

## Revising for Mystery: Discovering New Territory in the Geography of the Line

### Some Wisdom from *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line*:

#### Kazim Ali, “On the Line”

To proceed line by line means not to throw yourself forward in the dark but to throw yourself with abandon into the arms of darkness” (36)

#### Catherine Barnett, “Three Takes on the Line”

...where and how to end the line is, for me, one of the most energizing possibilities, uncertainties, because it holds within it the possibility of beginning again at the next line, and that little vertical fall is fuel, libido, a little vertigo—and because it holds within it the possibility that the line won’t end, not|this|time” (49)

#### Mei-mei Bersseerbrugge, “Two Lines”

“A line of poetry on a page exists in space, but I think of it as a kind of timing, a measured flow of poetic energy, a dynamic”

“...a long, pliant thread”

a dynamic, alternating long/short line is “architectural” and “has given me enough structure to allow the poem to become very soft and still be contained” (52)

#### Marianne Boruch, “Secret Life”

“The line against the larger wealth of the sentence is a rebel thing which undercuts order. With it comes all that can’t be fully controlled: the irrational, the near-deranged, the deeply personal and the individual utterance. Thus poetry. And the line—kept *almost* in line with the commonplace sentence—enacts its own small, large drama in direct cahoots with the strange, the unending” (55)

#### Mary Ann Samyn, “Some Notes on the Line”

The formula for a good poem is “accuracy + uncertainty.” It should contain “clarity and mystery, the sureness of the line and of discovery—line to line” (214)

#### Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line*

“Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines” (120)

#### Levertov, “On the Function of the Line”

The line expresses the act of thinking (31)

Line break is an additional form of punctuation

Line break impacts the “melos” of the poem—the melody and pitch patterns

#### Emily Dickinson, Letter Fragment

“We go by detachments to the strange Home”

**White** / *Colette Bryce*

I stepped from my skis and stumbled in, like childhood,  
 knee deep, waist deep, chest deep, falling  
 for the sake of being caught  
 in its grip.

It was crisp and strangely dry and I thought: I could drop  
 here and sleep in my own shape, happily,  
 as the hare fits  
 to its form.

I could lie undiscovered like a fossil in a rock  
 until a hammer's gentle knock might  
 split it open; warm  
 and safe

in a wordless place (the snowfall's ample increase),  
 and finally drift into the dream of white  
 from which there is no  
 way back.

I placed myself in that cold case like an instrument into velvet  
 and slept.

**Exercise 1: I Have Lived My Whole Life in a Painting Called Paradise**  
**(Stanza 1: relinedated for this exercise)**

with the milkweeds  
 splitting at the seams  
 emancipating their  
 seeds that were once  
 packed in their pods  
 like the wings and  
 hollow bones of a damp  
 bird held too tightly  
 in a green hand.  
 And the giant jade  
 moths stuck to the green  
 door as if glued there.  
 And the gold fields  
 and stone silos and  
 the fugitive cows  
 known for escaping  
 their borders.

**I Have Lived My Whole Life in a Painting Called Paradise/ Diane Seuss**

with the milkweeds splitting at the seams emancipating their seeds  
that were once packed in their pods like the wings and hollow bones  
of a damp bird held too tightly in a green hand. And the giant jade  
moths stuck to the screen door as if glued there. And the gold fields  
and stone silos and the fugitive cows known for escaping their borders.

I have lived in a painting called *Paradise*, and even the bad parts  
were beautiful. There are fields of needles arranged into flowers,  
their sharp ends meeting at the center, and from a distance the fields  
full of needle flowers look blue from their silver reflecting the sky,  
or white lilies if the day is overcast, and there in the distance is a meadow

filled with the fluttering skirts of opium poppies. On the hillside  
is Moon Cemetery, where the tombstones are hobnailed or prised  
like cut-glass bowls, and some are shaped so precisely like the trunks of trees  
that birds build their nests in the crooks of their granite limbs, and some  
of the graves are shaped like child-sized tables with stone tablecloths

and tea cups, yes, I have lived in a painting called *Paradise*.

The hollyhocks loom like grandfathers with red pocket watches,  
and off in the distance the water is ink and the ships are white paper  
with scribblings of poems and musical notations on their sides.

