean the moments when I suspect that a poem is trying to manipulate me to feel some particular way. To feel sad, for instance, when a response of sadness isn’t merited by what’s happening in the poem.

I don’t mean to say that I love the badly sentimental poem. I mean that I appreciate the risk, I share the impulse to convey strong emotion, and I believe sentimentality to be an event or a stage that, ideally, all poets will risk or pass through at some point.

What might be termed “sentimental”—those subjects, feelings, scenarios—are also the exact reasons why I write and read poetry.

I don't deny that sentimentality, in some scenarios, *is* truly terrible. If I respond to something that is “sentimental” with disgust or rage, it is when the person or entity I feel to be manipulating me has some kind of power over me or what I love.

Sentimental poems *don't* have power over me. The biomass energy industry, for example, has power over me. Biomass, an industry placed on the “Green Energy” list in the dying days of the Bush Era, and which is, in fact, dirtier and more dangerous than coal energy, and which is, as we speak, beginning the permit process so that it may circle the entire Olympic Peninsula, where I live, with its incinerators, so that it might harvest and burn much of one of the last temperate rainforests and dump cancer-causing small particulate emissions over the entire peninsula and its mostly very poor residents—*this* has power over me. When an industry attempts to manipulate me by cheerfully, brightly, sentimentally portraying smiling white middle-class two-parent families standing next to, I shit you not, a John Deere tractor in a pretty green field with a stream running through it—*that* enrages me. That is a dangerous sentimentality.

The bad or too much sentimentality that I have encountered in poems, however, has been, I believe, not actually dangerous. Has been something performed, something experimented with, something risked, something understood or misunderstood on the way to understanding better how strong emotion might enter a poem. It's really no problem for me to simply skip over a poem I find too sentimental. I don't *feel threatened*. I just don't really mind at all. Because when one of those poems works—when the sentiment risked and pushed or altered or sincerely conveyed blows my mind or breaks my heart—those are always, by far, my favorite poems.

All that in order to say: I don't see sentimental poems as a problem. But there is something around the discussion of sentimentality in poems that *does* deeply unsettle me. It doesn't have to do with sentimentality, or the risking of it. Rather it is the monitoring of sentimentality in poems, the naming of sentimentality in poems, the connection between this censorship and the belittling of certain life experiences and wisdoms, the diminishing of whole cultures or their ways of experiencing the world, the degrading or silencing or quieting or diminishing of whole subject matters or voices or ways in poetry simply by associating them with the term “sentimentality” that churns in my gut and gets up my fight.

I love this earth so much. I love animals, trees—and not just abstractly. I mean that I have relationships with them, sometimes lasting my whole life. The American West, with its deserts and its high mountain lakes, is the basis of all the love that I have ever felt for anything in my entire life.

My babies. Same thing. Oh my God I am out of my mind with love for them. I love, even, the smell of their urine-soaked pajamas when they wake some mornings. Love, even, the shitty plastic toys that they, incomprehensibly, love.

I was raised strictly Catholic and attended Catholic school till college. My father dropped out of the seminary to marry my mother. My uncles were priests. I went to mass two or three times a week until I graduated from high school. My entire imagination was formed during the many years I was immersed in masses, songs, chants, prayers, meditations, liturgies, rosaries, stories. I have always felt, now and as a child, let's call it an Ecstatic-Gnostic-Animism. But all my instinct for prayer or joy or connection was channeled through highly ritualistic Catholicism.

Yet if, in a poem, I use the language of my imagination that is connected with religious language, I risk being termed sentimental or—harder, to my mind—religious. As a woman, if I speak about pregnancy and babies, I certainly risk being termed sentimental. If I speak about how I love the earth, I risk being termed sentimental.

There is a Great Dulling Force in the universe. This Great Dulling Force also is in the world of poetry, and it is connected with the smiling family standing next to the John Deere tractor as the small particulate emissions rain down. It is something I do experience as a threat. It is something that does hold power over me, that I experience as manipulative. It is this dulling, this *pulling* of everything toward a center, or toward a type of voice, or toward a particular perspective, or toward handling of certain subject matters with a certain kind of a language—*this* force deeply unsettles me. And right now, in my life, so much of the conversation inside this Great Dulling Force seems to center around this word “sentimental.”

There are certain emotions I have come to rely on when I am writing a poem, emotions that put me in relationship to this Great Dulling Force. If I find that I am embarrassed by a poem I have written, ashamed of a poem I have written, if I wrote it feeling desperate and intended to throw it away in the morning, if the poem is slightly unhinged or, yes, if I am repulsed by something I have written, then—I will trust it. Trust it to be something I wrote because it truly needed writing, and not simply because I had figured out how to write an admired and acceptable poem.

I will trust what I have written, that is, if I can barely stand for you to read it. However, I will only give you a poem that I can barely stand for you to read if I am feeling belligerent enough.

Much more interesting to me than whether or not a poet risks sentimentality is this: are they belligerent enough to risk shame? And are they shamed enough to become belligerent? Belligerent enough, that is, to offend the Great



Dulling Force? And then shamed enough by that Great Dulling Force to become, again, belligerent. And belligerent enough, ideally, to offend it again.

I will end with Lia Purpura's untitled poem from her collection *King Baby*. In this collection, Purpura has, excellently belligerently, and for 64 pages, written poem after poem about not only her actual baby but also about the idea of babies. In the collection, as in this poem, Purpura seems to constantly acknowledge that force which might be resistant to hearing a woman's poems about babies and then to completely ignore or circumvent it through the strategy of the King Baby.

