

On Reading and Rereading Contemporary Poetry

You are the editor of a poetry magazine. A new submission arrives. You read it. You don't like it or you don't understand it—or you don't like it because you don't understand it. What do you do? You remind yourself that you now like many poems you didn't at first like or understand. You read the submission again. Maybe it's new. Maybe it's bad. Maybe you're a bad reader. You discuss the poem with a friend. You're still uncertain. Will the poem reveal its significance to you? Does it have anything significant to reveal? Quick, decide, before the next submission arrives.

Reading contemporary poetry is an exhilarating, exhausting experience. There are few precedents to guide judgment—to determine how much attention to devote to a poem. Don't like “Spain 1937”? Read it again. Read about it. It influenced generations of writers. Discover how and why it changed their lives. Don't like “Spain 2017”? Maybe it's the poem. Maybe it's you. To find out, you must remain receptive and skeptical—open to new work and suspicious of your own commitments. A nearly impossible task, especially in the long run.



This note describes my experience reading and rereading a single poem—Peter Gizzi's “A Panic that Can Still Come upon Me”—over a ten-year period in a number of roles: editor, reviewer, academic, friend. I first read “Panic” in 2005 when I was the editor of *Chicago Review*. Gizzi submitted the poem to the magazine. I rejected it. I wanted to like it. I admired Gizzi's earlier work. But I found the poem lifeless. Gizzi's panic seemed indistinct and inauthentic—contrived to justify the poem.

The word “contrived” should be banned from poetry criticism. All poems are contrived. But “Panic” seemed contrived and inert. How many poets ruminate on Zeno's paradox? Or lament their complicity in state violence? In the poem's first section (there are five total), Gizzi writes:

If we find we are still in motion
and have arrived in Zeno's thought, like

if sunshine hits marble and the sea lights up
we might know we were loved, are loved
if flames and harvest, the enchanted plain

If our wishes are met with dirt
and thyme, thistle, oil,
heirloom, and basil

or the end result is worry, chaos
and if “I should know better”

If our loves are anointed with missiles
Apache fire, Tomahawks
did we follow the tablets the pilgrims suggested

These lines are delicate and beautiful. They are also honorable and self-aware. States name weapons after their conquered enemies—Apache missiles, Tomahawk missiles. The war on terror refracts the paradoxes of American culture—its dogmatism and imperialism, its commitment to justice and individual rights. But as Marjorie Perloff notes in an essay on Gizzi’s work, the lines are “predictable.” Gizzi is telling us something we already know.

“Panic” overflows with the familiar: liberal politics, hesitation, beautiful images of sunlight, allusions to famous poems. Perloff catalogues Gizzi’s references: Sartre, Williams, Crane, O’Hara, Stevens, Johnson, Cage, Coleridge, Keats, Whitman. Last names are all we need to construct a familiar genealogy. I love these writers, and I respected Gizzi’s poem. But I did not like it.



Patience is the master key to every situation. One must have sympathy for everything, surrender to everything, but at the same time remain patient and forbearing.

—Franz Kafka

In summer 2014, I reviewed Gizzi’s *In Defense of Nothing: Selected Poems, 1987–2011* for *Chicago Review*. A year earlier, Gizzi and I had become friends, and I was eager to revisit his work. Rereading “Panic,” I came to regret my decision to reject it. After nearly a decade, the poem finally revealed its significance to me.

When I first read the poem, I had been frustrated by Gizzi’s repeated use of “if”—a word that opens almost every stanza. But rereading the poem, I realized that every “if” was a site of suspension. I had been a victim of what Dan Beachy-Quick describes, in an essay on the poem, as the “theoretical *then* biding its time in reason’s anteroom.” My desire for this “then” had inhibited my openness to the poem’s openness. I had been unwilling to enter its “space of consideration,” to quote Beachy-Quick again.

My mistake had been to assume that “Panic” called for a response. Consider this passage from the poem’s second section. Gizzi confronts the irreconcilability of human and nonhuman time:

If the sun throbs like a drum
every five minutes

what can we do with this

the 100,000 years it takes a photon
to reach the surface of the sun

eight minutes to hit our eyes

In 2005, I had read “what can we do with this” as a question. Gizzi was asking readers to respond to a crisis. We could lament the poverty of human experience. Or we could marvel at the complexity of the universe. Or we could attempt to imagine time from a nonhuman perspective. Or we could dismiss the question altogether—which is what I did.

Nine years later I realized that “what can we do with this” was not a question at all. It was an appeal for patience. This appeal was anything but familiar. In our everyday lives, we are constantly being called upon to respond.

The poem, I believed, was an attempt to enact Kafka’s advice: “one must have sympathy for everything, surrender to everything, but at the same time remain patient and forbearing.” Patience is an inconvenient virtue. The word derives from the Latin *patientia*—patience, but also the ability to endure pain. To be patient, one must suspend one’s self-regard and sense of responsibility. One must foster sympathy without the expectation of reciprocity.

What is the value of patience? In “Friendship,” Emerson warns, “Our impatience betrays us into rash and foolish alliances which no god attends.” If the demands of patience are too high, he recommends bashfulness and even apathy: “Bashfulness and apathy are a tough husk in which a delicate organization is protected from premature ripening.” Patience protects us from the world—and protects the world from us.

But patience, for Emerson, is never a value in and for itself. It is always part of a larger program of perspectivism. As George Kateb argues, Emerson’s “great lesson is that some large part of the interest or fascination in the world comes from the fact that meaning or beauty or truth can be found in conflicting or incompatible ideas, principles, forces, and practices.” Patience is a lubricant—it helps us appreciate encounters with meaning and beauty and truth.

