

Jeffrey Harrison's
INTO DAYLIGHT

(Tupelo Press, 2014)

READER'S COMPANION

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Biographical Note

Jeffrey Harrison is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *Into Daylight*, winner of the Dorset Prize (Tupelo Press, 2014) — along with *The Singing Underneath*, selected by James Merrill for the National Poetry Series (Dutton, 1988); *Signs of Arrival* (Copper Beech Press, 1996); *Feeding the Fire* (Sarabande, 2001); *Incomplete Knowledge* (Four Way Books, 2006), which was a runner-up for the Poets' Prize in 2008; and *The Names of Things: New and Selected Poems*, published in the United Kingdom (Waywiser Press, 2006).

A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, he has published poems in *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *The Yale Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *American Poetry Review*, and *The Paris Review*, and in anthologies such as *Poets of the New Century* (Godine, 2001) and *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* (Pegasus, 2012).

He has taught at George Washington University; Phillips Academy, where he was the Roger Murray Writer-in-Residence; College of the Holy Cross; Framingham State College; and the Stonecoast MFA Program; and in summer programs at the Chautauqua Institute, the Wesleyan Writers' Conference, and The Frost Place.

For more information, visit the poet's website:

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Commentaries on Jeffrey Harrison's Poetry

On *Into Daylight*:

"This book gets better each time I read it. Harrison is very skillful in a way that's almost passed out of existence: only a handful of writers can do what he does in handling the line and understanding how syntax and line work together — employing the plain style with great virtuosity." — **Tom Sleigh**, final judge of the Dorset Prize

"The book is called *Into Daylight*, and the title is wonderfully right. Jeffrey Harrison brings what he sees and experiences into the light of what they are: the look of a flower, or a rabbit that John Clare might also have seen, or the subtle blooming of a witch hazel branch, but also a death — the remembrance of a death, the death of a brother — and a childhood game of sliding down a banister, telling its delight and foretelling of things to come. There's darkness in the light of these singularly intelligent and moving poems, written in perfectly managed lines, in a measured verse that never loses its poise. The human being speaking these lines is one whose speech is wonderfully worth knowing, quietly and vividly observant and sympathetic in judgment of things seen in the daylight of their beauty and their vulnerability." — **David Ferry**, author of *Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations*, winner of the National Book Award

"Naturalness is the quality I most admire in Jeffrey Harrison's restrained and deeply affecting poetry. It's a quality achieved through great art, the eliminating of everything superfluous, easy, or artificial. What remains is utterly convincing, flawlessly right."

— **Jonathan Galassi**, publisher, poet and translator, author of *Left-Handed*

On *The Singing Underneath*:

"There is no one else for whose poems — their tone and wording and overall approach to things — I feel greater sympathy and admiration." — **James Merrill**

"*The Singing Underneath* is a remarkable first book.... This is not a collection of pieces or parts or wounded connections. It is a book with the resonance of closure. Nearly every poem finds its own whole, intricate world, its own whole feeling. The interaction of nature and narrative is straightforward, discovered, deeply intelligent; it is how the imagination loves to work — in stories, in settings, in the muddy detail of landscape. The heart of the poems, as the title suggests, is understated, but near, in the first moment of experience, and so the more poignant." — **Stanley Plumly**

"*The Singing Underneath* is a remarkable and refreshing first book of poems — as though the landscapes of Fairfield Porter, the quiet wisdom of Elizabeth Bishop, and the indomitable good humor of Guillaume Apollinaire had all found their way inside one

unspoiled imagination. This is not a young poet trying ‘to find a voice,’ this is a poet who — in the rarest sense — was born with one.” — **Sherod Santos**

“His poems are concrete, vivid ... whether he is recollecting his Ohio childhood or a more recent vacation in the Adirondacks, or describing a scallop, a foxglove or ‘Bathtubs, Three Varieties.’ His observations and draughtsmanship are accurate and acute.” — ***Publishers Weekly***, © 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc.

“Like James Wright, Harrison articulates a vision of nature that is both celebratory and dark. He rejects ‘wisdom, faith, knowledge’ for a ‘sense of things as they are.’ But the world he observes is far from ordinary: ‘just beneath the world we see, / there is a silent singing that breaks out / at moments, in flickering points of light.’ Never far from the beauty of the natural world, however, are ‘dark presences [that] seem — now that I have become / aware of them, to be aware of me.’ Harrison’s metaphorical lyrics are infused with this ambiguity, and lead to moments of self-discovery: ‘our mouths twisting / until we realize that we, after all, / are secretly disturbed about our lives.’”
— ***Library Journal***, © 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc.