Here is how I understand Purpura's King Baby: In real life, the real Purpura and her actual child take a walk along a river and they find this *thing*—a primitive-looking baby-object, perhaps an object of worship, made out of two gourds and covered with cowrie shells. It has no limbs, just a round head with a cut-open mouth. And the entire collection is “about” this object, this, as she calls it, King Baby. I didn't understand this, exactly, the first time I read the book, and experienced some shock and exhilaration when I believed that the entire collection was “about” her actual baby and her actual experiences as a mother. When I understood that the King Baby was an object to which she was addressing these poems, my questions went something like this:

Why was I shocked when I thought she was writing flat-out spiritually-linguaged love poems about her own actual child? Do we have to have a King Baby to write about Real Baby? I, too, often simultaneously experience my babies and the ideas of my babies—is this the same thing as the King Baby? Is there any such thing at all as a Real Baby without its King Baby? Which version of my beliefs about this book do I crave more: the book about an actual, albeit strangely nicknamed baby, or a book about an object? And isn't it interesting, it's a king and not a queen.

Either way, actual baby, object baby, idea of baby, actual motherhood, idea of motherhood—I was glad Purpura wrote about them and, no matter which of those things she was most focused on, remained deeply tender about babies. Remained, I would say, teasing, taunting, aware of, or risking sentimentality. Remained, I think, at least a little belligerent.

There's always a reason.  
You make the reason or don't  
understand it. But reason comes  
pouring. While your body  
looked like a buoy, we were part  
of a calm understanding.  
Then we saw *you*.  
Popular thought went crazy:  
we must have found you

for a reason!  
Forgive us such arrogance:  
why wouldn't we be your reason,  
your shapely passing thought,  
raw moment's explanation?  
And when we parted the branches  
and late afternoon sun striped down,  
why wouldn't we be  
odd light come to the planet  
just for you?

## Sentimentality, the Enemy?

Kevin Prufer

1.

In his delightful 1967 essay “What Is Sentimentality?” critic Brian Wilkie notes that textbooks more or less all define sentimentality as “the expression of feeling or the attempt to evoke feeling in excess of what the portrayed situation reasonably calls for.” This, he suggests, is a poor definition. Using Henry Clay Work’s hilariously overwrought “Come Home, Father” as an example, he makes his case. In Work’s song, a little girl calls out to her absent, dissolute father, who is out at a bar drinking. The hearth fire has gone out, her mother is weeping, the clock chimes the hours tormentingly, and her poor brother Benny has grown sicker and sicker. “Come Home, Father” concludes:

Yes, we are alone, poor Benny is dead,  
And gone with the angels of light;  
And these were the very last words that he said:  
“I want to kiss Papa good night.”  
Come home, come home, come home!  
Please, father, dear father, come home.

Once we’re done screwing up our eyes and giggling, we notice Wilkie makes two observations. First, “Come Home, Father” is *clearly* sentimental. No reasonable reader would disagree. Second, the poem also confounds our generally agreed-upon definition of sentimentality: there is no disproportion between the sentiment expressed and the situation. Little Benny, after all, died while his father was on a bender. While the poem may cause sophisticated readers

to cringe, it is not because it has gone too far in its expression of sadness at a terrible occurrence. Neither is the situation by itself sentimental; it is not contrived or unrealistic. Similar situations, Wilkie argues, occur with depressing frequency, and our feelings of outrage at fathers and sadness for children are appropriate. In short, “Come Home, Father” attempts to acquaint us with realistic, not uncommon problems (alcoholism, emotional abuse, the death of a child) and expects us to react *appropriately* to them. “At this point,” Wilkie writes, “I am ready to argue that the definition of ‘sentimentality’ as emotion inappropriate to the occasion is largely false or useless or both.”

Here, Wilkie changes gears, posing a sort of literary continuum wherein sentimentality exists at one extreme while the “hardboiled” inhabits the other. “The important point,” he writes, “is that to censor out either end of the spectrum. . . is to cut oneself off from the knowledge and appreciation of a certain challenging attitude toward human experience and from a fecund area of literature.” Instead of imagining sentimentality strictly as an aspect of a literary work, he asks whether it might instead be “an event or reaction. . . . It is possible to see sentimentality as neither subjective in the reader nor objective in the work, but determined in different instances by varying proportions of the reader’s attitude and the objective content of the work.” Some of us, after having tasted too much cotton candy or sweet sherry, recoil from it. That negative reaction is an event inside the taster, not a characteristic of the candy or the sherry. Other tasters, perhaps those who didn’t overindulge last weekend, might enjoy it a great deal (although Wilkie allows that certain sherry may be poisoned, just as, in a different sentimental poem, the speaker may expect us to burst into tears after he steps on a flower).

2.

I quoted from Wilkie’s essay on a panel about sentimentality last year. Surely, I said, sentimentality, wrapped up in the softer emotions, makes us feel sugary and cheap. Surely there is something distasteful about its abundance of emotion, appropriate or not. And of course, among poets in the American academy, and among most poetry readers, sentimentality is abhorred. We poets are trained to root it out of our work and to recognize it—whatever it is—in the work of poseurs and amateurs. There is no greater literary crime, a friend says, than sentimentality: one need only say the word to condemn a writer’s entire *oeuvre*. (“Longfellow is sentimental,” another friend once declared, and with that he washed his hands of him.)

Beholden to orthodoxies passed down to us, we rarely ask why this is so. Why does sentimentality trouble so many of us? Many successful poets of my generation rarely risk sentimentality, instead sliding easily into winking coyness, postmodern self-referentiality, wordplay, pop-cultural signification,

series of fleeting impressions, *artes poeticae*, and abstraction. Often a casualty of this avoidance is any engagement with the reader on emotional (as opposed to intellectual, comic, experimental, or discursive) levels. I'm thinking here of poets as varied as Larissa Szporluk and Timothy Donnelly, Matthew Rohrer and Karen Volkman—excellent writers all, but writers whose appeal, at least for this reader, exists in a realm far from anything that might resemble emotional directness, and far from any risk of sentimentality.

Wilkie is right to point out that excessive emotion is not necessarily the benchmark of sentimentality. He also correctly suggests we rethink our definition of the term.

