John Poch

Love Poem

Your name is your name because of tongues
and the repetition of how you were made for mirrors.
Poems are not alive unless one loves artifice
and intelligence which leaves the windows open.
Never doubt that I will go strolling mornings
to persuade my squid-black ink to make a brown
that settles for nothing less than the gold
of your summer skin against a whitewashed town.

It is always sobering for me to kiss you this way
because just the memory of your teeth can bite
a mountain awake. Darkness knows how lava pines
for the various glows and resin of your youth.

Bet your wealth of imagined outdoor rooms
that I'm believing Sundays are for sleeping.
But only your sleeping while I meditate
on last night. With grace, our inside jokes belittle rulers.
Bet your best foreign money I'm bitten.
And we can spend the winnings on a train trip for two.
At two hundred miles per hour I can tell you
my riddle about drinking the end of the infinite.

John Poch

An Affinity for Form: A.E. Stallings's "Explaining an Affinity for Bats"

Explaining an Affinity for Bats

That they are only glimpsed in silhouette,
And seem something else at first—a swallow—
And move like new tunes, difficult to follow,
Staggering towards an obstacle they yet
Avoid in a last-minute pirouette,
Somehow telling solid things from hollow,
Sounding out how high a space, or shallow,
Revising into deepening violet.

That they sing—not the way the songbird sings
(Whose song is rote, to ornament, finesse)—
But travel by a sort of song that rings
True not in utterance, but harkenings,
Who find their way by calling into darkness
To hear their voice bounce off the shape of things.

The sonnet is the poem of the magician and the underdog. It is also the poem of the mathematician, the lover, and the rebel. In its first few hundred years, it was used almost exclusively as a form to convey the thoughts and feelings of love. But in the last few hundred years, the sonnet writer seems to want to make it do a new thing every time, even while maintaining its basic structural form of fourteen lines of rhyming iambic pentameter, and sometimes even pushing those boundaries. More recently, it has been used as a poem able to express and reflect the political, the personal, the elegiac, the natural world, and even Olympic feats. Its fourteen lines are usually broken up into an eight-six form of octave and sestet. One of the primary effects of this form is to have the final six lines outdo the former eight which have set up some kind of initial argument. In Shakespeare's development of the form, the final two lines often seem to outdo the previous ten combined.

There are two primary types of sonnets. One, the Elizabethan or Shakespearean form, has seven different rhymes, which make it easier for the English practitioner (because English is rhyme poor compared to Italian) to make a poem without straining too much for multiple rhyme words. The Italian, or Pe-

trarchan form, uses only five rhymes, at most. The first eight lines are made up of only two rhymes that alternate in a brace rhyme scheme: abbaabba, as seen above in Alicia Stallings' poem. If you think this is not difficult to do in English while developing a clear argument in meter while paying attention to lines and the entire sound/syntax/sense of the octave, give it a try some time.
Like baseball, the sonnet is a game of inches (or feet). And the numbers of the stanzas, rhymes, feet, and variations in the overall structure are just as important as the numbers of innings, players on a baseball team, the distances between bases, pitcher's mound, and home plate, and the differences between the speed of a fastball and a slider.

Alicia Stallings is one of the few strong contemporary poets who works almost strictly in form, and one of the few to be able to pitch a perfect game. Her training is classical, and her translations of Lucretius, Sappho and Virgil, and especially her own poetry, early on in her career have garnered her many awards, perhaps most recognizably a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Genius Award. Her sonnet here seems, at first, to be a poem about the natural world, but like many of Robert Frost's great nature poems, it goes much further than that, signifying deep spiritual truth.

Stallings's poem begins, via the title, with the presumption that she must explain to us why her speaker likes, or has an affinity for, bats. Many of us have an irrational fear of bats due to the bloodsucking mythology that surrounds them, even though ironically they actually save us from a lot of bloodsucking due to the number of insects they devour. But there is no denying that their nocturnal habits, their diet of insects, and, up close, their razor-toothed, rodent faces and hairy, jagged skin-wings are slightly terrifying. So, Stallings has some convincing to do.