But Gizzi’s poem did not seem to ask us to confront an array of “conflicting and incompatible ideas, principles, forces, and practices.” Indeed, it did not seem to ask us to do anything at all—except maybe forbear. Perhaps Emerson was not the right touchstone. Perhaps *Bartleby* was better. *Bartleby*’s famous *I would prefer not to*, Giorgio Agamben writes, “opens a zone of indistinction between yes and no, the preferable and the nonpreferable. But also [...]

between the potential to be (or do) and the potential not to be (or do).” The poem’s repeated *ifs* seemed to work in a similar way. “Neither activity nor passivity,” notes Ann Smock, “but the action of passiveness.”



Six months later Anthony Caleshu asked me to contribute an essay to a volume he was editing on Gizzi’s work. I suggested a topic: “Panic” and patience. Caleshu agreed and sent me the Perloff and Beachy-Quick essays that I discuss above—both were set to appear in the volume.

Rereading “Panic,” I changed my mind again. The poem’s dominant effect was now sadness, not the “action of passiveness.” In section one, Gizzi laments his complicity in state violence. In section two, he deplores the pettiness of human experience. In section three, he mourns his inability to share his feelings. In section four, he confronts his own mortality.

Section three includes one of the most disturbing passages I have read in a poem:

If today and today I am speaking to you, or
if you/I whisper, touch, explain

If they/you hate those phrases
if we struggle to get to the thing
the body and the other noises

If a W stumbles here even in private
there was this man we said
everywhere between us

if speech can free us

The lines capture a breakdown in communication. Words fail, touch fails. Even the body’s natural responsiveness is impaired. The appearance of “W” in the third stanza is ghastly—a conflation of then-president George W. Bush and Gizzi’s partner, the poet Elizabeth Willis. (Gizzi dedicates *In Defense of Nothing* to Willis.) The speaker’s sense of complicity has infiltrated his own home—even his body. There is nothing that can be done. The standalone line, “if speech can free us,” is a declaration of cynicism and hopelessness—not patience. Or more accurately: it is a moment of panic. “Panic,” Jeff Dolven observes, “is both halt and spasm, an organismal failure, a sudden devolution that strips us not only of our civility but also of our sentience.” Panic is a moment of intense isolation—isolation from the world and from ourselves.

The poem, thus, indicted its own ideal of patience—or, at least, acknowledged its harmfulness. Better to wait expectantly in “reason’s anteroom” than remain isolated in the poem’s “space of consideration.”

Perloff argues that “Panic” comes to a “climax in the death wish” of section four. She is right. In the second stanza, Gizzi’s speaker contemplates suicide:

If I am a bridge I am standing on, thinking,
saying goodbye to myself
when I stood by the water in life
thinking of my life, pine boughs
the hill next to water

The “if,” here, is fleeting, elided by the when, which instantiates the scene. Reading these lines, I found it difficult to find a reason why Gizzi—or, rather, his speaker—shouldn’t jump.



A clever fellow once got the idea that people drown because they are possessed by the *idea of gravity*. If they would get this notion out of their heads by seeing it as religious superstition, they would be completely safe from all danger of water.

—Karl Marx

The speaker does not jump. Section five dissolves the poem’s panic. “It is as if by thinking alone,” Beachy-Quick remarks, “that the body is lifted out of the water and put onto the bridge.” Could this be right? Is thought, for Gizzi, all it takes to overcome panic? Perloff thinks so: “In the remarkable turn...the poet suddenly remarks ‘I am not stupid,’ and from here on out, more hopeful possibilities suggest themselves.”

The poem concludes:

if I wanted to go all over a word
and live inside its name, so be it

There is my body and the idea of my body
the surf breaking and the picture of the wave

When I was writing the essay for Caleshu’s volume, I didn’t know what to make of these lines. I didn’t want to believe Perloff and Beachy-Quick.

I didn't want Gizzi to be Marx's "clever fellow." I still don't. But rereading the poem today, I worry that he is. Even desperation is preferable to naïve idealism.

Does Gizzi's "so be it" identify "my body" and "my idea of the body"? Or does the phrase acknowledge the difference between the two? Is the poem's intimation of idealism meant to be its most terrifying moment? Or a happy resolution? The lines are beautiful—is their beauty false?

One thing is clear: my initial worries about evaluating the poem's significance are now trivial. Confronting the new might be exhilarating and exhausting—but easy when compared to choosing between failure and idealism.



I finished the essay for Caleshu in December 2014. He rejected it. "Your essay," he wrote, "reads as something most concerned with your editorial response." "[Y]ou begin to take on Perloff and Beachy-Quick," but "at the end of the day I'm not sure you move beyond them enough (though I appreciate your sense of the poem's 'sadness')."

I was also suspicious of my self-concern. I still do not know whether I like or dislike the poem, but I'm also not sure whether liking or disliking the poem matters. What matters is the poem itself—and my still evolving relation to it.

I decided to send the essay to Gizzi. Over e-mail we discussed what it means to write about panic with the knowledge that readers might somehow share the experience. The choice, Gizzi implied, wasn't between failure and idealism, but between experiencing that choice alone or within a community—even a fragmented and anonymous community of readers. This is what writing and reading does: it creates a community that simultaneously respects and transcends our isolation. "Separated, we are together," Mallarmé writes in "The White Water Lily." Reading and rereading, we are together in our isolation.

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