One thing that seems to unite all my experiences of sentimentality is that it is the enemy of emotional complexity. "Come Home, Father" asks us to feel outrage and sadness, but it does not ask us to examine those emotions, to look with curiosity at the father or the society that allowed a child's death to happen, to perhaps mix our indignation with pity, insight, or even empathy. In our lives, our feelings about (and reactions to) difficult situations are complex. "Come Home, Father" doesn't move us because it is simplistic, reducing emotion to a single channel. In doing so, it fails at emotional accuracy. Humans feel conflicting emotions, but the sentimental poem (or song or painting) doesn't allow for them. Sentimentality, it seems to me, reduces our complex responses to the world; a poem ideally ought to expand those responses.

Art, including poetry, is uniquely suited to expressing the complexity of a universe whose truths clash and compete. For Emily Dickinson, there is simultaneously a God and no god, an afterlife and a void. John Keats feels both horror at the thought of death and erotic attraction to it. When contemporary poets retreat from strong emotion in order to avoid sentimentality, they misunderstand the term at the expense of a powerful force for their writing. Instead of retreating from emotion, we should retreat from emotional, ideological, political *simplicity*. That's a better way to avoid sentimentality.

### 3.

Where does this suspicion of emotion come from? And why is it so ubiquitous among writers? Is it just because sentimentality, as a trait or a reaction, feels icky? It could be, but I would argue instead that the simple emotionality of much sentimental art is not merely icky but also *dangerous*, something our early Modernist forebears knew from experience.

In 1918, Wilfred Owen described the horrors of young British soldiers marching to their deaths surrounded by mists of poison gas. A boy slowly dies, his eyes "writhing in his face." Blood "comes gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs." Instead of ending the poem on the harrowing, if meaningless, demise of an anonymous soldier, though, Owen points the finger at

Jessie Pope, a writer of sentimental war propaganda, the kind of stuff that persuaded young men to enlist in the first place: “My friend,” he writes:

... you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et Decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

There is nothing grand, let alone “sweet and proper,” about the young man’s death in Owen’s poem; war is much more complex and horrifying than that, despite what Pope’s message would have us believe. Although Owen would not survive the war, other poets picked up on this distrust of sentimental language, and that distrust infused the Modernist movement. Modernist artists understood sentimentality’s potential for lies, its ability to resonate with us in powerful, sometimes lethal ways. Sentimentality at its worst, they knew, was a way to reach the masses, to use sweetness, nationalism, or nostalgia to persuade us, against our better judgment, to do stupid, fatal things. Sentimental war propaganda is partly to blame for the nearly 17 million fatalities of the Great War. We, too, often see sentimentality deployed to dubious ends. Witness the rhetoric of George W. Bush during the runup to the Iraq war (countless other examples include paintings of happy slaves singing in cotton fields, wanting only to serve their masters; and the pretty, submissive housewives of 1950s sentimental movies). When the World War II poet Dunstan Thompson looked over the destroyed body of yet another young soldier, he exhorted all of us “to love him, tell the truth.”

That said, I think too many of us avoid emotion because we worry about sinking into sentimentality. Sure, emotive expression can be indecorous or cringeworthy, as in Work’s lyric—*not* because it is exceedingly purple but because it fails to think deeply or complexly. I also believe we have adopted the anti-sentimental stance of our Modernist predecessors without completely apprehending their reason for it.

Like Owen or Thompson, I imagine that poetry might tell the truth in its complexity and thus oppose a tide of dangerous sentimentality, of mistruth wrapped in sugar, of lies put forth by governments, corporations, and even by ourselves. Simple retreat from strong emotional affect—retreat from the risk of sentimentality—is not an adequate pressure against the emotional manipulation of the larger world.

# When “Cold” Poems Aren’t

Joy Katz

When I was first writing poems, and not self-conscious about sentiment—certainly before I encountered a force, among poets, against sentiment—I never imagined my favorite poems could be considered cold. Yet time and again teachers and poet friends called them chilly and remote. One such is John Ashbery’s “Into the Dusk-Charged Air,” which includes the names of over a hundred rivers. Here is the opening:

Far from the Rappahannock, the silent  
Danube moves along toward the sea.  
The brown and green Nile rolls slowly  
Like the Niagara’s welling descent.  
Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire  
Near where it joined the Cher...

I still remember when I bought *Rivers and Mountains* in a used bookstore in San Francisco and sat down to read the poem. I finished the first page, then turned to the next. Ha! I laughed; it was a joke—a joke on me—because I was waiting for what was going to *happen* in the poem, and nothing happened. Only more pages, more rivers. To go on for a hundred lines like that should be cruel, or at least cruelly frustrating. But instead the poem was beautiful, and something else. Something more than funny: it was moving. I kept reading long past the joke. The poem was not without emotion, although at the time I couldn’t have said why.

One reason the poem mesmerized me is because, of course, many interesting things *do* happen in it, and in rapid succession. Crimson plains are drenched; the Marañón is suddenly and for no reason “too tepid;” a young man strides a bank then disappears. The rivers sing, slog, chill, freeze, burst, and argue as the poem rolls grandly through the seasons. I liked the musical names: Rappahannock, Niagara, Saône, Dordogne, Durance, Wabash. The poem made a chant, but it also had purpose. I mean I don’t have a deep personal connection with Canada, but it is appealing, and intimate, to be impelled to dislike the Saskatchewan, and I fell for Ashbery’s entreaty to embrace the meandering Yangtze.

Still, you argue, a decathlon list poem is void of sentiment almost by design. All right. I grant that “Into the Dusk-Charged Air” feels more willed than inspired. One hundred and seventeen river names do not spring from the heart onto the page. There is no confessional element in the poem, no “universal” experience to snag a reader’s empathy, no sigh-producing epiphany.

