

Poetry Craft Workshop: Turns and Endings

Information on Turns:

1) Turns can shift a poem:

--from narrative to meditative/philosophical or vice versa

--from narrative to metaphorical or vice versa

--from premise to conclusion; similarly, from set-up to punchline (or gut punch, depending on the material of the poem)

--from one time period to another, ex. from past to present or future; from present to past and back to present

2) Ways to introduce turns:

--By taking a Y in the road, subtly introducing new information, a gentle weaving-in

--By making a left or right, more distinct than a Y but still connected to what came before

--By use of the swerve, which veers sharply in a new direction that is connected to what came previously in the poem

--By employing the leap, which takes the poem into brand-new, unexpected material, either concrete or metaphorical

--By introducing a question, which may create a subtle shift, a greater swerve, or a leap
M.L. Rosenthal writes of turns as "gentle modulations, or at the furthest extreme, wrenching turns of emphasis or focus or emotional pitch (torques)."

3) Turns are mostly something we make subconsciously in writing early drafts, though we may make more conscious decisions about them during the revision process, at which point we might ask ourselves:

--Whether a turn adds or subtracts from the poem

--Whether we need to make more turns, weave more material into the poem

--Whether to make a subtle turn more dramatic or a dramatic one more subtle

--Whether to turn a statement into a question or a question into a statement

Strategies for Ending Poems:

- 1) End on Something Someone Says
- 2) End on a Concrete Image
- 3) End on a Metaphorical Image
- 4) “Die looking backward.” —Jericho Brown
- 5) End on a Declaration of the Speaker’s Belief or Personal Truth
- 6) The Leap
- 7) End Using Direct Address to the Reader
- 8) The River-to-the-Sea Ending
- 9) The Funnel Ending
- 10) End on a Question, concrete or metaphorical
- 11) The Concrete Image That Takes on a Metaphorical Meaning at the End
- 12) Repetition of the Ending for Added Impact or Meaning

Several Endings to My Poem “Buttercups”

“Buttercups” 1st day’s drafts

“but mostly I’m a woman sitting on her steps,
trying not to wiggle so I can watch bees
come and go inches from my skin,
delighted to be a part of this bumblebee/
flower blossom cheer.”

Remember that your job in the writing a first draft is to get words on the page. Spill it all out—even if a line lacks strength.

“the sheen on their wings and on the buttercups
shining up my little world, reminding me
we still have the present, delighted
to take part in this bumblebee/flower blossom
party, hoping it lasts.”

“delight in observing this bumblebee/blossom
party that’s gone on for millennia,
my prayer that it lasts.”

These endings all make me say, “So what.” I used a more powerful image in the third version, the word prayer as opposed to delight or hope, but still, so what. It’s just doesn’t move me. There’s not much there.

Remember to be merciful when you critique your writing. When I say “so what,” I’m critiquing the poem, not my skill as a writer or myself as a person.

This is what I have now, the 4th draft:

“Buttercups”

“as I rejoice in this bumblebee-blossom ritual
forty million years in existence, praying
that now that they live at our mercy
we’ll find ways to make it last.”

This hews much closer to what I needed to say, that having damaged the earth so badly, we have to take responsibility for repair and future protection, that in a sense we’ve made ourselves into gods.

Indigo

As I'm walking on West Cliff Drive, a man runs
 toward me pushing one of those jogging strollers
 with shock absorbers so the baby can keep sleeping,
 which this baby is. I can just get a glimpse
 of its almost translucent eyelids. The father is young,
 a jungle of indigo and carnelian tattooed
 from knuckle to jaw, leafy vines and blossoms,
 saints and symbols. Thick wooden plugs pierce
 his lobes and his sunglasses testify
 to the radiance haloed around him. I'm so jealous.
 As I often am. It's a kind of obsession.
 I want him to have been my child's father.
 I want to have married a man who wanted
 to be in a body, who wanted to live in it so much
 that he marked it up like a book, underlining,
 highlighting, writing in the margins, I was *here*.
 Not like my dead ex-husband, who was always
 fighting against the flesh, who sat for hours
 on his zafu chanting *om* and then went out
 and broke his hand punching the car.
 I imagine when this galloping man gets home
 he's going to want to have sex with his wife,
 who slept in late, and then he'll eat
 barbecued ribs and let the baby teethe on a bone
 while he drinks a cold dark beer. I can't stop
 wishing my daughter had had a father like that.
 I can't stop wishing I'd had that life. Oh, I know
 it's a miracle to have a life. Any life at all.
 It took eight years for my parents to conceive me.
 First there was the war and then just waiting.
 And my mother's bones so narrow, she had to be slit
 and I airlifted. That anyone is born,
 each precarious success from sperm and egg
 to zygote, embryo, infant, is a wonder.
 And here I am, alive.
 Almost seventy years and nothing has killed me.
 Not the car I totalled running a stop sign
 or the spirochete that screwed into my blood.
 Not the tree that fell in the forest exactly
 where I was standing—my best friend shoving me