On Signs of Arrival:

“In their tactful mix of common sense and wonder, their openness to the ‘sudden radiance’ that can charge an ordinary moment, the poems of Jeffrey Harrison speak their own tough-minded joy in the created world. Pitched between plainness and a buoyant and unshowy lyricism, his language coaxes us to see ‘the world afresh, for what it truly is,’ whether close to home or in some exotic region of the earth. This is a poet who hears, as the title of his first volume proclaimed, ‘the singing underneath.’ In these new poems, subterranean song is enriched by a spiritual undercurrent that turns simple response into meditation, itself a sign that imagination has unassumingly, but truly, arrived.” — **Eamon Grennan**

“In Harrison’s work, the commonplace, the incidental, the exotic, and the miraculous all present themselves as the occasion for ... unflinching meditation and the knotting of lyric intensity.” — ***Partisan Review***

“Harrison’s second collection displays a mastery of language that is exact and graceful. Observing the natural world, whether in his own backyard or halfway around the globe, Harrison infuses ordinary images (a mayfly on the surface of a lake; a paddle hidden above the front door of a cottage) with significance. The foreign and the familiar embrace in ‘Household Spirits’ when a trip to Thailand conjures a memory of a martin house from childhood and its ‘flighty utopians, the spirits of that farmhouse / gathering overhead in buoyant swarms, / water in their voices, sky on their wings.’ With buoyant observations of fragile wonders and in a singular, acute and fluent voice, Harrison also announces his own arrival.” — ***Publishers Weekly***, © 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

“... an engaging sense of wonder graces Harrison’s second book of poems. For him, ‘there is always something calling you back,’ not merely to childhood but to an Emersonian merging of human spirit with the ‘purest form’ of nature. While anecdotal poems narrating travels to Asia and elsewhere on ‘the lonely planet’ are absorbed in the exotic, Harrison returns with relief to a careful exploration of ancestral history and memory that, with a disarming lack of ego, he offers as a ‘talisman’ of life-enhancing ritual. Final poems about ‘signs of arrival’ (his wife’s pregnancy and the birth of a son) give these bright, austere poems human softness and simplicity. Harrison’s heartfelt achievement is the courage to embrace ‘angelic visitations.’ If Shakers wanted to ‘make a chair an angel would want to sit on,’ Harrison would like to write a poem, one suspects, that an angel would read.” — **Frank Allen, *Library Journal***, © 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

On Incomplete Knowledge:

“Determinedly affable, chatty and low-key even when his subjects are bleak, Harrison’s fourth volume stakes almost everything on [his] winning tone. Often that gamble succeeds: viewing Manhattan on New Year’s Eve, 2000, Harrison muses, ‘I wish I could give you / this pale blue city under the glass / of a plane window like a snowglobe,’ the sweet wish barely ruffled by the specter of 9/11. ‘Fork’ recalls a decades-long revenge against a malevolent writing teacher; ‘To Kenneth Koch’ elegizes a great one.... These lighter subjects lead up to weighty poems about the poet’s brother’s suicide and his grandmother’s dementia, including the moving sequence ‘An Undertaking,’ which narrates the day-to-day aftermath of the brother’s death. These memoir-like poems have the bizarre details real grief always includes (the brother had ‘Enough socks / for several lifetimes’), along with the sadness no verbal talent can assuage.” — ***Publishers Weekly***, © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. (Oct. 2006).

“A scribbly abstract expressionist painting adorns Harrison’s new collection, but don’t judge the book by it. Harrison’s poems aren’t abstract; they are full of definite actions, clear thoughts, and real things. They aren’t expressionist, either — never histrionic or formally eccentric. Their content comes out of Harrison’s own reasonably average life, but they are never just about Harrison. He is always eager to communicate what experiences mean to him and, he hopes, to you, who could easily have had their like. Driving with a friend to see Vermeers in Washington, visiting another friend in New York who’s become unemployably strange, and walking out to appreciate the world’s abundance despite knowing next to nothing, it seems, about it are typical of the experiences Harrison shares. He also relives, in the sequence that makes up the second half of the book, a rarer occurrence: living on after — and, really, with — a suicide in the family. Like a fine playwright, Harrison brings us into his experiences so artfully that we feel their weight and their truth as ours.” — **Ray Olson, *Booklist***, reviewed October 1, 2006, © American Library Association.