I learned nothing about Ashbery's life, desires, or personal pain from reading the poem, but I sensed his hunger for the world, his tenderness. In fact I find more tenderness in this poem than in many confessional poems. Its sentiment comes partly from romantic verbs: the rivers glisten, dream, and skulk; they offer "eternal fragrance;" they see "the fluttering of crested birds." The reason such higher diction doesn't feel too sweet, though, is because it pushes against flatter moments. For instance the Paraná stinks, and the river Inn, which "does not remember better times," neatly avoids the pitfall of nostalgia.

Perhaps, after all, Ashbery worried that a long list poem would not inhere in a reader's heart. Maybe that's why he chose such a dreamy title. Who would say "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" is cold? It sounds like Gerard Manley Hopkins. The Sentiment-O-Meter is beeping loudly and fast.

To warm the cast of apparently cold verse, I will talk about a few more poems that could be dismissed as difficult, overly ironic, or just annoying. I also will pounce on a poem that, I think, fails for lack of sentiment. I could level this charge at some of my own poems, too. For me, almost no failure could be worse than emotional evasiveness.

### *Poems That Seem Bloodless and Hollow*

Frederick Seidel writes poems that sometimes shock people. Here is the first stanza of "Broadway Melody:"

A naked woman my age is a total nightmare.  
A woman my age naked is a nightmare.  
It doesn't matter. One doesn't care.  
One doesn't say it out loud because it's rare  
For anyone to be willing to say it,  
Because it's the equivalent of buying billboard space to display it

*A naked woman my age is a total nightmare* (Seidel is 74) makes people angry. An editor I know hates this poem, and the poet, for that line. I feel a little like I'm defending a criminal by saying there is meaningful sentiment in the poem, but I think there is. And I like the line; it is not merely cheaply transgressive.

In one sense the opening is baldly sentimental. Seidel is like a child, with no moral filters, who blurts whatever he feels. (Scholar Michael Robbins has called Seidel's meanness "a kind of innocence.") You can imagine the poet as a four-year-old at the dinner table saying *Look, Grandpa Fred has hair on his ear*. "A naked woman my age is a total nightmare" makes readers, especially women, feel an order of discomfort that certain lines written by women—about their bodies—make some male readers squirm. The line poses as a statement of fact, a naked woman = x, but it amounts to a confession: *I, Fred Seidel, am an asshole, and I don't care about you*.

But wait, a naked woman his age might be a total nightmare. I can't disagree. I am, at least, open to the idea *in* the poem, and I also don't believe it as an idea outside the world of the poem. I am afraid my body will be frightening when I am 74, and yet I do not look upon the aged body of an old woman as frightening. Now, do I really have the artist's objective eye, or do I accord the senior bodies at the gym a dignity because I hope someone will do the same for me someday? Maybe I'm too chicken to contemplate my future chicken-skin. The poem calls me out as a wimp, and it makes me aware I hold conflicting truths in my hands. That's what makes its sentiment remarkable. The possible truth of "a naked woman my age is a total nightmare" lingers outside the bad-mannered world of Seidel, making it disturbing in a complicated, interesting way, not a cheap way. Plus which, Seidel says "nighmare," not "dis-grace." Nightmares have a long, dignified poetic tradition.

Sentiment in contemporary poems sometimes has to do with the distance between the voice of the poem and the voice of the poet. If it is too great, poems can feel remote, which is to say lacking emotion. Seidel's sentiment is partly a function of the zero distance between poet and speaker (and sometimes, upsettingly, reader). It's also a function of craft. The poem's last line, "spreading their wings in order to be more beautiful and more terrible," a compassionate observation of old people, would be weirdly antiquated and sentimental without the bitter first thought to balance it.

*A Line That Lacks Sentiment Because It Might Actually  
Be Bloodless and Hollow*

I'm going to talk about Mark Bibbins' book *The Dance of No Hard Feelings* in a minute, because its irony is bound up with sentiment. But there's one line in the poem "I used to have the Shampoo," which Bibbins co-wrote with poet D. A. Powell, that bothers me:

I can't get over that retarded girl on the trike

"I Used to Have the Shampoo" seems to have been written over time, with the poets exchanging alternating lines. I can almost guess which lines came from which poet. This line probably came from Powell, whose writing, which is gorgeous, has a certain cruel edge.

I can imagine a Frederick Seidel poem with the line "I can't get over that retarded girl on the trike." In Seidel, there is an important connection between transgression and sentiment. Just about every line drags you under the bus, but in the process asks something about perception or narcissism. D. A. Powell's cruelty is usually just as powerful. But in this poem, the "retarded girl" is tossed off. The transgression lacks meaning. It only wounds you pointlessly, like a paper cut or a little splash of acid.



*All We Have is Language to Make Poems Out Of,  
But We're Still Mad at Language*

By now poets know that language is untrustworthy. Every poem we write, and will write, comes after the postmodern language crisis. The fact that the stuff we makes poems out of is the same stuff we make sketchy arms treaties and corporate mission statements and “clean coal” initiatives out of need not be the subject of our poems, but our imaginations cannot be unaware of this fact. A poet is naive if she has never, at least in her mind, distrusted the ability of language to represent the world.

We don't want to be naive, and we want to write in our time. So how can sentiment work now? The dis-ease many contemporary poets continue to feel about narrative, epiphany, and the one-to-one correspondence between cities, landscapes, and physics in the real world and cities, landscapes, and physics in poems—all the old trappings of poetry—accounts for a pretty ubiquitous distrust of sentiment. Sentiment is feeling, and we feel with our real bodies in real time. Sentiment is sincere. That's one reason for the mass of poems on the ironic end of the irony-sincerity continuum, many of which feature surrealism. Surrealism distances the world. It is as compelling a strategy as any in poetry, but it's easier, right now, to write poems with dance floors full of water torturers wearing lingerie than it is to find a non-icky way to feeling.