(no stanza break)

backward so I fell on my ass as it crashed.
I'm alive.
And I gave birth to a child.
So she didn't get a father who'd sling her
onto his shoulder. And so much else she didn't get.
I've cried most of my life over that.
And now there's everything that we can't talk about.
We love—but cannot take
too much of each other.
Yet she is the one who, when I asked her to kill me
if I no longer had my mind—
we were on our way into Ross,
shopping for dresses. That's something
she likes and they all look adorable on her—
she's the only one
who didn't hesitate or refuse
or waver or flinch.
As we strode across the parking lot
she said, O.K., but when's the cutoff?
That's what I need to know.

Sorrow Is Not My Name

—*after Gwendolyn Brooks*

No matter the pull toward brink. No
matter the flurid, deep sleep awaits.
There is a time for everything. Look,
just this morning a vulture
nodded his red, grizzled head at me,
and I looked at him, admiring
the sickle of his beak.
Then the wind kicked up, and,
after arranging that good suit of feathers
he up and took off.
Just like that. And to boot,
there are, on this planet alone, something like two
million naturally occurring sweet things,
some with names so generous as to kick
the steel from my knees: agave, persimmon,
stick ball, the purple okra I bought for two bucks
at the market. Think of that. The long night,
the skeleton in the mirror, the man behind me
on the bus taking notes, yeah, yeah.
But look; my niece is running through a field
calling my name. My neighbor sings like an angel
and at the end of my block is a basketball court.
I remember. My color's green. I'm spring.

Bullet Points

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will
Do it the same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of these winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we've been taught,
Greater than the settlement
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,
And more beautiful than the new bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.

Testimony

(for my daughters)

I want to tell you
that the world is still beautiful.
I tell you that despite
children raped on city streets,
shot down in school rooms,
despite the slow poisons seeping
from old and hidden sins
into our air, soil, water,
despite the thinning film
that encloses our aching world.
Despite my own terror and despair.

I want you to look again and again,
to recognize the tender grasses,
curled like a baby's fine hairs
around your fingers, as a recurring
miracle, to see that the river rocks
shine like God, that the crisp
voices of the orange and gold
October leaves are laughing at death.
I want you to look beneath
the grass, to note
the fragile hieroglyphs
of ant, snail, beetle. I want
you to understand that you are
no more and no less necessary
than the brown recluse, the ruby-
throated hummingbird, the humpback
whale, the profligate mimosa.

I want to say, like Neruda,
that I am waiting for
"a great and common tenderness,"
that I still believe
we are capable of attention,
that anyone who notices the world
must want to save it.

Everything Is Perfect

If my cancer recurs,
if I vomit from chemo,

help me follow the one who knew
she was dying, who turned
to the man wiping clean her face

and said, *Everything is perfect.*

Scrape me like a nutmeg, Lord.
Release my fragrance.

In memory of Akiko

High Desert, New Mexico

Temple of the rattlesnake's religion.
Deluge and heat-surge. Crèche of the atom's
rupture. Night blackens like a violin
and bright flour falls from the kitchens of heaven.
This is where the seams begin to loosen,
where you can walk for miles in any direction—
rabbit, lizard, raven, insect drone—
and almost forget the shame of being human.
Smoke tree. Sage. Not everything is broken.
Horses appear at this remote cabin
to stand outside and wait for you to come
with a single apple. Abandon
your despair, you who enter here forsaken.
The wind is saying something. Listen.

And So

And so you call your best friend
who's away, just to hear his voice,
but forget his recording concludes
with "Have a nice day."

"Thank you, but I have other plans,"
you're always tempted to respond,
as an old lady once did, the clerk
in the liquor store unable to laugh.

Always tempted, what a sad
combination of words. And so
you take a walk into the neighborhood,
where the rhododendrons are out
and also some yellow things

and the lilacs remind you of a song
by Nina Simone. "Where's my love?"
is its refrain. Up near Gravel Hill
two fidgety deer cross the road,
whitetails, exactly where

the week before a red fox
made a more confident dash.
Now and then the world rewards,
and so you make your way back

past the careful lawns, the drowsy backyards,
knowing the soul on its own
is helpless, asleep in the hollows
of its rigging, waiting to be stirred.

