

The Best American Poetry You'll Never Read

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3/18/13

revision: 5/2/15

“the poets who do not write. . . . they make poetry out of handfuls of air”

(John Lee Clark)

A few months ago, my friend Kenny Lerner sent me a link to a new poem on YouTube, called “Made in the USA,” by himself and collaborator Peter Cook. Together, as *Flying Words Project*, they perform often, all over the world. They live in different cities, so their habit is to create new poems in hotel rooms while on the road. “Made in the USA” is a poem about epidemics, sneezing, DNA, social ills, the great connectivity of the universe, and lots of other things. Full of inventive imagery, each line propulsively spawns the next. Typical of Flying Words Project poems, it starts personal, gets political, and ends up back where it started.

One particularly effective and unusual moment in the poem depicts a ray of sunlight piercing a bead of sweat. If it were a conventional poem, I could quote that part here, and you could decide for yourself if it was “effective and unusual.” I can’t do that. Lerner and Cook work in American Sign Language (ASL). The image I refer to involves Cook using the same *handshape* simultaneously in both hands — in this case the bent index finger — to represent a ray of sunlight piercing a dripping bead of sweat. Both hands use the same motion, perpendicular to each other. Two ideas, one piercing the other. One image.

I considered how I might translate this into English. The beauty of Cook’s phrase — image — is its homonymic economy, a *handshape rhyme*. He sets it up well before it occurs. This is not something that would likely occur in everyday sign, but it’s grammatically natural. One might translate it simply as “sunlight pierces a falling bead,” or more ornately as “sweat and sun in tired reunion.” I’m pretty sure these aren’t very good — I’m a composer, not a poet — and I bet someone with more experience in poetic

translation could do better. I don't know how to translate this poem's poetry, but I can try to explain why it *is* poetry.

Cook and Lerner are major poets, two of a number of active contemporary American poets whose work is created and performed in American Sign Language. Some of the best known other poets are Patrick Graybill, Shira Grabelsky, Monique Holt, Debbie Rennie, Rosa Lee Gallimore, Ayisha Knight-Shaw, Nathie Marbury, Ella Mae Lentz, and the late Dorothy Miles, Gil Eastman, and Clayton Valli. All are Deaf, first-language signers, and their work is essential to the Deaf community and culture. But it is unlikely that you've ever heard of any of them.

My interest in ASL, and its poetry, is a little unusual. As a composer, I'm interested in how we "understand" music, which is not a language. It's sound, with its own rules, history, styles, and expectations. Music has no intrinsic, practical meaning—you can't sit down at the piano and play "My aunt bought an ugly new green hat with a bird on top." ASL itself is oddly similar to contemporary music in that its "language" is not widely understood. ASL can be as beautiful to watch as music is to hear, but the former is a natural language, replete with meaning. Music is sound without meaning, ASL is meaning without sound.

ASL has a relatively small number of speakers—depending on how one counts, somewhere between 1–3 million. The audience for ASL poetry is even smaller. Poetry challenges our understanding of language, and is not intended as practical communication. Just as most Deaf people have far more pressing concerns than the poetry of Clayton Valli, Patrick Graybill, Shira Grabelsky and Rosa Lee Gallimore, most English speaking Americans don't pay all that much attention to John Ashbery, Louise Glück, or Elizabeth Bishop. Since ASL poetry has generally not been translated effectively into English, its audience is limited to a small subset of the Deaf community—a small minority within a small minority. But the art form has, by now, a long tradition, and a sizeable enough corpus to merit our serious engagement with it. It's not English language poetry, but it is American poetry, and part of our culture.

What follows is an introduction to ASL poetry by a musician, intended for hearing, non-ASL speakers. I'll discuss a few classic poems in order to make them more available to non-Deaf English speakers. I'll explain some of the most common techniques, and try to show how the poems emanate from ASL. Understanding how poetry functions in a signed language may change the ways we think about poetry in any language.