Yet sentiment can function powerfully amid post-postmodern irony, black humor, and surrealism. As evidence, I offer a poem from Joanna Fuhrman's *Pageant*. “The Joke” is a post-postmodern poem, complete with pop culture reference. But it longs for the era of the lyric. Specifically, the poem seems to long for the lyric version of itself.

The last joke in the world finds itself in the womb of a pregnant Jamie  
Lynn Spears.  
“Knock Knock.” It bangs against the uterus walls.  
No one answers. The video feed from the Second World War is projected  
on the outside of a wiggling fallopian tube.  
Bodies. Wire. Burning. Ash.  
Terrible silence rules.  
Before it was a fetus, the joke had wanted to be a poem.  
It used to watch the lyrics line up between the toy boats in the still lake.  
It envied their decorum, the way their sails billowed when the children blew.

Fuhrman works like a trial lawyer, presenting evidence that she knows will be stricken from the record. “The Joke” can't end with a beautiful image, because Fuhrman knows beautiful endings are sentimental and outmoded. Yet “The Joke” does end with a beautiful image. “The Joke” craves lyric poems’ “decorum.” “The Joke” wants to be serious. It sincerely wants to be “A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky” by Lewis Carroll.

The poem also shoulders the weight of history in the line “the video feed from the Second World War.” Notice Fuhrman does not say “a video feed from the Second World War,” but *the* video feed from the Second World War. The definite article “the” pins a noun to the real world, whereas the indefinite “a” allows a pretend world. In this way the poem signals to us that the war reference is real, even if the poem is surreal. This is World War II as our grandparents knew it, not an imaginary war with exploding candy bunny soldiers. It’s as though the video were streaming live into the poem from Carolyn Forché’s *The Angel of History* or Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge.” We can trust that the bodies and ash are bodies and ash, but they are also part of the joke, because post-postmodern poems are so often funny, or at least ironic. If the poem is a “fetus,” and it tests positive for sincerity, must it be aborted?

The poem is funny, but sad. The joke can’t be a poem, because the poem it wants to be, an old-school romantic lyric, is no longer viable. “The Joke” is a post-postmodern elegy to what it can’t signify. It is sad that the real toads in Marianne Moore’s imaginary garden are extinct.

*When Poems Aren’t Just Being Difficult*

Here are the first lines of another poem on the Not end of the Hot/Not sentiment scale, from Mark Bibbins’ *The Dance of No Hard Feelings*:

Bring Us a Souvenir from the Next War

In Antwerp this afternoon the Museum of Anaesthesia,  
the reason one goes to Antwerp, is closed. A way  
to translate nowhere into nothing and the inhalation  
thereof becomes a boon, a freak rush around the sun.  
The diagnosis is cracked emphasis but the prognosis  
is a coming together, niceness, and considerable  
kissing in the neighborhoods. We still can’t know  
anyone but we have a way of not minding not knowing,  
and you must be glad the numbness rising in your legs  
isn’t reading on your face [. . .]

What’s going on? To start with, the “we” in this poem is traveling. Not to an ancestral home, as the bards did, but to an unfamiliar city with a kooky museum. Any chance of bonding with the locals is canceled by the pronouncement “we still can’t know anyone.” It is as though the “we” had spent a long time, at home and abroad, trying and failing to fit in. The speaker of these poems inhabits the world in a casual, provisional way. It is not a world with the permanence, reassurances, or kinships of the Old World.

But neither is this a poem of post-postmodern alienation. Like almost all of the poems in the book, it is addressed, with affection, to a lover. “We still can’t know / anyone but we have a way of not minding not knowing”—the two have a secret way to cope with alienation. Owing to their failed attempts to *Belong in the World*, they are bound up in exclusion, but a cozy exclusion, like economy class with a quilt and a hit of ether.

The speaker knows his partner well enough to know he is glad he doesn’t look stoned. The Museum of Anaesthesia is closed, but our heroes are pleasantly buzzed. The fact that they might appear so is naughtier than being caught making out in the street.

Elizabeth Bishop traveled too, but it was what we call immersion travel. She moved to Brazil, learned Portuguese, and lived in a house (as opposed to a guest house) with her lover in the 1950s. By contrast, Bibbins and his guy skim the surface of continents. Skimming is the problem in many post-postmodern poems. They are sometimes all surface and coy reference. But Bibbins embraces detachment; after all, he has someone to share it with. Face alienation head-on, and it could be a high, “a freak rush around the sun.”

If the illness of our era is dislocation, the prognosis in Bibbins is good. Maybe he, and we, can’t wander the earth and find our ultimate place in it, but if we’re lucky, we can be strangers alongside nice fellow-strangers. It’s strong sentiment that lands lightly as an air kiss.

## Call Me Sentimental

Jenny Browne

It’s early evening. A man and a woman are in the kitchen arguing over their 6-year-old daughter’s homework, a grammar worksheet on sentence construction. The kid has cut out the predicate part of a sentence with scissors and glued it beneath a red circle. Two arrows point in opposite directions from this circle. One is labeled *who* or *what*, meaning the subject; the other *to whom* or *to what*, indicating a direct object.

The father, a photographer, says sentences should move in one direction from beginning to end, that the worksheet should reflect this, and, most important, that the arrows pointing in opposite directions will confuse his child in the same way that grammar always confused him. The mother, an English professor, resists both the wounded intensity in his remark that he’s “going to have to have a talk with the teacher about this” and the way he seems to question her own authority and integrity.

“I teach this stuff,” she says. “I think it’s fine.”

“You’re accepting mediocrity,” he says. “The worksheet could be better, and I find your resilience to my thoughts on this—”

“You mean my *resistance*?”

“Whatever.” He is not what we would call a word person.

“Why are you fighting about me?” the child says, beginning to cry.