Letter to the Person Who Carved His Initials into the Oldest Living Longleaf Pine in North America

—*Southern Pines, NC*

Tell me what it's like to live without
curiosity, without awe. To sail
on clear water, rolling your eyes
at the kelp reefs swaying
beneath you, ignoring the flicker
of mermaid scales in the mist,
looking at the world and feeling
only boredom. To stand
on the precipice of some wild valley,
the eagles circling, a herd of caribou
booming below, and to yawn
with indifference. To discover
something primordial and holy.
To have the smell of the earth
welcome you to everywhere.
To take it all in, and then,
to reach for your knife.

Mississippi Gardens

slaves, she answers, as I sink
my fingers beneath the roots.

the knees of that blue housedress are threadbare.
she wears it on Tuesdays and Fridays when we tend the flowers.

pullin' weeds ain't a time for talk she chides.
I watch her uproot the creeping charlie.

the fragrant blossoms we protect, hug our whole house.
sweet peas were my choice.

we rarely buy those things for sale in the gardening aisle.
don't make sense to work the earth and not feel it.

I wanted those thick cotton gloves, but they stayed on the shelf.
you gotta learn the difference between dirt and soil.

sometime I notice how the ground changes.
denser, darker, moister, a little more red in some places.

in social studies class I learned about crop rotation
and how it keeps the land fertile.

Mama, what did they used to grow here?

Hornet's Nest

Gray paper sack full of venom:
you've watched its dark door since the last
blackberry brambles loosed their grip
on jagged crimson leaves rimed
with silver, revealing the soft nest
suspended from a slender bar
of lightweight hooks and needles.
Now, though, when you come
with clippers, bear it home to hang
in triumph from your ceiling—
it looks different now. Swollen large
as a cow's heart, ringed with barbwire
thorns, it pulses gravity like
some clouded moon, the blind black hole
at the bottom a wordless mouth.
First the earth, then its glittering
chain of satellite trash begins
to realign, to circle around
this homemade house, this labyrinth
of the female, of makers, one of
the endless ominous softly
throbbing hearts of everything.

Alleluia

1.

I saw You,
O God,
in the long brown legs
of my daughter
in her fingers that shape
prayers without words

I saw You when she cartwheeled
eight times
across the green field
and rose staggering, panting,
exulting

You shone and shone
like a cartwheel of light
from the body of my brown and joyful girl

2.

And, oh, my daughter's sweet bones
flashing beneath her skin

beneath that thin, taut glaze, that cherished
illusion,
the shape of You glowing, glowing

3.

At first I did not know You
in the lank black body
of the roadside tom, rank
with blood and fear.
Like the others, I passed
You by. But I turned back,
although I did not recognize You,
wrapped You in the worn pink blanket
from the back seat. Your blood-filled
eye blinked unsurprised at the blank

(no stanza break)

and voiceless sky, but I felt
Your heart tremble beneath my hand,
felt the heart's old persistent music,
beyond logic, beyond hope,
and so I heaved You into my car,
and I drove to the veterinarian,
murmuring, "All right, it's all right,
it's all right," though I never
believed it, while Your blood seeped
into the blanket, and Your stench
filled my nostrils, and I prayed

I would not have to touch You again.

Then Your scrabbling feet stilled
to the sound of my voice, and You pushed
your dirty head against my thigh,
and a great purr rumbled
from Your broken chest,
and I knew You,
and You died.

4.

It was a day there was no pain,
though I knew pain would follow,
like an old dog that will not leave,

knew I'd pay for this hour
tramping the banks of the Oconee
with a cold skewer of pain
through my hip and my knee

But it didn't matter. That
was the day I decided
to be happy,

thinking that happiness may be
the only thing You want from us,
the only gift You can use

5.

How else could You have seen
the black dragonfly
dancing over the dark water,

(no stanza break)

the flash of iridescent blue
beneath its wings, quick
as a breath, how else
could You see the dragonfly dart,
then hesitate above the mossy green
bank as if it gave pleasure
deliberately? How could You perceive
the green dimness falling
between trees, that antique
stillness, then the vermilion leaves,
startling, unexpected, like an exclamation
of delight, how could You receive
that moment when one, then two,
then three dragonflies skimmed
over the Oconee River

except through me
except through me
except through me

A Brief For The Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything.
We stand at the prow again of a small ship
anchored late at night in the tiny port
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.
To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
all the years of sorrow that are to come.