The first line begins *in medias res*, in the middle of things, viewed from our human perspective below. The bat is in flight, we assume, at evening, in the last light. The decline into darkness has begun. Line two seems like a psychological denial of what we imagine, or it is at least a somewhat more familiar image of flight since we are creatures of sight. We don't want to see a bat, so we go with something more angelic than demonic. A bird rather than a rodent. A swallow. Line three (perhaps because it is getting darker) relates the sight to a sense of sound: "move like new tunes, difficult to follow." Line four completes the first brace rhyme with "they yet." So we move from "silhouette" to "they

yet." "Yet" is a word which creates uncertainty in the movement of the bat and/or our observation of it. This ending on a rhyme word of such uncertainty reminds me of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," where Frost writes: "Whose woods these are I think I know. / His house is in the village, though." In conversational speech someone would say something more like: "I think I know whose woods these are, but his house is in the village." A poet, however, wants to do more work with words, to make them mean more, to emphasize them, especially their sound, so Frost allows "though," via rhyme with the previous "know," to resonate aloud and create a feeling of uncertainty. Stallings does the same here with "yet."

The second four lines (a quatrain, if you consider the way the brace rhymes cordon off those lines) continue the observation, developing our sense of a binary world: light/dark, sight/sound, bird/mammal, solid/hollow, height/depth. All of these binaries seem to move toward darker, more limited, or less inviting choices as night comes on. And then we move to stanza two, the sestet, where, if we are trained sonnet readers, we can expect a development or shift, what we call the *volta*. The volta is often, in some way, the reveal, or the twist, or the appearance of the dove from the magician's hat. It is not the end, but a new beginning: something that we will want to solve, perhaps. How did this shift happen?

At this point in her poem, Stallings switches the focus, immediately, on sound rather than sight. *Focus* may not be the right word here, but I mean to use it to convey a different kind of seeing. After all, by now the deepening violet has taken us into near total darkness. We might think of the stanza break as the moment where the evening grows so dark we are blinded to our surroundings. There is a shift in the way we must perceive things, so we will need to rely upon our sense of sound. In the sestet, sound takes over where sight leaves off. In the octave she has mentioned already the "new tunes," but remember that was related to visual movement. And the "song" of the bat is not the music of a bird, rather it is a kind of music that gives us, beyond song, information. Sound in this first stanza is a kind of foreshadowing of what will happen more fully in stanza two. In the tradition of poetry, most poets relate the singing of the poet to the song of a bird: larks, mockingbirds, thrushes, ovenbirds, etc. But never bats. Stallings is hearing (and seeing) things differently, as poets are known to do. Indeed it is one of the primary aspects of any poem to turn our emphasis from one way of perceiving to another.

So many great poems are about poetry itself. We call this *ars poetica*. This poem is no exception. The poet is completely aware that her affinity is not only for bats but *with* bats, and for the way that they survive by eating, locating their food not by sight, but sound. The first stanza, looked at in regards to how a poet might understand, allows the words to do double duty. A "glimpse" is a first sight of something that could be developed further. A swallow can be a bird, but it also can be an action of ingesting, nearly the opposite of a song that comes forth from the throat, not into it. "New tunes" are what the Modernist poet Ezra Pound suggested poets needed to put forth when he made his famous pronouncement of "Make it new." Of course, many readers understand that a poem is "difficult to follow" due to its multiplicity of meaning and directionality. Poems perceive much in the way the bat must be discerning in lines six and seven, and a good poet goes through much "revising." Stallings is having some fun here with the notion of what it is to write (and read) a poem.

The poet, like the bat, makes sound but not just to hear herself. The poet makes this music to hear the thing the sound describes, the very shape of it, so that the poet can find what that thing is in the dark and either veer around it or consume it. If the thing to be perceived is finally internalized, it can then be made one with the poet. So many poets I know, when asked why they write poems, say things like: "To understand words better" or "to figure out what is going on in the world" or as I so often tell people, "To find out who I am." Putting words in the best order is similar to arranging molecules to make a better medicine or writing a more successful code for a more efficient computer program. A poem does not just emote feelings, though often we are taught this from elementary school to high school; it has to do with discovering how to live and be in the world. Just about any artist would admit this self-discovery as a purpose in making art.