“While Harrison maintains his knack for parsing that ‘spiritual significance’ from contemporary American life, this book’s ultimate success might owe more to his seemingly effortless access to both desperate sorrow and a certain joyous and musical

gusto — somewhat paradoxical attitudes Harrison often convincingly achieves within the space of a few lines.” — *Virginia Quarterly Review*

On *The Names of Things: Selected Poems*:

“... Harrison has always been gifted at communicating the significance of his experiences and observations, both ordinary and special. In this he recalls Robert Frost, and like Frost’s, his poems expand in meaning as they are read, reread, and closely considered. Like Frost, Harrison is a traveler, but whereas Frost in his poems roams close to home, Harrison jaunts far afield as well as around the neighborhood, speculatively as well as bodily (see ‘Brief History of an Atlas’ and the two poems advertizing to Arabian explorer Alexander Kinglake). His language is chaste and precise, he is formally modest, and he is as natural a poet as any writing in America today.” — **Ray Olson, *Booklist***, © American Library Association, November 15, 2006.

On *Feeding the Fire*:

“It’s thrilling to read an entire book of poems written with such pleasure and gusto. Harrison writes with remarkable confidence about a range of ordinary things — salt, rowing a boat, discarded books, a stinking pond — and he gets more out of his subjects than seems possible. How does he do this without ever being pretentious? He’s an artist.” — **Philip Levine, *Ploughshares***

“The poems in Jeffrey Harrison’s new collection, *Feeding the Fire*, chronicle our growth from the cluelessness of childhood to that slightly greater state of awareness called adult life ... Harrison’s best poems ... open doors to the place in the heart where we come closest to knowing who we really are.” — **David Kirby, *The New York Times Book Review***

“It is rare to encounter poetry that is suffused with a calm technical assurance and, at the same time, tense with the potential to surprise convincingly. Harrison’s language is exact, sinuous, and compelling, and leads ... to places we may not have seen before, but know when we arrive. This is a beautiful book.” — **Henry Taylor**

“This is a book that can be read from start to finish with ever-heightened expectations that are never disappointed, and with sustained delight. The poems move with the fluidity of a mind’s swift and graceful agility, full of darts and surprising turns, alive with leaps, sprints, and spirals. They wind through luminous galleries of the past, antechambers of memory or the obscure outskirts of recollection, always discovering astonishments.” — **Anthony Hecht**

“I take enormous pleasure in Jeffrey Harrison’s descriptive acuity and verbal precision, his nourishing exactitudes. Here is a poet who is always arriving, travelling far and wide to see the world anew, freshening its perceptions, deepening its memories, welcoming its mysteries.” — **Edward Hirsch**

What Is This Book About?

In a general sense, I think this book is about restoring a connection to the world, to life, to perception, and to poetry during the decade following the suicide of my older brother. The book asks what comes after such a tragic event: How does one go on, what does one write about, and how does one find again one's proper relationship with the world and rediscover delight while also giving voice to pain and sadness? It's about finding the path back to life.

After the poems I'd written in the immediate aftermath of my brother's death, which appeared in my previous book, *Incomplete Knowledge*, I had no idea what I would do next. What poems could follow those poems of grief?

I answered that question very slowly, poem by poem. It turned out I had more to say about my brother, but also about a lot of other things. Most of the poems in *Into Daylight*, especially after the first section, are not about my brother at all, though his absence may hover behind some of the poems not explicitly about him. The book's title suggests a movement out of darkness and into light, and I'd like to think that's true, even though that movement may be complicated and fraught.

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Subjects and Themes

There are many different subjects and themes in the book, some of which were obvious to me while I was writing the poems, and others that I didn't notice until later. Besides the poems about my brother, there are poems about the natural world (including animal poems and "backyard pastorals"), homages to poets and literary figures (mostly, but not entirely, in the third section), love poems (mostly in the last section), and meditations while walking in the woods.

Perhaps less obviously, there are poems about encounters of one kind or another, poems about various kinds of mistakes or misunderstandings, poems about finding things, and poems in search of a way of seeing and interacting with the world.

Many of these themes and subjects overlap in individual poems, so arranging them in a collection was more complicated than you might think. Assembling a book is always a little like playing gin rummy and not knowing if you are going for runs of a particular suit (theme?) or groups of cards of the same denomination (subject?) — or something else entirely.

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Author's Commentary

Here are thoughts on some of the poems in *Into Daylight*. I've addressed particular poems mostly in the order they appear in the book, though sometimes I discuss poems in groups or individually.