To Roanoke with Johnny Cash

Mist became rain became fog was mist
reborn every few miles on a road
made of s and z, of switchback

and falling into mountains of night
would have been easy and who
would have known until flames

and nobody, even then. I played his life
over and over, not so much song
as moan of a needle and the bite,

the hole it eats through the arm
and drove faster to the murmur
of this dead and crow-dressed man,

voice of prison and heroin and the bible
as turned by murdering hands.
And the road was the color of him

and the night was blind but the mist
turned blaze in headlights as I haunted
myself with one of the last songs

he sang, about what else, about pain
and death and regret and the fall
that was the soul of the man.

Those Winter Sundays

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?

Every Mourning

Morning: walking my neighborhood, I come upon a colony of ants busy at work. I take care not to step on any and miss

them all, then encounter up a ways a fellow traveler greeting the day. I am frightening her. No. She is afraid of me.

Is she an introvert? Is she a neighbor? Is she just in from the 'burbs, from the country? Is she scared of the inner city? Am I the inner city?

Is she racist? Shouldn't I be the wary one? Or is she a survivor like me? It can't be what I'm wearing: khakis, a blue and white

checkered button-down shirt, and the nylon sandals I favor because they're comfortable, my feet can breathe in them.

Dear friends, I am the nicest man on earth.

And I want to shout, *Morning!* But just then a weaver or carpenter, just then a pharaoh or fire or pavement, just

then a little black ant struggles by alone, alone. And in that moment, I want us to give ourselves over

to industry, carry the weight of the day together, lighten it. I want to be a part of a colony where I feel easy

walking around. Cool as the goddamn breeze. Where I can breathe, build structures sturdier and grander

than this—but the woman crosses to the other side of the street, and I do what I usually do: retreat into

myself as far as I can, then send out whatever's left.

Coastland

When the wind gets up and the water rises,
those who live on higher ground, at a distance
from the pinched smell of pluff mud,
from spartina marshes and swamps of cypress knees,
upland from the tannin-black tributaries
where through the bottoms, among the wet-footed
spider lilies, one barred owl
calls another, one to the other till there's little left to say,
upland from the cottonmouth and the brown water snake
coiled and rooted by the tupelo
and the alligators logging across the slough,
upland from the deer hound pens full of yelps—
full of naps and pacing, full of cedar-thicket dreaming—
and the dirt yard's milling of gray cats
and striped kittens yawning by the palmettos,
upland from the sea sky sea—the horizon
a fine line polished away—
from the shrimp boats shrinking smaller and smaller
on their way to their serious work of gathering,
from the smooth, quick balancing act
of the sun—heavy and orange—riding the waves,
upland from salt myrtle and the season's second growth
of trumpet honeysuckle, those who live at a distance
from the band of quick, dark clouds blooming at sea,
upland from the bang and whirl, clatter
and shake of the wind when it's up,
those who live on higher ground ask
of those who live by the flats and shoals,
the shallows and bogs, *Why*, and again, *Why, O why*.

Ode to Dalya's Bald Spot

my sister wraps the throw
around herself on the small
cream loveseat & i know
for sure that she is not
a speck of dirt on a pill.
she coughs & sniffs up all
the lucky air in the room
into her excellent nostrils,
which are endless
holy wells replenishing
the soft architecture of her guts.
not even the lupus can interrupt
this ritual of beholding.
you ever look at a thing
you ain't make, but become
a mother in the looking?
our blood is a thread tied
around my finger, tied
around her finger, that helps
me love. when her knees
swell, when her joints rust,
when her hair thins & flees
making a small continent
of skin on the side of her head,
i am witnessing her in whatever
state her body will allow.
Bismillah to the brain that
put my name next to her name
and said *look at this girl your
whole life and know some kind
of peace*. littlest bald spot, that no one
expected or knew how to love
you remind me of us.
i know Dalya's thinking, *how ugly
what a shame*, but i wanna
build a mosque right then
& there. make an annual
hajj to that brown meadow.
slick as a coin. little planet
uncolonized. flagless.
her awful, but her own.

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The Supple Deer

The quiet opening
between fence strands
perhaps eighteen inches.

Antlers to hind hooves,
four feet off the ground,
the deer poured through.

No tuft of the coarse white belly hair left behind.

I don't know how a stag turns
into a stream, an arc of water.
I have never felt such accurate envy.

Not of the deer:

To be that porous, to have such largeness pass through me.

A Small Needful Fact

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.