From hand to page

Poetry in ASL is an evolving art form, and its practitioners vary in their relationships to the *dominant* or *contact* language — English. Dorothy Miles, one of the earliest video-recorded modern ASL poets, wrote (and published) her poetry both in English and ASL. Other ASL poets, like Cook and Rosa Lee Gallimore, use English creatively in tandem with ASL. In Flying Words Project, Kenny Lerner provides spoken *glosses*, or what he dryly calls “captions” to the signing, and often joins in the physical performance. Because of the use of English, their work is accessible to both the hearing and Deaf communities. Lerner's glosses are not translation, there are beautiful and important differences in content between the English and the ASL. The younger Gallimore often explores the idea of translation explicitly, weaving slang and different sign dialects (Signed English, for example, which is not ASL) into the fabric of her work.

What might be called “classic” ASL poetry — including that of Valli, Eastman, Lentz, Rennie and Graybill — is completely and originally in sign. The majority of this work is widely available on video and the Internet, but for the most part it has not been rendered into English. John Lee Clark, in his essential anthology *Deaf American Poetry* suggests that, perhaps partially because of “a mistrust of the English language that many Deaf people share... Like many of his contemporaries who pioneered the art form, Valli thought for many years that his work could not be translated into English.”

ASL poetry is often *interpreted* in performance, sometimes as part of the work itself, more often for pedagogical purposes in teaching the language to non-signers. In the early poetry performance groups in Rochester, NY, in the 1980s (which included both Deaf

and non-Deaf people like Peter Cook, Kenny Lerner, Debbie Rennie, Jim Cohn, and Wendy Low), the interpreters were artistically equal members of the ensemble. However, there are still relatively few standard poetic translations of ASL poems, nor has there been much discussion of how this might be achieved. Clark further notes, “Another factor is the relative lack of literary interaction between ASL poets and fluent signers who have an intimate knowledge of poetry in both languages.”

Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of standard English material translated (on video) into ASL. Patrick Graybill has been a pioneer of this enterprise on behalf of the Deaf community. His ASL versions of standard American texts (like the “Pledge of Allegiance,” “The Lord’s Prayer,” political texts, and so on) are eloquent and extraordinarily literate. They are also “very ASL,” which is to say rich in ASL grammar and creative in its linguistic principles. These ASL texts are as important for teaching ASL to young Deaf children as for their content. A less pedagogical but equally important contemporary example of English-ASL translation is Monique Holt’s project to translate the complete Shakespeare sonnets. For an example of this remarkable enterprise, see her videoed performance of the 30th sonnet, at Dartmouth’s Hood Museum of Art. But these are just a few examples, and even though there is a tremendous amount of interpreting going on, there are relatively few “texts” in ASL. Since the (small) Deaf community needs English material more than the (large) hearing community needs ASL, there is an unequal flow of translation between the two languages.

Rennie: “The Swan”

Poems in sign can do things that spoken/written language poems can’t. A clear example, and one that you don’t need to know any ASL to appreciate, is Debbie Rennie’s “The Swan,” a short naturalistic poem from the early 1980s. It begins with the image of a tree and its reflection in water, both waving but in different rhythms. The poet observes both. Rennie has two hands, a body and a face to work with —she can present multiple images and perspectives simultaneously. Unlike written poetry, sign poetry can pack a lot of meaning into a single moment. The more it does so, in fact, the less sign resembles written languages.

Rennie's poetry is often imagistic in the literal sense —*iconic*, representative images. Signs are not words, just as languages are not their vocabularies. Sign languages are generally more economical than spoken languages. That is, they have smaller “dictionaries,” with fewer discrete, one-to-one (indexical) linguistic elements (“words”). Signs get a lot of cognitive mileage out of the combination of hand and body movement, inflection, facial indicators, context, perspectival shifts and spatialization. A simple sign like “to need” (a bent, or “x” index finger) can be inflected by movement, facial indicators, and context to mean anything from “I could use a...” to “ABSOLUTELY MUST” (not to mention as “a bead of sweat” and a “ray of light”).

“The Swan” only uses about four actual *signs* (such as “tree” and “bird”). It is mostly made up of subtle mimetic and perspectival shifts, both of which are fundamental to sign grammar. Sometimes Rennie *is* the swan, sometimes she's *looking at it*, sometimes a little of both. Her perspectives morph smoothly and continuously — at one point the water ascends, becoming the swan's wings — in accordance with ASL linguistic principles. Any signer would understand what she does, and be moved by the playfulness of how she does it. “The Swan” is minimal and beautiful, haiku-like in its constraints. Like any good poetry, it is disciplined and economic in its exploration of linguistic possibilities.