First And Last Poems

The first and last poems in the book, "Out Back" and "Cross-Fertilization," serve as bookends, though I did not notice this aspect of their relationship right away. Both poems have flowers as their literal subjects, but in a sense they take opposing stances.

In "Out Back," the speaker tells himself not to meddle much with the flowers, both literally and poetically. He accepts the limitations of language to capture the world (which will "surpass anything I could say") and eschews the embellishments of elaborate metaphors and flights of the imagination ("without much remark") in an attempt, perhaps, to connect more directly with original perception — to get at "the thing itself before it has been made anything," as Lily Briscoe muses while she paints, near the end of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. "Get that and start afresh," she goes on. At the same time, there is the sense of a speaker who, for whatever reason, is observing the world, and contemplating it, but not getting too actively involved.

In contrast, the speaker of "Cross-Fertilization" is definitely meddling with the flowers, transporting them across state lines and then manually pollinating them with a Q-tip. (Yes, I really did this. Foxgloves are biennials, not perennials, meaning that each plant lives only for two years, blooming in the second year, so they need to go to seed in order to reproduce themselves and continue.) He also brings in a pop song, makes jokes, and develops a perhaps slightly outlandish sexual analogy that takes the poem beyond an attempt to capture "the thing itself." In this poem, the speaker demonstrates far more engagement — both with the literal world and with poetic transformation — than in "Out Back."

I'm not sure exactly what that means, but this is probably related to the idea of reconnecting with the world. But if so, I don't think there is a linear progression from one to the other in the book.

Instead, the poems probably fluctuate along this spectrum between leaving things alone and actively participating, either literally or figuratively. Is one of these outlooks preferable or healthier than the other — or is it more a matter of finding a balance? To a certain extent, the fluctuations may simply demonstrate that, at certain times, we want to pare things down to their essentials and see them clearly, whereas at other times we're drawn to imaginative transformation and the linguistic embellishments that sometimes accompany it. But it's also true that an observer in some sense stands apart from the world, and perhaps it is only when we become actively involved in the world that we become part of it, surrendering ourselves to life.

In that sense, the narrator in the first poem is more tentative and contemplative, while the one in the last poem is more alive.

“For Clare”

The literal trigger for this poem was an encounter with a young rabbit in my back yard, but it quickly became a kind of homage to the Romantic poet John Clare (1793–1864).

I tried to keep the poem as simple and straightforward as possible, in emulation of Clare’s directness and purity of language. Clare is one of the poets who comes closest to achieving Lily Briscoe’s goal of holding “the thing itself before it has been made anything.” His poems restore language to its elemental function — to name the things of the world — by returning to poetry’s primary impulse: to praise. Yet there is nothing facile about his poems. Clare’s lifelong poverty and psychological difficulties remind us that he wrote these poems as (to paraphrase Frost) stays against confusion. And after our own dark periods of grief or depression, Clare’s poems can help return us to the world, grounding us in a language that renews.

I think I was drawn to elemental poets like John Clare and Edward Thomas (see “Out Walking,” in the fourth section) for a kind of basic sustenance (like bread, like grass) during the difficult years following the loss of my brother. That is one reason I used “For Clare” to introduce the poems about my brother. While the poem is in some sense just a poem about a rabbit, its deeper subject, I think, is vulnerability — the rabbit’s, Clare’s, my own, and maybe (though indirectly) my brother’s.

Poems About My Brother

There are really only a handful of poems about my brother and his death in this book, but most of them come early and are, in a sense, the departure point for the rest of the book. These poems are a continuation of, and in one poem a commentary on, the many poems about my brother’s suicide that were included in my previous book, *Incomplete Knowledge*.

Those poems were written much closer to the event than the ones in *Into Daylight*, and I had some very complicated feelings about having written them — feelings I try to capture here in the poem “Essay on a Recurring Theme,” which is a sestina, a form that may mirror the obsessive anxiety of the poem’s speaker. I chose these particular six end-words to repeat because they are the words I used most frequently in my last book, according to Amazon’s concordance feature. I wasn’t surprised that “brother,” “death,” and “know” were three of them (the latter was most often used in the negative, to convey a lack of understanding).

One of the things I worried about, in regard to those earlier poems, is that I had let my brother’s suicide overshadow his life: I had written more about his death than about him. As time went on, I was able to write a few poems that, I hope, capture more of his personality, particularly “Encounter with John Malkovich” and “Two Salukis.” I never thought I’d be able to get humor into any poem having to do with my brother’s death, but doing so felt in keeping with my brother’s spirit, since he was funny and liked the poems of mine that are funny.

