

Writing Water: The Curious Behaviour of W

Sumana Roy

TODAY IT IS WATER'S TURN. HOW ARE WE TO WRITE WATER—AND NOT NECESSARILY about it—in our poems? I often find myself turning helplessly to onomatopoeia to rescue us. I begin with the sounds in Bangla, the language I was born in. 'Jal', which is the word for water, has a rhyming onomatopoeic phrase to describe its shining and reflective character: 'chhal chhal'. There are others which carry the sense of how the water is falling, its sound, volume and intensity: 'toop toop' for waterdrops slow and reluctant to fall; 'jhiri jhiri', for a drizzle; 'jhor jhor', for a slightly unexpected voluminous fall of water. There's also 'tapur tupur' for the gentle sound of raindrops, on tin roofs in particular, I think. Speaking to my colleague, the translator Arunava Sinha, about the impossibility of translating onomatopoeic sounds into English, we discussed how 'tapur tupur', the gentle sound of Bengali raindrops, was usually translated into 'pitter patter' in English. Though the consonants remain the same in both the languages—p, t, and r sounds—the gentle 'u' of the Bangla 'tapur tupur' is flattened to the English 'pitter patter'. Something goes wrong—the rains in Bengal are different from that in England.

The students in my Creative Writing class come from many languages: Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, Bangla, Maithili, Haryanvi, Odia, among others. They write in English; for this course, they are writing poems. How do we write water?

I begin with the letter from which the word begins its life: W. Double U, often pronounced as 'dablu' in India, an affectionate mispronunciation. Why does it look like this? Is there a reason it resembles an 'M' that has fallen and landed on its head? Why does the word 'Me' begin with 'M' and 'World' with 'W'? What does this optical inversion of 'M' to 'W' do to the words that they give birth to? In Bangla, the word for water and ship, 'jal' and 'jahaj', begin with the same letter: the sound 'ja'. 'Jahaj', I could not help noticing one day in class, was a palindrome—it read the same from left to right and right to left, like the water to the left and right of the ship did perhaps. Similarly, the words for boat and river, 'nouka' and 'nadi', begin with the same letter: the sound 'na'.

Bringing this intuition and conditioning to water, I begin to think of a word which could help my students to imagine a history where water and its forms might have given birth to the letter 'W', to its shape. I have chosen three poems to read in class today: Robert Lowell's 'Water', H.D.'s 'Oread', and Miyazawa Kenji's 'Flood'. I cannot really say whether it is the presence of the Japanese poet in our reading list that makes me rush towards Hokusai, to his wave. 'W' for 'water', for 'wave'—upper case or lower, 'W' remains 'w', like water, without upper or lower case.

I'm teaching this class on Zoom. If I hadn't, I'd have shown them, as I often do, my notes—drawings and doodles—on a printout of H.D.'s 'Oread'. The 'w' words are marked, and, turning the orientation of the page, I see that in my notes from teaching this poem I have noticed the teeth-like waves of the poem.

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

It is height that H.D. wants us to see and then feel. Not height alone, but the sharpness of height, its repetitiveness, one after the other—that explains 'pointed pines' and the repetition of 'pines' in the line right after, picked up and emphasised in the last word of the poem: 'fir'. The waves are as tall as coniferous trees, my students and I agree, or that's what she wants us to feel. The nouns help the eye, and, turning the page from 'portrait' to 'landscape' mode, I share visuals of my old notes with them on Zoom—the lines resemble tall pines in a forest, but also, because we've been pushed to make the comparison, waves in a sea. But it is the verbs that get us wet: 'whirl' 'whirl', twice, for such is the intensity of whirling, the repetition almost an echo of the 'pines' on the right-hand side of the line (the left and right sides of the lines are showing parallel behaviour); 'splash', 'hurl', 'cover', a little water in the first verb, a little more in the second, and the submerging in

the last one, replicating the wave's behaviour as it pulls us in and rides over our bodies.

We pause—the word 'water' hasn't been used at all. And yet, we are wet, drenched. How did that happen? Like it is possible to love, without using the word 'love' at all, I say, thinking of my parents, who've never said they loved me, but have been there always, like saliva inside my mouth, keeping me alive. I say this and stop at 'saliva', a water-word. Suddenly I find a paper cutting inside my copy of Mandelstam, lying beside me on the sofa, from where I am teaching. It's a cutout of the six-line H.D. poem, now living a second life as a bookmark. I must have cut it out once, though I cannot exactly remember when. I pull it out of Mandelstam's grip and show it to the class on Zoom—the pines and fir of the waves. One large wave.