“We’re not fighting, we’re discussing,” the father replies, sketching a new diagram to show the teacher.

“I’m sorry, honey,” the mother says. “Can you tell me what the assignment was, so we can make sure you understand it?”

“Well,” she takes a deep breath, “the teacher said to put the predicate with the red because a heart is red, and the verb gives life to the sentence, just like the heart gives life to us.”

The discussion continued through dinner, but I want to pause here and use this exchange to suggest two things about the perception of sentiment in contemporary poetry. First, if I said I was writing a poem about a man and a woman arguing about language, few people would assume that the poem risked excessive sentiment. But if I said I was writing a poem about a man and a woman arguing in front of a child, or that the child said something about what a heart does, assumptions about the territory of feeling would immediately change.

If we define sentiment in poetry as the expression of emotion through image, music, and thought, the kind of sentiment I am most interested in makes a poem feel true. Not factually true, but true in how the poem reflects something of the complex ways humans actually experience their lives. Such sentiment—call it muscular, felt, authentic—creates the impression that there is a lived life behind a poem. By “lived life,” I don’t mean to privilege any particular sort of life experience or prescribe a fixed notion of what a poem should be “about.” Rather, I mean a poem’s way of mattering should come at least in part from how it gets complexity of feeling right; it should not avoid emotionally loaded content entirely.

When it comes to topics thought to be hot with sentiment, many poets now take a blanket *not* approach. A former student of poet and critic Ray McDaniel said McDaniel told his workshop they could write about “anything except their thoughts, feelings, or experiences.” McDaniel might have good reasons for this pedagogy, and I don’t think poems grounded in personal experience and emotion necessarily mean and matter more than other kinds of poems. It’s just that I’m especially interested in poets who knowingly engage emotionally loaded material in memorable, mysterious, and musical ways.

The opening stanza of K. Silem Mohammad’s “Poems About Trees” comically and ironically evokes the don’t-go-there strategy:

I have written a couple of poems about trees  
poems about trees and snakes and lakes and birds  
poems about nature and life in New England  
I write crappy poems and eat babies  
if you like poems about trees you're in for a treat.

On one hand, the last sentence thrills, coming as it does after the hokey reference to pretty landscape poems. But Mohammad's poem also feels like a distillation of a poetics that relies on cleverness for impact rather than wrangling with authentic sentiment. This cleverness of disengagement is one possible response to the cleverness of nostalgia that often, and unfortunately, creeps into poems that do "go there," but I don't find it a very interesting one. Or maybe the response is "interesting," but "that's interesting" is generally what I say when I don't care enough to say anything more. Call me sentimental, but I want a poem to make me care.

I don't think writing about baseball automatically risks excessive sentiment, but opinions about content will vary depending on a reader's gender, personal experience, and taste. I remember a colleague at the Michener Center for Writers who began a workshop by declaring "Look, if I see the word vagina, I just automatically put the poem on the bottom of the stack." I don't automatically do that with baseball poems, but David Bottoms' "Sign for my Father, Who Stressed the Bunt" strikes out with me because its core sentiment doesn't feel true in the way I want a poem to feel true. I don't doubt Bottoms' earnest use of batting instruction to symbolize his father's attempt to convey wisdom. But after detailing the speaker's lifelong preference for swinging at the fences, the poem concludes with a sappy metaphor of taking one for the team: "Like the hand brushed across the bill of a cap, / let this be the sign / I'm getting a grip on the sacrifice." The speaker's "getting a grip" on his father's lessons, right there at home plate, feels simplistic and sentimentally forced. No wonder some poets want to eat babies.

If the little domestic scene that opened this essay sounded like the beginning of a Robert Hass poem, it's probably because I have been thinking about Hass as I write this. In an interview with my students at Trinity University last spring, Hass argued that the subjects most often assumed to tug on heartstrings—the feelings of children, concern for the poor, an emotional connection to nature, et cetera—entered literature at about the same time that people started taking care of their own children. Up till that point, around the mid-1700s, literature was created by people who employed nursemaids. Therefore, says Hass, writing about the nuclear family can still feel bound up with other subjects that are often used in didactic

or sloppily confessional ways. Back then, calling someone sentimental would have been a compliment. Not any more. (Cue those epiphany-generating vistas of New England, happy sleeping babies, and illuminating encounters with homeless people.) In the interview, Hass also suggested that there is something particularly bootstrappy and all-American in contemporary poetry's resistance to diving into the waters of *wah, wah, poor little me*. Indeed, even poets who choose to approach sentimentally risky subjects are quick to distinguish *sentiment* from *sentimentality*.

The final section of Hass's *Praise* begins with a Dostoevsky epigraph: "It's funny, isn't it, Karamazov, all this grief and pancakes afterward." By Dostoevsky's time, the American literature deemed "sentimental" routinely encouraged readers to keep emotion in check. At the same time, though, such writing specifically aimed to elicit feeling in a reader. Elizabeth Strout's novel *Olive Kitteridge* feels like a great contemporary analog of that sentimental era's sort of sentiment. "People manage" is the spoken refrain in the small town where Olive routinely pisses folks off with her prickly demeanor. But conflicting emotional undercurrents keep shuddering the surface in *Olive*, leaving her (and this reader) feeling "like someone has swung a lobster buoy and struck her in the breastbone." The book's final assertion—"It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet"—is the kind of contradiction Hass uses to check his own sentimentality while risking real feeling. In "Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer," he wonders how one might separate the pain of loss (Hass is writing about a divorce) from the pain of possibility. "When I think of that time, I think mainly of the osprey's cry, a startled yelp." Birds fly in and out of so many poems these days that they too might soon be declared sentimentally suspect. But this yelp is part song, part cry, a single image of mixed emotion. The poem ends with the speaker eating a roasted baby chick, bones and all. Crunching the bones of a baby bird could be another mission statement for how to avoid sentimentality. It's a sort of gentler, more philosophical *Godzilla Meets Bambi*, and Hass gets to play both roles.