The subject of my brother’s death is alluded to in the “Banister” section of “Parts of an Old House” (in the second section) and returns briefly just before the end of the book, in the poems “Nobody Died” and “A Drink of Water.” These poems were written several years after those in the first section, and, by placing them near the end of the

collection, I wanted to convey the sense of more time having passed, as well as the idea that an event like my brother's death never goes away.

“Custody of the Eyes” and Poems About Vision

The book contains a number of poems inspired by poets and other literary figures, most of them in section three, though a few of them, like “For Clare” and this poem, can be found in other sections. This is also, of course, one of this book's poems about how we see the world.

I've loved Gerard Manley Hopkins since I was in college, and over the years have often returned to his amazingly energetic poems and vivid journal entries. But it wasn't until I was preparing to give a talk about him a few years ago that I read a biography (actually, two). I became fascinated by his pivotal years at Oxford, where he came under the influence of his teacher Walter Pater's Aestheticism just as he was feeling the pull, in another direction, toward Catholicism. After his conversion, he gave up poetry, only returning to it after a seven-year struggle to resolve (partly through his theory of Inscap) the contradiction between his love of earthly beauty and the demands of his religious calling.

Some of this is in the poem, and some behind it, my main focus being the strange (to most of us) notion of one of the penances that Hopkins practiced during his training as a Jesuit. The actual trigger was the name of the penance, “custody of the eyes,” encountered in one of the biographies. The phrase took on a life of its own and, with its slightly surreal connotations, inhabited my brain for quite a while before I wrote the poem.

Like a number of poems in the book, especially perhaps the four directly preceding (“Temporary Blindness,” “Learning the Trails,” “Kingfisher,” and “Custody of the Eyes”), the poem “Vision” is about seeing, or maybe about learning to see again. It began as a poem about literal vision and then found its way into a larger meditation on how we apprehend various aspects of life, including (through a reference to Hurricane Katrina) the suffering of others. (I seem only to be able to write about major historical events tangentially.) The speaker of this poem, it seems to me, is caught in partial darkness, looking for a way to alter, open, or regain his perception.

Poems About Mistakes

Midway through the second section, there is a run of poems about mistakes or misunderstandings of various kinds — some minor and some larger: “The Figure on the Hill,” “The Day You Looked upon Me as a Stranger,” “Slip,” and “Remembering Karenia Brevis” (a poem that was plagiarized by the now notorious internet pirate Christian Ward). I was surprised to find this confluence when I was putting the book together.

Mistakes can be funny or exhilarating or touching (as my old teacher Kenneth Koch showed us in poems like “Taking a Walk with You” and “Passing Time in Skansen”), but also painful, mortifying, or many other things. It strikes me that mistakes are openings for the imagination, or for unexpected emotions, and therefore thresholds of poetic possibilities.

“Listening to Virginia”

I didn't read Virginia Woolf until I was almost fifty, and — well, I fell in love. I began by both reading *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* on the page and listening to audio versions read by Virginia Leishman. (There are several recordings of these books out there, but I highly recommend Leishman's renditions. She has a lovely voice, and it is easy to imagine that it is actually Virginia Woolf reading to you.)

It felt like a revelation, and I was incredibly grateful to Woolf for reminding me of the power of beautiful writing. The poem tries to capture the feeling of listening to *To the Lighthouse* while driving around doing errands. I had to do a lot of rewinding when I lost the thread, but I never minded listening to a beautiful passage over again. I borrowed a few images from Woolf but then took them to different places. The book's title comes from the last line of the poem.

“On Bitching”

Among the homages and other poems in the third section, there are also several poems about poetry and being a poet, a subject I've mostly avoided until now.

“On Bitching” was partly inspired (if that's the word) by a lunch I had with another poet who spent an entire hour and a half complaining about the injustices of the poetry world. Of course, we all complain about the poetry world, but this was over the top. Around the same time, my friend the poet Alan Feldman told me about a poetry assignment — an imitation of a poem by Catullus — he'd given to his writing class and tried himself, and he suggested I try it. Alan is really good at thinking up assignments, but I can never get myself to do them. This time, though, I looked at the Catullus poem, and then I remembered my lunch with the embittered poet, and somehow the poem started coming naturally.