There are rabbits: mink-colored ones and rabbits that are mystics

humped like haystacks, and at Moon Cemetery it's an everyday event  
to see the dead rise from their graves, as glittering as they were in life,  
to once more pick up the plow or the pen or the axe or the spoon  
or the brush or the bowl, for it is a cemetery named after a moon  
and moons never stay put. There are bees in the air flying off

to build honeycombs with pollen heavy on their back legs,  
and in the air, birds of every ilk, the gray kind that feed from the ground,  
and the ones that scream to announce themselves, and the ravens  
who feed on the rabbits until their black feathers are edged  
in gold, and in the air also are little gods and devils trying out their wings,

some flying, some failing and making a little cream-colored blip  
in the sea, yes, all of my life I have lived in a painting called *Paradise*  
with its frame of black varnish and gold leaf, and I am told some girls  
slide their fingers over the frame and feel the air outside of it,  
and some even climb over the edge and plummet into whatever

is beyond it. Some say it is hell, and some say just another, bolder  
paradise, and some say a dark wilderness, and some say just an unswept  
museum or library floor, and some say a long-lost love waits there  
wearing bloody riding clothes, returned from war, and some say  
freedom, which is a word that tastes strange, like a green plum.

**Exercise 2, (last stanza) Moles / Ellen Bryant Voigt (relined for exercise)**

traps don't work  
the way they do for squirrels  
my father used to thrust  
the hose into one hole  
and flood them out my beloved does  
not care what my father  
did this greensward is his  
joy his job  
my job was  
children  
food house the rest  
of what I did stayed underground

**Moles** / *Ellen Bryant Voigt*

Where is his hat where is his horse where is his harrier my beloved  
 is distraught he made this yard each blade each stem each stalk except  
 the mounds of fresh dirt like little graves it's moles that make the mounds  
 when they make holes they're worms with fur the cat

does not do moles she's stalking rooks and mice beloved  
 has scattered human hair across the sod it keeps the deer away  
 he has installed a high-pitched hum in the lily bed it keeps the dogs  
 out of the yard who might have otherwise unearthed a mole too bad

traps don't work the way they do for squirrels my father  
 used to thrust the hose into one hole and flood them out my beloved  
 does not care what my father did this greensward is his joy his job  
 my job was children food house the rest of what I did stayed underground

**Exercise 3, begin here** / *Lucille Clifton* (**relineated for exercise**)

in the dark where the girl is sleeping begin with a shadow rising  
 on the wall no begin with a spear of salt like a tongue no begin  
 with a swollen horn or finger no no begin here something in the girl  
 is wakening some thing in the girl is falling deeper and deeper asleep

**begin here** / *Lucille Clifton*

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 where the girl is  
 sleeping  
 begin with a shadow  
 rising on the wall  
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 begin with a spear  
 of salt like a tongue  
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 begin with a swollen  
 horn or finger  
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 no begin here  
 something in the girl  
 is wakening some  
 thing in the girl  
 is falling  
 deeper and deeper  
 asleep

**Exercise 4, DUCK** / *Kay Ryan (relineated for exercise)*

It isn't ever all green thought in green shade, is it? When even  
 a duck pivots beak-down in pursuit of the succulent options  
 that tuck and cling among the dangling roots of an emerald dream,  
 parts stay so independent they seem foreign. With the duck, for example,  
 the improbable curl-peaked eider island that bobbles above him.

**DUCK** / *Kay Ryan*

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 all green thought  
 in green shade,  
 is it? When even  
 a duck pivots  
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**Exercise 5, Using Your Own Work (10 minutes)**

Open a document that has 4-5 lines of poetry or prose. Cut and paste into a new blank document so you don't feel stressed about "wrecking something" but feel free to mess around with the line structure. You might not have time now to work by hand, but feel free to try this later when you have time.

Spend some time making radical shifts with the lineation—What happens?

1. What happens when you change the topography of the poem in terms of its sound, meter, pacing?
2. How does altering the lineation also make room for vistas or tight quarters? What happens when we can "see ahead" to the end of the line? What happens when we can't see very far?
3. Do you appreciate your new choices? Even if you don't like it, that's fine. You're just seeing the work in a new way. What choices showing you about how the poem's lines are working before or after the changes?