But “The Swan” is difficult to translate onto the printed page so as to preserve Rennie's performance, her “reading.” It is said that poetry is that which cannot be translated, like a joke or a pun. The accomplished translator Gregory Rabassa says that: “The fact that there's no such thing as a perfect translation is part of the definition of translation.” Translators of written poetry find ways to deal with this, often not so much translating as writing a new, parallel poem. Reading Rimbaud in English is not ideal, but maybe it's better than not reading Rimbaud at all.

The translation scholar Willis Barnstone says that “Moving between tongues, translation acquires difference. Because the words and grammar of each language differ from every

other language, the transference of a poem from one language to another involves differing sounds and prosody.” But translating from tongue to *hand*, from sound to *gesture*, is a lot harder.

Written languages share some basic principles —spelling, nouns, adjectives, verbs, and some paradigmatic sentence order. The latter for example, varies widely — a fundamental distinction can be made between linguistic structures that are *subject first* (“You must use the force, Luke.”) and those that are *object first* (“The force you must use, Luke”). In translating from one language to another, one has to adjust for that.

ASL, and sign languages in general, are tail first (sometimes referred to as *object/subject/verb* or *topic/comment*). In and of itself, this makes ASL no harder to translate to English than Japanese, or even Yiddish. But what might be called *modal* differences present a more interesting challenge. Sign languages are composed of gestures in space, often several at once, not unitary, sequential sounds in time. Mimesis, movement, and perspective can all combine simultaneously to create a single complex meaning. Students of writing are admonished to “show it, don’t say it.” Similarly, sign language interpreting students are taught to “show it, don’t say it,” a directive essential to both conversational and poetic signing. Modal differences engender different kinds of translation losses. “As I move away, the fat, old, smelly, far-off cat climbs a tree blowing in the wind” could, in the hands of someone like Patrick Graybill, be a single, eloquent ASL gesture.

Yet English is commonly *interpreted* into sign, for every conceivable purpose. Interpretation is used for everything from doctor’s appointments and classrooms, to theater performances, lectures, book clubs, and social events. It may be fair to say though, that interpreters are probably more important for the non-Deaf community — who are, in general, terrible at communicating with Deaf people — as they are for the Deaf community, who are experts at communicating with a world that doesn’t understand their culture very well, their language at all.

Ironically, the *performative* interpretation of songs at concerts is often the way that the hearing world encounters ASL (not to mention Mayor Bloomberg's interpreter). One way that ASL interpreting students are taught to evaluate their work is by whether or not the *transaction* (meaning the exchange of meaningful communication) is *successful*. It is relatively clear whether or not a patient and doctor, or a student and teacher understand each other. Poetry has no similar metric for success; it pushes a language to, and past its limits. It's not necessarily interpretable, because like even the simplest joke — "Take my wife, please" — poetry uses language against itself.

There's no written language where one can actually, physically, become a swan, and, as in the end of Rennie's poem, settle into the water with a slight jiggle. But with its concentrated reliance on imagery and avoidance of "words," perhaps "The Swan" doesn't need translation. Signers and non-signers understand it in fundamentally different ways, but it is comprehensible to both. Perhaps a hearing person, after learning a little bit about how the poem works, would be able to appreciate it in a new way, a Deaf way.

Rennie, along with Cook and Lerner, was part of a generation of ASL poets who emerged in the Rochester, NY, Deaf poetry movement in the early 1980s. All were associated with the National Technological Institute for the Deaf (NTID), which is part of the Rochester Institute of Technology. NTID is one of two universities or colleges in the U.S (and maybe the world) where sign is the primary language. Rennie, Cook, Lerner, and others were taught or influenced by the previous generation of Deaf poets and performers who taught at NTID, including Patrick Graybill (who works in ASL) and Robert Panera (who writes in English). *In the Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*, a documentary by Miriam Lerner (an accomplished interpreter and scholar who works at NTID, and Kenny's wife), is a unique and detailed history of this movement. It contains extraordinary early footage, not only of the early work of Rennie, Cook, Lerner and others, but of historical events like the legendary meeting between Allen Ginsberg and Patrick Graybill. As far as I know, this film also contains the only available record of Eric Malzkuhn performing his famous and influential version of "Jabberwocky." Kenny Lerner (hearing, bi-lingual),

like Graybill and the poet and scholar Karen Christie (who is Deaf, but bilingual and writes her poetry in English) still teach at NTID. They all teach in ASL.