There's Hokusai, and I cannot resist the urge to invoke him. Perhaps the most recognisable element from a Japanese painting, I share it with my students, and give them a thumbnail history of both Hokusai and this 'Wave', created a little less than two centuries ago. It feels strange to talk about water in this manner, of it turned into something fixed, even as we know that it can't be—where are the statues of water, for instance?—and yet, both the painting, and some of the poems we plan to read in class give us water where the risk of its fluidity might be taken away. I read it aloud again, this one-sentence poem:

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

I request my students to say 'whirl'. We say 'whirl'. I mispronounce, as I am often wont to (I say 'wander' for 'wonder' even though I try hard not to): I end up saying 'whorl'. In both, their 'whirl' and my 'whorl', the tongue behaves in almost a similar manner—it twists itself up as if it were water. The tongue—and I imagine the water—is in a state of unease, an unnatural position, so that saying it twice, as caused by the repetition of 'whirl', makes both the tongue, its end stuck up against the roof of the mouth, and the water want to return from this position to one more natural to it. And hence 'splash'—both the tongue and water behave in a similar manner. They have similar origins and anatomical genealogies—the word 'splash' reminds us of that.

I say 'tongue' and pause. The tongue laps up water; 'lap' is also a unit of distance in water, in the swimming pool, for instance. Look at the word in the Lowell poem, I say.

Water

It was a Maine lobster town—
each morning boatloads of hands
pushed off for granite
quarries on the islands,

and left dozens of bleak
white frame houses stuck
like oyster shells
on a hill of rock,

and below us, the sea lapped
the raw little match-stick
mazes of a weir,
where the fish for bait were trapped.

Remember? We sat on a slab of rock.
From this distance in time
it seems the color
of iris, rotting and turning purpler,

but it was only
the usual gray rock
turning the usual green
when drenched by the sea.

The sea drenched the rock
 at our feet all day,
 and kept tearing away
 flake after flake.

One night you dreamed
 you were a mermaid clinging to a wharf-pile,
 and trying to pull
 off the barnacles with your hands.

We wished our two souls
 might return like gulls
 to the rock. In the end,
 the water was too cold for us.

'The sea lapped / the raw little match-stick / mazes of a weir ...' I rush, almost like water, to point out my favourite lines in the poem to them, but I must return, again like a wave that returns to the sea, to the beginning, from where it starts.

The poem is called 'Water', I say. But the word does not arrive at all, not until the last line of the poem. It's almost as if the beginning and the end, the title and the last line, are in water, but what of its middle? And why 'water'? To begin with, Lowell seems to be saying, just give them the residents of water, like if you were trying to write about a house, you might want to introduce your reader to its occupants, and then work backward, almost like a mathematical equation, to how they add up to become the house. And so—the 'lobster town' of the first line followed by the 'boatlands of hands', a beautiful synecdoche. It's a technique Lowell uses in stanza after stanza, certainly till the third: lobster and granite in the first; oyster shells and hills of rock in the second; fish and the matchstick in the third. He makes our eyes move constantly, therefore, between the land and the sea—between the residents of the sea, the lobster, oyster and fish, and the structures on land, the granite, the hill, and the weir. What does this achieve? Without our realising it, Lowell is making our eyes replicate the movement of water, from land to sea and land and sea, the endless serve-and-volley. Apart from the eyes, these words also service another sense: smell. We enter the poem smelling the town with its lobster and oyster and fish. To return to our question, then: how does one write water? By heightening the senses, in this case two—sight and smell. But there's more that awaits, and more that is happening.

The next stanzas sit on a 'rock'—unmoving, they sit like a rock in them as they do on land. Apart from the second-last stanza, the word occurs in every subsequent

stanza. Taking on its metaphorical life as solidity or an unchanging foundation in relationships, the 'rock' stands in the poem, in stanza after stanza, even as what the eyes see changes and the water moves to and fro. Without using the word—the noun 'water'—Lowell gives us the persistence of its action, letting it spill from the last line of a stanza to the first line of the next: 'when drenched by the sea' to 'The sea drenched the rock'. My eyes register the clock on the computer, to check the time left for the class to end. Though there's not enough time, I cannot resist pointing this out to my students—what the difference between the passive and active voice in the two lines does in writing water. The employment of the two voices, and the opposing directions of syntax, amplify the coming and going of water through language. Lowell is almost insistent that we experience this through language, through the peculiarities of syntax and its effect on our experience. We experience its continuity, its endless coming-and-going, through other phrases too. One of these is 'flake by flake'—a perfect summation of water's weathering project.

(I've forgotten to tell my students something I'd been meaning to, and so I sprint back to point this out to them—how Lowell's refusal to use 'water' until the very end of the poem makes him use conflicts that heighten the sense of the elemental—the 'sea' and the 'rock', two monosyllables in a fight that will outlast everything, perhaps even the poem. That economy of sound is necessary, because against it is the play of the relationship, given to us in a monosyllable as well: 'us', used for the first time in the third stanza.)