I also realized that I could have it both ways in the poem: I could put my own complaints into the mouth of the other poet (calling myself out, in a sense) while also sounding reasonable through the speaker who is trying to talk sense into him. And I could have some fun along the way. In the end, my poem bore very little resemblance to the Catullus poem. Much of it is about the contemporary poetry world, but there are anachronistic references to ancient Rome, as well as allusions to things that aren't part of either period, including Stalin and a poem by Yeats. (By the way, Hilarius is a real Roman name.) After all the complaining (or, more accurately, pleas to stop complaining), I was glad to be able to end the poem on a more positive note. Some of that feeling comes back several poems later in “The Generations.”

“Light Snow” and “Shaking Off the Snow”

These two poems could probably be compared in the same way that I compared “Out Back” and “Cross-Fertilization” above. I also now feel (several years after writing the poem) that the path in “Shaking Off the Snow” is in some sense the path back to life. So is the path in “Walking with Eliza,” though I didn't think of it that way when I wrote the poem. What better form of engagement in the world is there than talking to one's children?

An Essay on Poetry: “The Poem’s Argument”

by Jeffrey Harrison

(First published in *Poet Lore*, Fall/Winter 2012.)

For much of the twentieth century, American poets shunned rhetorical language, often favoring instead a poetry that relied on the image to do most of the work. By now, imperatives like “Go in fear of abstractions” (Pound), “No ideas but in things” (Williams), and “Show, don’t tell” (every high school creative writing teacher in America) have become so ingrained that we would be forgiven for losing sight of this fact: Most poems — perhaps all poems — have arguments of one kind or another. Sometimes the argument is largely implied and does not rely heavily on rhetorical language, but many poems do use at least a modicum of this kind of language — which I also want to call the language of statement — to make their arguments. Even William Carlos Williams’s iconic imagistic poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” famously begins with a snippet of statement — “so much depends / upon” — without which it would not be a poem at all. That initial bit of argument gives the poem an organizing principle, acts on the images that follow, and provides the stance of the speaker, the “angle of entry” into the poem, so to speak. You could say the whole poem depends on it.

The Romantic poet John Clare, perhaps, comes closest to refuting the notion that every poem has an argument, especially in his sonnets. The sonnet form is justly famous for developing complex arguments in a small space, but Clare’s sonnets are almost pure description. Still, even a poem as straightforward and elemental as his “Emmonsails Heath in Winter” has an argument, albeit one so compact it is contained entirely in the first four words, “I love to see”:

I love to see the old heath’s withered brake
Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling
While the old heron from the lonely lake
Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing ...

All the nuggets of rich description that follow are strung on the simple thread of that candid bit of statement, which enacts a direct angle of entry into the poem and clearly gives the speaker’s heartfelt stance on his surroundings.

The argument in Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” is slightly more complicated, weaving through the poem in intermittent strands of statement:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves ...

In these first three stanzas, the argument-making statement comes in three main passages:

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard ...

And have been cold a long time
 To behold ...

... and not to think
 Of any misery in ...

What comes between these pieces of statement is description. Here is the description alone, as if the first part of the poem had been written without an argument:

The frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow,
 The junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter
 Of the January sun; the sound of the wind,
 The sound of a few leaves ...

This has a Chinese or Japanese feel, and in those traditions all of these images would have specific (though not entirely fixed) connotations, giving this passage more meaning and emotional resonance than it has in English. In English, it feels incomplete — and not only because it lacks any main verbs. That problem could be solved in several different ways, but even then this passage would not feel like a poem.

A poem could begin this way, but something else would have to happen afterward to make it a poem — for instance, the introduction of a first-person speaker who has thoughts or feelings about this scene. Many very good poems do begin with description and then expand from there — but Stevens happens to introduce his “something else” at the beginning, finding his way into the poem through an argument. One of the remarkable things about this poem is how seamlessly the argument runs through the imagery, like intermittent stitches. The other remarkable thing is the mysterious and visionary place where the poem arrives: “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” The poem might never have arrived there without the argument that Stevens set up at the beginning and then pursued. In other words, what might be thought of as the mundane language of statement or the rational language of argument has led to discoveries quite beyond the rational and mundane.

Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” is a different kind of poem, a recollection from childhood presented in the first person:

Sundays too my father got up early

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

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

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

The most obvious part of the poem's argument comes in the last two lines, which are an example of the language of statement framed in a rhetorical question. But they are much more than that, too. As we read through the poem and arrive at those lines, we feel the power of their intonation as a heartfelt lyric utterance emanating from everything that has come before: the images, the memory and the emotions associated with it, and the argument.

The same is true of the next most obvious statement in the poem: "No one ever thanked him," at the end of the first stanza. This goes right to the heart of why the poem was written and is a key part of the argument: it raises the emotional stakes. In doing that, it obviously provides the speaker's stance on the recollected scene and helps give the poem a structure beyond the simply narrative.