These younger poets, by and large, started from scratch. A central figure in the Rochester Deaf poetry movement was the hearing, English language poet Jim Cohn, founder of the Bird's Brain Society in 1984 (a name proposed by Peter Cook, after Ginsberg's poem "Birdbrain!"). Supported in part by both Graybill and Panera, this was a "non-academic 'underground' poetry project ... to encourage hearing-impaired students ... to identify themselves and interact in ways that would raise poetic consciousness and awareness that sign language as a viable medium of art. We began with a series of sign language poetry performances by deaf poets once a month in a well frequented campus bar" (Cohn, 1986). In Cohn's essential memoir *Sign Mind*, commenting on the paucity of early-recorded examples of ASL poetry, storytelling, and wordplay — the Deaf cultural heritage — he says "until around 1984, ASL poetry had been like a teardrop in some forgotten video."

"Memories"

Patrick Graybill, still an active poet, is an elder statesmen of Deaf literature. Unlike Rennie and Cook, his poems, mostly created in the 1980s, often deal directly with the Deaf experience, emphasizing the centrality of ASL to both culture and identity. Karen Christie and Dorothy Wilkins, in their foundational essay on ASL poetry, call this "resistance" or "liberation" literature. Perhaps the greatest and most clearly identifiable example of this is Gil Eastman's masterpiece, "Epic," an astonishing 20-minute poem which tells the story of the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet, a central event in Deaf history.

The pioneering Deaf Culture scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in *Inside Deaf Culture* describe the "anxiety of culture" that exists in the work of Deaf artists, pointing out that later generations, like Cook and Lerner, felt that they could be "free of meaning" and deal with levels of higher abstraction and universality. This might be called, after Christie and Wilkins, "post-resistance" ASL poetry. The Deaf English language poet

Raymond Luczak even goes so far as to say: “My answer to the question of deaf art is this: Don’t even answer it. Don’t even try.”

However, Graybill, Valli, Lentz and others, in most of their work, deal directly and consistently with Deaf culture, language, and oppression. Their meaning is clear, even if it is often conveyed allegorically or metaphorically. Often autobiographical, these poets, especially Graybill, describe the linguistic isolation of growing up and existing in a hearing world. Their work is the work of a community, the American Deaf community, establishing a new art form, albeit one that has deep roots in Deaf theater (for example, Graybill was an early performer in the National Theater of the Deaf). Sometimes, though, these poets’ work eschews descriptions of hardship in order to exult in what Rennie calls the “blessing” of being Deaf — they describe alternative ways of seeing and understanding. Ella Lentz’ work beautifully exemplifies this attitude, in poems like “Eye Music” and “To a Hearing Mother,” and others. H-Dirksen Bauman, whose Ph.D. thesis on ASL poetry is indispensable, points out (in a short history of modern ASL poetry in his introduction to *Signing the Body Poetic*) that the distinction between the young Rochester poets (Cook, Lerner, and Rennie) and Valli, Lentz, and Graybill is as much technical as topical: “For some critics, the work of Flying Words Project is more akin to the avant-garde literary tradition of Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Allen Ginsberg, while Valli and Lentz represent a more formalist approach akin to Robert Frost’s.”

Graybill grew up, like many Deaf people, in a linguistically repressive, even hostile, educational system. Like many Deaf people, he found a clear identity in his own language and culture. He also found artistic freedom. This narrative is central to much of Deaf poetry, visual art (like the visual art movement known as *De’Via* — “Deaf View/Image Art”), and theater (the National Theater of the Deaf’s landmark 1972 televised production called *My Third Eye* had an enormous impact on Deaf artists of all disciplines). Some of Graybill’s poems are well known in the Deaf community, like “Liberation,” a utopian and humble plea for the equality of ASL and English.