Another strategy for avoiding sentiment can be seen in how Hass collects bits of experience, song, thought, image, and emotion and arranges them with a light, almost random, hand. "Child Naming Flowers" (a sentimentally risky title if I've ever heard one) gathers the smell of wild fennel, the "greasy knives" of childhood trauma, an O'Keefe painting of a peach, and a bird rustling in the leaves to juxtapose near-simultaneous hope and despair. Such apparently random "gatherings" (as Hass has called them) feel both strange and familiar, like listening to a recording of your own voice on an answering machine, or like looking at an old photo and measuring the distance between how you felt you looked then and how you look now.

Sentiment is not a matter of content that one should studiously avoid but rather a question of what to do with the mess of being human. Rather than pretending that the lumbering, unpredictable beast of emotion isn't still in the room, "Washing the Elephant," a poem by Barbara Ras in a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, takes on sentiment explicitly, as if to question what poets and poems ought to do with experience:

Isn't it always the heart that wants to wash  
the elephant, begging the body to do it  
with soap and water, a ladder, hands,  
in tree shade big enough for the vast savannas  
of your sadness, the strangler fig of your guilt,  
the cratered full moon's light fueling  
the windy spooling memory of elephant?

The poem begins with a riff on this old Chinese folk tale, and as it continues it touches on all sorts of emotional hot spots: childhood memories, the death of parents, misguided romance, regret, aging. Ras rides sentimentality along the way, but her elephant metaphor presses deeper, through a tone of emotional inquiry rather than certainty. The vehicle of poetic comparison shape-shifts as the poem builds to this assertion midway through:

It takes more than a half century to figure out who they were,  
the few real loves of your life, and how much of the rest--  
the mad breaking-heart stickiness--falls away, slowly,  
the way you lose your taste for things  
like popsicles unthinkingly.

Popsicles and great loves get yoked together, as if equal in significance. This acknowledgment of the changing weight of passions as one moves through life, coupled with the speaker's inability to do little but accept that our potential for self-deception and, if we're lucky, for forgiveness, will also keep changing, seems as true to what I know about being human as anything.

In the end, the poet is left to "wash the huge mysteriousness of what they meant/ those memories that have only memories to feed them, and only you to keep them clean." The specificity of this washing, this activating of a reader's body in the present tense through image and emotional intimacy, makes the poem sentiment-full rather than sentimental, at least for this reader. The other thing I know about being human is that we all live in bodies, and these bodies will one day stop working. In the meantime, I want to read poems that reflect how messy and beautiful it feels to live in the world, poems that make me care even more. As my kid seemed to already understand, the verb gives life to the sentence like the heart gives life to us.

# Lyric Solace, Lyric Evasion

Sally Ball

How do poets reckon with deep feeling in our skeptical, self-conscious time—a time when poetry can seem more interested in its motives and strategies than in its apparent subjects, a time when in fact distinguishing between motives, strategies, and subjects can cause a person to feel naïve or obsolete? We are so attuned to manner, to surface, we often begin and end the conversation there. A friend laments that current MFA students seem equipped to talk only about voice. A similar recognition of the reign of manner drives Tony Hoagland to note that the “skittery poems of our time” can be characterized by their great invention and playfulness, but at the same time, “[this] is also a moment of great aesthetic self-consciousness and emotional removal.” Mark Doty, in his equivocal introduction to *Legitimate Dangers*, a 2006 anthology of younger poets, says that the included poets’ “overwhelming preference is for performative speech: they are concerned with the creation of a voice, a presence on the page meant to be an experience in itself, not necessarily to refer to one that’s already taken place.” The ongoing discussion of manner strikes me as a fault line in contemporary American poetry, splitting the ground between those who think deep feeling can be rendered head-on, in an investigative, engaged, articulate way, and those who think deep feeling is a fool’s errand or can only be had slant, by negating or undermining its presence.

A reader drawn, as I am, to directness—to a relinquishment, however temporary, of self-protective irony—may wonder: is it mere *openness* that attracts? Do we crave restless or unfettered emotion because self-consciousness has often come to seem defensive (about the self) and judgmental (about oneself and others)? Self-conscious language can shift a poem from intellectual or emotional curiosity and candor to evasion and refusal. Instead of exploring sentiment, a poem is inclined to say: *See how I register this situation and myself from multiple angles! or: You can't keep up with me or make sense of the multiplicity of my attention, nah nah nah boo boo.*

In such a climate, what incarnation(s) of sentiment would I want to praise? Those that allow for the expression or investigation of emotion—not necessarily without irony or self-consciousness, but without the presumption that strong feeling is necessarily false, silly, or mistaken. I so often feel poets avoid emotion. Why? To not feel it, or to not shortchange it?

Here is a strong poem, “Song of Past Feelings,” that I suspect will seem outmoded, from Sylvia Moss’ *Cities in Motion*:

This extravagance,  
this giving in to sorrow,  
I hate in you—



dangerous, the way the willow  
seeking everywhere the same monotonous source  
easily strangles  
a house, another tree,  
whatever blocks its path.

It is too difficult to love you  
and yet to give up  
at the moment I understand this  
is heartless—  
Who can shelter you?

This poem addresses the very topic of expressed emotion. It touches the extremes of the sentiment spectrum: extravagant sorrow willingly inhabited (maybe) by the beloved, and a dubious, bootstrapsy refusal of sentiment in the speaker (again, maybe).

What I find extraordinary is the directness, honesty, and hopelessness of the last stanza: *It is too difficult to love you*. No emphatic line break, no beating around the bush. The line is less blameful than one might think, because it discloses two kinds of failure: his failure to be easy to love, her failure to love despite the difficulty. [A]nd yet to give up/ at the moment I understand this/ is heartless. The speaker tests herself for “goodness.” She wants to have a heart. She is wounded, not relieved, by her epiphany. Who can shelter you? The question seems full of tenderness for both parties, implying disparate but intertwined ideas: I want to shelter you; I can’t; you won’t let me; you want too much from me; all this lack of safety may be beyond our control.