However, the argument of the poem begins earlier, and more subtly, in the poem's very first line, with the word "too": "Sundays too my father got up early." This small word single-handedly turns the first line from simple recollection into part of the poem's argument. It makes a slight but very important adjustment of the angle of entry into the poem. Farther down, at the end of the third-to-last line, the phrase "as well" is doing something very similar. And this additional realization finally triggers the utterance that releases the accumulated pressure of the poem.

These seemingly insignificant words and phrases like *too* and *as well* — and a slew of others like *otherwise*, *yet*, *nor*, *still*, *even*, *only*, *if*, *if only*, *but*, *when*, *that*, *so*, *that*, *then*, *because*, *though*, *although* — these little words and phrases (most of which a grammarian would call adverbs or subordinating conjunctions) can be very important in establishing and modulating a poem's argument. Sometimes we distrust a poem that relies too heavily on these small rhetorical moves, and it is true that their overuse can signal a weak poem. (It should also be acknowledged that in certain kinds of contemporary poems — for instance, many of those written by John Ashbery — these logical connectives and the language of statement are used to thwart referential meaning rather than to enhance it, creating a kind of "empty" argument rather than one that "adds up.") But in other cases these markers help the poet bring into focus what the poem — or its speaker — is actually saying. Thus they help establish something beyond tone: the sense of the speaker as a character. By fine-tuning the speaker's attitude as the

poem progresses, they dramatize the psychology of the speaker while also serving as signals that help the reader to follow the thread of the poem.

The following poem by the contemporary poet Peter Schmitt (from his book *Hazard Duty*) turns on a number of these small words and phrases while framing its argument with a series of subordinate clauses:

A DAY AT THE BEACH

If he had been paying more attention
to whatever my mother was saying
from under her hat beneath the umbrella,

or watching more closely over my brother,
off playing somewhere with his shovel and pail,
or me, idly tracing my name in the sand,

if he hadn't had that faraway look,
gazing out to where the freighters crawled along
the horizon — so that when he suddenly

pushed up and off, sand in his wake, visor
taking wing behind him, you could believe,
as he churned toward the glassy water,

that it had just come to him to chuck it all,
this whole idea of family, and make
for those southbound freighters and the islands —

then he might have never seen the arm heaved up,
the lifeguards running just as my father
was lifting the old man out of the surf

and bearing him ashore, the blue receding
from his cramped limbs. And as a crowd closed around
the gasping figure struggling to his knees,

my father turned back to us — sheepishly,
almost, back to the endless vigilance
of husband and of father, which was all

he had ever asked for in the first place.

The poem begins with a line and a half of what I've been calling the language of statement: "If he had been paying more attention / to whatever...." But in terms of argument, the important word is "If." Functioning as a subordinating conjunction, it sets up the first subordinate clause and creates a kind of grammatical suspense as we wait for the main verb, which we know will come as a kind of answer in a "then" clause.

The “then” doesn’t come until the sixth stanza, with “then he might have never seen” — more language of statement taking up the main argument of the poem. However, between the first “if” and the “then,” we get a handful of secondary parts of the argument and more syntactic markers, including a series of further subordinate clauses, the phrase “so that when” in line nine, and the clause “you could believe” followed by “that it had just come to him to chuck it all, / this whole idea of family.” All of this further suspends the main clause and adds to the release when we get there: “then he might have never seen.” After that, we get “just as” in the following line, “And as” at the beginning of the poem’s second sentence, and then finally “back to the endless vigilance / of husband and father, which was all // he had ever asked for in the first place.” — three instances of the language of statement that makes up the poem’s argument.

This is a poem that sticks quite closely to the scene at hand, but the argument running through it gives it a syntactic dynamism and a structure that it wouldn’t have if it were just recording the events of the episode. That poem might begin something like this:

My mother was saying something
 from under her hat beneath the umbrella,
 my brother was off playing somewhere
 with his shovel and pail, and I
 was idly tracing my name in the sand.
 My father had that faraway look,
 gazing out to where the freighters crawled
 along the horizon — but suddenly he was
 pushing up and off, sand in his wake, visor
 taking wing behind him ...

This version has a simple narrative structure. There is nothing wrong with narrative, and I am not advocating one particular approach to poems. Different poems call for different methods, and sometimes straight narrative is the way to go. Nevertheless, something is clearly felt to be missing in the above rephrasing, and what is missing is the argument that provides the actual poem with a structure beyond the narrative, as well as the sense of a compelling speaker.