Graybill's work is characterized as well by a deliberate, explicit attention to poetic technique. This is more than poetic formalism. A teacher by spirit (and an influential one by practice), he skillfully explores and illustrates techniques in part for their pedagogical possibilities to younger artists, and for Deaf people in general. "Liberation" is a good example. Graybill confines himself to one handshape, the "B" or flat-palm, a handshape often referred to as *neutral* or *unmarked* because it is easy and natural to form. By contrast, Graybill's student Peter Cook seems to often favor *marked* handshapes, those that are more difficult to produce. A clear example is the "x" (bent index finger) handshape ("bead of sweat/ray of light") in "Made in the USA." Another Cook poem, "Need," explodes from the morphogenesis of this same handshape. In a little over two minutes, the meaning of the crooked finger moves from: the title verb to an oil derrick to oil lines to a gas pump to a man chopping down a tree (to make the paper for the memo to send a man to war) to the bullet that hits the soldier to the drippings from the soldier's coffin, and, finally, back to "need."

Regardless of handshape, both Cook and Graybill usually follow a deep-seated (though fluid) grammatical principal of sign: generally, in a moving sign of two hands, only one handshape is used. "...if both hands are moving in a sign, then the handshapes, locations and movements of the two hands must be the same...If the two hands in a sign have different handshapes, then one must be stationary." (Lane, et al)

In both "Liberation" and "Made in the USA," a single handshape is used for dual gestural pronouns with differing and changing referents: in "Made ..." the bead of sweat/ray of sunlight; in "Liberation," English/ASL. In other poems, though, such as "Reflection," Graybill intentionally violates the "same handshape" principal, exploring the idea of saying two completely different things at once, one in each hand, with different signs and/or handshapes. Bauman and others cite this as one of many cinematic influences in ASL poetry and storytelling, in which performers adapt filmic techniques. The contemporary storyteller Manny Hernandez makes virtuosic use of this in his work. Being able to say two things at once is one of many things that distinguishes ASL from written poetry.

But “Liberation” uses the “B” hand almost exclusively, the poem is based on *restricting handshapes*. This is a challenging poetic and narrative discipline, analogous, perhaps, to something like a sestina. This technique and many others have long traditions in ASL storytelling and folk poetry. Rutherford’s *A Study of Deaf American Folklore* is a good introduction to some of these forms, as is Ben Bahan’s essay in *Signing the Body Poetic*. Bahan himself is one of the great modern masters of story-telling. There are also numerous virtuosic examples of number and handshape stories recorded by Cokely and Sherk on the standard ASL instruction texts called the “green books.”

The composer Lou Harrison counseled artists to “cherish, conserve, consider and create.” Similarly minded, the early ASL poets drew deeply on traditional storytelling techniques in their work, transforming them into new poetic forms. Cook and Graybill’s use of handshape economy to structure poems is both traditional and radical, as in Graybill’s use of the same shape in two hands to mean something different. At one powerful moment in “Liberation,” Graybill “softens” the B-handshape sign for “English” into the sign for, well, “signing.”

Graybill’s set of “haikus” called “Memories,” a set of four poems about his childhood at the Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD), exemplifies both the clarity and linguistic/autobiographical foci of his work. *Residential schools* like KSD have, historically, been the spiritual heart of Deaf culture, and are often where competence and virtuosity develop. These are true haikus, but as Graybill points out, the 5|7|5 = 17 structure is measured in sign rhythm, not syllabification. Each poem ends in a different “frozen image,” expressing a different emotional conclusion for each. In the first, Graybill shows his happiness on returning to school; in the second (“ychh”), how physically ugly the school was; in the third, his horror at not being allowed to sign; and in the fourth, he caricatures a teacher’s bulldog countenance.

The third haiku is a powerful comment on the love and loss of language. It might be “glossed” (with additional commentary in brackets) as:

SPEECH CLASS AGAIN!

[distasteful, learning to speak English was usually a school priority]

I CAN SIGN ASL TO MY FRIENDS

[using the sign that means to sign fluently, naturally, turning to one side]

OR SIGN IN A SIMPLER WAY TO OTHERS

[maybe to non-native signers, using the sign that might mean “to make signs,” turning to the other side]

NOT ALLOWED! WHAT’S THIS MITTEN?