As in Shakespeare's sonnets, the final turn happens in the couplet, though in Stallings's sonnet, the last two lines don't rhyme. Still, they act as a turning point for a powerful final thought. Remember that the sonnet moved from sight to sound between octave and sestet. Now, within the sestet, between the first four lines and the couplet, the movement goes from making the sound to hearing it. This is the "last-minute pirouette" we might have "harken"ed was coming if we had been paying close attention to line five. The echo has returned, finally, formally,

strategically, geometrically, and we end locating the exact shape of the thing: the sonnet. The formal shape of this poem cannot be emphasized enough.

Many readers unfamiliar with the finer qualities of sonnets might miss a thing or two, but that is not an insurmountable problem. Any art requires a breadth of knowledge of formal understanding to glean the most appreciation of the effects. It can be difficult. Line three's "difficult to follow," then, is not just the difficulty of our seeing the bats at night and with their zig-zagging movements, but this also has to do with our understanding of good poems or even complex sentences strung across lines. As well, if this is an ars poetica, we realize the poem is barely begun here in line three. It is, here, a "new tune," and the poet must be asking herself how she will arrive at her destination. That is a difficulty for the writer. The difficulty for the reader is another thing. Some readers prefer a simpler poem of superficial feeling and sentiment. But this is never what we would ask of scripture, which we consider the greatest literature. The British poet, Geoffrey Hill, said of poetry: "In my view, difficult poetry is the most democratic, because you are doing your audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings. So much of the populist poetry of today treats people as if they were fools. And that particular aspect, and the aspect of the forgetting of a tradition, go together." While not anywhere near as impenetrably allusive and arcanely historical as Geoffrey Hill's own poetry, the beautiful difficulty of this sonnet is something to be engaged, admired, and praised.

It should be noted that bats are not blind, only limited in their ability to see, especially at night. Stallings doesn't go into it (the sonnet form doesn't have room), but we know the echolocation the bat uses is one that will allow it to eat and survive. Without the aid of night vision goggles that we might use in the dark, they need some help locating insects in the pitch dark; and the use of vocalization and hearing function perfectly. In the gospels, we read that Jesus continually emphasized both the senses of hearing and of seeing to encourage His followers toward the kingdom of God. He healed both the blind and the deaf and often especially emphasized hearing. Eight times in the gospels, He says: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." He knew that our earthly hearing and seeing are continuously fraught with error due to our fallen state, so the statement is not only encouraging but somewhat ironic. In Matthew 13:14, He quotes Isaiah and

says: "'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive." He understands that we might have glimpses of the truth, as Peter did when he called Jesus the Son of God, but then the world grows dark around us and we can end up in the place of blindness and denial. Peter, later, staggering, even after he had seen the risen Christ, would need some night vision. He would need the light of the Holy Spirit and not just the light of day. The ear had to hear differently. The words had to shift: he would need to rely upon his calling, not as a fisherman, but as a fisher of men. Of course, here, for the sake of linking us back to this poem, a poet myself, I'm playing with the word in Stallings's penultimate line, "calling."

Again, look at the diction in the sestet whose words have to do with sound: "sing," "songbird," "sings," "song," "song," "rings," "utterance," "harkenings," "calling," "hear," "voice." The sonic quality of the poem hardly could be emphasized more. The poem ends with the "shape of things," sure, but this shape is arrived at through sound, not image. Surely, this is true of the way, at times in our lives when we can't see for the darkness around us, we can attempt to understand our predicament through listening. We must learn to see differently, via sound, or a different kind of sight. We might call that "faith." It has a shape and a way of knowing more certain than we might, at first, imagine.

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One last note on the title: the word "affinity" is a word used to express a relation by marriage, as opposed to the word "consanguinity" (literally, "with blood"), which would signify that "sanguine" relationship. Stallings doesn't pretend to want to be related to the bat by blood. She is neither into the old Romantic songs of birds nor the more recent romantic vampire craze and certainly doesn't want to be bitten; rather, she desires to sing and be sung to, hearing some divine echo. She is brought into the family of these strange, winged creatures through a marriage, a pronouncement of words.