Lowell soon returns us to the metonymy of the residents-for-the-habitat that he had established in the first few stanzas. The reason for doing so is quite obvious—to see a 'mermaid', even if only in a dream, is to see water, just as to see the 'gulls' (with its quasi-rhyme with 'souls') is to see the sea. In both cases the reader must imagine the sea—in one we are submerged, as the mermaid is; in the other, we leave the sea, as the gulls do.

But that is not how we eventually experience water—we experience it by not experiencing it. 'In the end, the water was too cold for us'. This last line, after the imagined underwater life of the mermaid and the aerial life of the gulls (and perhaps the 'souls' as well!) returns us to the earth, the 'right place for love', as Lowell's contemporary knew. Is the water being 'too cold for us' only a statement about the weather? We know it isn't. To write water, Lowell teaches us, is to use its temperature, its different states, and to know when *not* to water as it were.

I know that the time for the class is running out. I'd have liked to read Elizabeth Bishop's 'At the Fishhouses' with them, and I extract a promise from my students that they will read the poem on their own, that they will pause to experience these lines in particular:

If you should dip your hand in,
 your wrist would ache immediately,
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.

You could say, like Lowell, that ‘the water was too cold for us’, or you could, like Bishop, make the cold run up the reader’s wrist and make the bones ache and go numb. Or, you could write about water as if it was fire, its opposite.

Only a few more minutes remain, and I begin reading Miyazawa Kenji’s poem ‘Flood’ (from Hiroaki Sato’s translation and selection of Kenji) with them.

Under the malicious glints of the clouds
 the Kitakami, grown twice in width, perhaps ten times in volume,
 bears yellow waves.
 All the iron barges are being tugged to the army camp.
 A motorboat sputters.
 The water flowing back from downstream
 has already turned into marshes
 the paddies on the dried riverbed,
 hidden the bean fields,
 and devastated half the mulberries.
 Gleaming like a snail’s trail
 it has made an island of the grass patch under the pines
 and of the Chinese cabbage fields.
 When and how they got there I don’t know
 but on the warm frightening beach
 several dark figures stand, afloat.
 One holds a fishnet.
 I recognize Hosuke in leggings.
 Has the water already
 robbed us of our autumn food?
 I climb the roof to look.
 I hauled the manure bundles to a high place.
 As for the plows and baskets
 I went in the water a few minutes ago, up to my waist,
 and managed to retrieve them.

Like Lowell’s, the title of Kenji’s poem is a simple noun: ‘flood’. The ‘fl’ sound prepares us intuitively—‘flood’, ‘flow’, ‘flux’, and so on. But no one can really be prepared for a flood, certainly not a farmer in Japan. Kenji is a farmer in early 20th

century Japan, and this is a farmer's poem, of a farmer's anxiety about flood. We see a river unable to cope with its excess water—there are many enemies, the clouds are 'malicious'. The poor motorboat 'sputters'. That verb—we feel the unpredictable spray of water on our bodies—is followed by a procession of verbs that build the poem, that make us experience the 'swell' of water: 'flowing', 'turned', 'hidden', 'devastated'. Then the words come out of the 'darkness'—the groping of the eyes for anything that it can see, anything that will bring knowledge: the 'fishnet', the 'leggings', first the eye moving southwards, where the water is, and then going up urgently, 'climbing' the roof, the bundles in 'a high place'. What does this do? Unlike the east-west movement of the water and the eye in Lowell's poem, the sea to land and land to sea, in this poem, water moves northwards—and hence the movement of the eye, registering 'leggings' and then the 'roof', the 'high place'. Water is climbing, and so must the eye, so must the body. And language, and the mouth as we read the poem in its English translation: 'leg' causes our lower jaw to drop, 'high' and 'climb' for it to rise. That is also how water is written, then.

The poem abandons us as the speaker abandons the poem. The speaker goes into the water, 'up to my waist', even as we know that the water is climbing. It is almost as if the poem ends abruptly, like flood ends living abruptly. We don't know what happens after this—whether the water climbs higher, whether the farmer survives. Their words no longer come to us.

The class, too, must end—we've run out of time. Before they click on 'Leave meeting' on their Zoom windows, I tell my students to draw the man inside their head, 'up to my waist' in water. I do it myself. I drag the pencil from the feet up to the waist. I cannot help noticing—imagining—that the legs joined at the groin resembles

'W'

SUMANA ROY Sumana Roy is the author of *How I Became a Tree*, a work of nonfiction, *Missing: A Novel*, *Out of Syllabus: Poems*, and *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories. She is Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University.