**Exercise 5, Alternate. Using Boruch poem as fodder**

Using this relinedated version of Marianne Boruch's poem, using the space below, rewrite the poem using a long or short line, depending on what you think the poem needs in terms of its topography. No right or wrong answers—just learning what happens when we play.

4. What happens when you change the topography of the poem in terms of its sound, meter, pacing?
5. How does altering the lineation also make room for vistas or tight quarters? What happens when we can “see ahead” to the end of the line? What happens when we can't see very far?
6. Turn the page and see what Boruch did with her lines? Do you appreciate her choices? What are her choices showing you about how the poem's lines are working?

**Little Wife / Marianne Boruch (relinedated for exercise)**

*At the Oriental Institute, Chicago*

They redid King Tut splendid, once stone-huge as this yet his wife's feet tiny, the only thing of her now low, next to him. A few toes, some of the rest, a bit of ankle, that's it in the shade of her husband's looming, massive looking straight ahead into the future where we live and can't eye-to-eye, where to stare at him is to suffer *warbler neck*, head back and up à la the high just-leaving-out trees as bright bits wing their blink and hide. Little wife, such small feet, the thought dwarfs the king as ache, as what is ever left of us and oh, I like her better.

**Little Wife / Marianne Boruch***At the Oriental Institute, Chicago*

They redid King Tut splendid,  
 once stone-huge as this  
 yet his wife's feet  
 tiny, the only thing of her now  
 low, next to him. A few toes, some of the rest,  
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 and hide. Little wife,  
 such small feet, the thought  
 dwarfs the king  
 as ache, as what is  
 ever left of us  
 and oh, I like her better.

**Additional Poems to Consider Later...****Aboriginal Landscape / Louise Glück**

You're stepping on your father, my mother said,  
 and indeed I was standing exactly in the center  
 of a bed of grass, mown so neatly it could have been  
 my father's grave, although there was no stone saying so.

You're stepping on your father, she repeated,  
 louder this time, which began to be strange to me,  
 I moved slightly to the side, to where  
 my father ended and my mother began.

The cemetery was silent. Wind blew through the trees;  
 I could hear, very faintly, sounds of weeping several rows away,  
 and beyond that, a dog wailing.

At length these sounds abated. It crossed my mind  
 I had no memory of being driven here,  
 to what now seemed a cemetery, though it could have been  
 a cemetery in my mind only; perhaps it was a park, or if not a park,  
 a garden or bower, perfumed, I now realized, with the scent of roses —

douceur de vivre filling the air, the sweetness of living,  
as the saying goes. At some point,

it occurred to me I was alone.  
Where had the others gone,  
my cousins and sister, Caitlin and Abigail?

By now the light was fading. Where was the car  
waiting to take us home?

I then began seeking for some alternative. I felt  
an impatience growing in me, approaching, I would say, anxiety.  
Finally, in the distance, I made out a small train,  
stopped, it seemed, behind some foliage, the conductor  
lingering against a doorframe, smoking a cigarette.

Do not forget me, I cried, running now  
over many plots, many mothers and fathers —

Do not forget me, I cried, when at last I reached him.  
Madam, he said, pointing to the tracks,  
surely you realize this is the end, the tracks do not go further.  
His words were harsh, and yet his eyes were kind;  
this encouraged me to press my case harder. But they go back, I said, and I remarked  
their sturdiness, as though they had many such returns ahead of them.

You know, he said, our work is difficult: we confront  
much sorrow and disappointment.  
He gazed at me with increasing frankness.  
I was like you once, he added, in love with turbulence.

Now I spoke as to an old friend:  
What of you, I said, since he was free to leave,  
have you no wish to go home,  
to see the city again?

This is my home, he said.  
The city — the city is where I disappear.

**All Wild Animals Were Once Called Deer / Brigit Pegeen Kelly**

(Stanza 1 of many...too long to reprint here but worth reading in her book, *Song*)

Some truck was gunning the night before up Pippin Hill's steep grade  
And the doe was thrown wide. This happened five years ago now,  
Or six. She must have come out of the woods by Simpson's red trailer—

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