The poem goes so far as to hate: This extravagance,/ this giving in to sorrow/ I hate in you—you, who might strangle me as the willow strangles what blocks its path: not then out of spite, but in the natural way of things. She hates this. Moss risks sentiment by layering in so many kinds and by offering a dose of skepticism about what might be called indulging in sentiment. After all, he is profligate; does the poem suggest that her austerity is superior? Is she austere?

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For poems whose strategy seems quite the opposite of Moss’, I turn to Christopher Nealon’s books *Plummet* and *The Joyous Age* (the latter an undoubtedly ironic title). I’m not sure there is a greater degree of self-consciousness possible than Nealon’s. His poems are acutely intellectually alert on so many levels. They can be dauntingly difficult to keep up with. And yet his poems seem marked by—sentiment.

In “You Meet Sound,” he writes: “It takes a long time to be freed into abstraction and like a *second* to be left there hanging.” Which I take to be a problem of epiphany, and a problem of time. The intellectual prowess that frees us into

meaningful, exhilarating, tangible relation with the abstract is fleeting. Doubt annuls such power reliably and swiftly, and we are once again in the torment of not-knowing. Part of Nealon's appeal is that while doubt comes along to hobble any sense of mastery, he does not renounce mastery either as possibility or as pleasure. Nealon may even enjoy it *more* given that it will recede, given that the world is always more complicated and unfurlingly enticing than it is finite or knowable. Mastery will vanish, but why not admit that it's a fabulous high?

When Nealon's poems seem most confessional, they are also evidently spoken by personae—you can hear several layers of quotation marks around certain kinds of speech. He is busy observing Our Moment and making a lot of fun of it. A poem called "Ecstasy Shield" begins: "No it's not a condom / just the second person"—Nealon is that much on guard against sentiment! The "you" is an ecstasy *shield*, in the form of either another person or a pronoun, that protects an "I." A second person does turn up to answer a question: "Is it true you're just a twitch in a frog-leg?" "No," says the You, "I'm joy I'm misery / I'm misprision / I'm direct address," i.e., I'm "you"? Or I'm talking *to* you? In this poem, "I" and "You" seem to be made one and also to be maintained as utterly separate people engaged in a game of cat and mouse. The two seek intimacy but can't believe intimacy exists. The game treats confession as ejaculation, listener as condom.

For all their Abstraction/Sophistication/Difficulty/National Darkness, Nealon's poems often seem really warm. Here's an excerpt from "Concept and Category," a long poem comprising a series of lyrics about the lyric, and about supplication. These poems know and crave the satisfaction of the lyric—of belief and epiphany and articulate conviction—and they also know those satisfactions are fleeting at best, always quickly destabilized by revisions, additions, shifts of point of view, et cetera.

I'm definitely in a batter-  
my-heart way  
today, lord, cloud  
or revenant, crushing  
insight or achievement  
of un-cathected thought,  
come on

This is me departing the festivities

This is groping for the switch

Rain or shine I

feel a dry  
solicitude for you, though  
I don't want the path  
through the marshes ever to stop

Maybe I'm so moved by Nealon's poems because despite their savvy, their savage wit, their speed, they can't outrun the tremendous longing that drives them onto the page. When Nealon cries out toward "god" he has to admit he likes the search, too, the uncertainty. He doesn't want the path through the marshes, from which one cannot see very far ahead, ever to stop. Elsewhere in the poem, Nealon pushes further: "And though it isn't only lyric that provides it I think a seeking for the consolation of the lyric is the situation for the working of the mind." Nealon knows the lyric consoles. We have unappeasable hungers, and the lyric provides a way for us to both fully inhabit them and, simultaneously, to escape them. The lyric is brief by definition, so its comforts are ephemeral.

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Moss and Nealon each seem to me to reckon with deep feeling in challenging, nourishing ways. Another book that complicates the role (and toll) of sentiment is Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*, which seems to tell the story of the splitting of a marriage from the wife's point of view. The poems are, initially, direct about her pain, jealousy, anger, and self-pity. But a seed is planted early on that he, the cheating sonofabitch, has a history of stealing her starts for poems. He finds them in her notebooks, finishes them himself, and publishes them under his own name. The vertiginous feeling one gets—pruriently, miserably, absorbed in the story—is that at some point the theft has happened here: the wife may not be our trusted narrator after all but a version of herself created by the husband, who is himself, of course, a creature of Carson's imagination. What had seemed a meditation on marriage from the jilted wife's perspective becomes instead a meditation on truthfulness, on point of view, on artfulness.

Does Carson disdain sentiment? The narrative isn't sufficient by itself. It must fork; it must become an intellectual exercise about a range of things, including how readers identify with poems and how we presume things about the speakers of poems. The book is moving and interesting on the first level, the divorce story, but thrillingly dense, shifting, and provocative on the second level, challenging our impulse to read in casual identification with the speaker as well as our confidence in the speaker's authority and identity. Carson delivers the goods, as it were—sentiment, narrative—and simultaneously alerts us to our own preconditioned interpretive assumptions. The book satisfies both ways: via exploration of subject matter and critique of how we consume it.

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The role of sentiment, of direct reckoning with strong feeling, is one of recognition and purge. If we can see and name what thrills or scars us, we can more fully experience it and also be freed from its controlling power—at least temporarily. Poems need to risk sentiment even though ultimately they will also leave us hanging; the access they offer to what resides elusively in our intuition will diminish. It is *because* this is true, I think, that we can trust the exploration of "raw" emotion to be valuable even when we don't believe it can be definitive.