As Schmitt’s poem reminds us, the poems that are most successful, the ones that convince us and will matter to us, are the ones whose arguments enact the drama of a speaker trying to say something. In these poems, emotional and structural integrity become one and the same. Another such poem is “Lemon Moon” by Jessica Greenbaum, whose second book, *The Two Yvonnees* (Princeton University Press, 2012):

We almost remembered living it, the lemon turning
 around the orange, which also turned, day in
 and day out, and, while rolling over through the seasons
 in the school’s basement, the Science room,
 gave wide berth to the grapefruit sun. Another year
 a brawny beach ball took center, while the tennis ball
 fuzzy with ground cover, circled like a ball
 never does, and the ping pong ball tagged along above it

like a clockwork gear at the edge of the world.

Beneath a sheet, thumb-tacked dome-shape into a planetarium,
 one of us was chosen as the star, planet, moon.
 Sneakers squeaked, and we almost remembered these paths
 from below the skin of our life, the way you move a skater
 by a magnet underneath the mirror. Melville says
 the structural body of the whaleboat mimicked
 the body of the whale, and as we circled those also circling
 (a pattern I later admired in the migration of two-steppers
 around a south Texas dance hall) I think we almost
 remembered the concentric moving bodies
 we came from, to come here, a wedge reappearing to flavor our sky.

The first clause of this poem, “We almost remembered living it,” is the partial statement that provides the poem with its angle of entry. This is an independent clause, a declarative structure, but because of the past tense of the verb and, especially, the word “almost,” the angle of entry is more oblique than if the poem had begun simply with “I remember.” Still, since this main clause is followed by a series of subordinate clauses, it has, in a sense, the opposite syntactic structure as the first sentence of Schmitt’s poem, and it initiates the poem’s argument more directly. And yet the syntax of what follows is still complex and dynamic. The second sentence has a similar structure, and there is a sense in both sentences that the initial main clause is a fixed body around which the subordinate clauses orbit like planets or moons, mirroring and reinforcing the poem’s subject matter. The poem’s remaining sentences vary in structure, but other elements reinforce that spiraling effect. For example, in coming back a second and then a third time in the poem, the phrase “we almost remembered” gives the sense that this poem about circling planets and children is itself revolving around the repetitions of that phrase — or it’s as if that phrase, that recurring partial statement, were giving the poem its rotation, its spin. We feel the argument turning on that phrase which, in its second appearance, negotiates the transition into the figurative (“we almost remembered these paths / from below the skin of our life ...”) and in its third appearance helps the poem to circle around to its mysteriously powerful ending.

There is no formula, of course, for getting the argument of a poem right. That challenge is complicated not only by the fact that different poems call for different methods but also by the many interrelated factors within a single poem: syntax, the language of statement, tone, the creation of a credible speaker. When we are stuck in a poem, the solution may be only an adjustment in the angle of entry, which in turn will change the way the poem is organized. In other cases, we may have lost hold of what we are trying to say, our stance on the subject, or the modulations of our feelings through the small words and phrases that track an argument. Or there may not be enough of an argument, with the result that the poem feels inert and seems to lack a focus, an organizing principle, and a voice, leaving the reader with nothing to go on in terms of how to read the poem.

What is true, though, is that the clarity of a poem often depends as much on the coherence of its argument as it does on the precision of its imagery or description. At the same time, the emotional integrity and structural integrity of a successful poem are

intertwined: the two will always be found together, manifesting themselves in the poem's argument, whether that argument is implicit or expressed explicitly through the language of statement. The movement of the argument, in turn, is what, to a large degree, establishes the sense of the speaker as a character. It is often the small adjustments in the argument that reveal the drama of a speaker struggling to say something, and it is through that struggle that the reader finally sees both who, exactly, is speaking — and why.

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Some Web Links for Jeffrey Harrison

The poet's own website:

<http://home.comcast.net/~jeffrey.harrison/index.htm>

Interview with Jacqueline McLean in the online journal *Smartish Pace*:

http://www.smartishpace.com/interviews/jeffrey_harrison/

Biographical note and featured poems on the website of The Poetry Foundation:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jeffrey-harrison>

Interview with Brian Brodeur on the website *How a Poem Happens* (July 31, 2009):

<http://howapoemhappens.blogspot.com/2009/07/jeffrey-harrison.html>

Essay by Jordan Davis about *Incomplete Knowledge* on website *The Constant Critic*:

http://www.constantcritic.com/jordan_davis/incomplete_knowledge/