[shows hands put in mittens, tied together; hands were often restrained to keep kids from signing]

[looks up in sadness and frustration, hands bound in front]

Christie and Wilkins describe this poem in great detail, primarily from the perspective of Deaf culture. They provide a different, more detailed gloss than the one above (focusing on Graybill’s language), and offer an English translation (“What? It’s time for speech class again?!/ But look I can sign smoothly with all my classmates/What?! You are punishing me!...”). They structure the poem in three lines, like a haiku (the second comprised of the second and third of my gloss) and note Graybill’s use of directional symmetry. The poem opens and closes with the narrator, horrified at the prospect of speech class and being punished for signing, in an “upward gaze” at the “teacher” — a metaphor, perhaps, for the Deaf community, subject to the authority of the hearing world. That authority is often expressed in the form of a hostile linguistic phobia — deafness can’t be abolished, but language can.

Christie and Wilkins also discuss the irony of the mittens —both brutal and soft. Dennis Cokely has pointed out (in conversation) those mittens’ cruel efficiency. They take away the three fundamentals of signing —*location*, *handshape*, and *motion*. A fluent signer can, in fact, communicate using any *one* of these. Graybill carefully shows how all were cruelly, efficiently gagged.

Now in his 70s, Graybill has recently re-emerged as a poet, giving a brilliant recent performance at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. After a long hiatus from making poems — he told me he rarely has the opportunity anymore — he performed

some of his older work (in markedly different rhythms) and unveiled some new work with considerable alacrity.

“Dandelions”

Clayton Valli (1951–2003) is perhaps the most famous and widely imitated ASL poet. Valli taught linguistics at Gallaudet University, and was at the center of the large and active Deaf community in Washington, D.C. Peters calls him the “Deaf Robert Frost,” perhaps because of his use of naturalist metaphors to express his relationship to Deaf language and culture. Like Frost, Valli uses language simply, creatively, and evocatively, the ASL counterparts of lines like “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

“Dandelions” is one of Valli’s most well-known poems. It is frequently “re-performed”—a project by students in ASL classes. Valli’s own performance is on *Poetry in Motion*, but there are many versions of it by others available on the internet. Like a Frost poem, “Dandelions” is accessible on a number of levels, as deep as one needs it to be. I often use it pedagogically as the first introduction to ASL poetry.

What follows is not a translation, but a gloss of the poem, one I made for a Dartmouth class on ASL poetry. I’ve marked a few timings, so that non-ASL speakers can watch and follow along. “Dandelions” has, in fact, been translated a number of times (more on this below).

Dandelions

YELLOWFLOWER
MANY IN THE GRASS
WAVING IN THE WIND
MAN COMES, LOOKS, ANGRY, SEES
YELLS: “D-A-N-D-E-L-I-O-N-S” (:13 SEC)
PULLS THEM OUT
MOWS
ALL GREEN
RAIN FALLS, SUN SHINES
GROUND IS WARMED/LIFE BEGINS
SOMETHING STARTS TO APPEAR

LOOKS AROUND
BLOOMS
YELLOW FLOWER (:33)
BEES COMES, POLLINATE
FLOWERS WAVING IN THE WIND
EVERY NIGHT CLOSE UP, OPEN UP AGAIN THE NEXT MORNING
FINALLY THEY BECOME A WHITE PUFFBALL, OPEN UP
WAVING IN THE WIND (MORE THAN DANDELIONS)
MAN COMES, YELLS “T-H-E-R-E”
PULLS ONE OUT
SPREADS

The poem is an explicit and obvious metaphor for the relationship of Deaf culture and ASL to the hearing world. At least I’d always thought it was obvious. When I showed it on the first day of class at Dartmouth (to a group of hearing students with no ASL proficiency), most of the students didn’t catch the Deaf metaphor. They got that it *was* a metaphor but thought it has a larger meaning, perhaps for all ideas that were repressed in such a way that the seeds of their liberation were spread. One student thought it was about “man’s attempted subjugation of the natural world.” I explained that Valli’s poems usually refer to Deaf culture, but the more I thought about it, the more I appreciated their insight. Valli’s art, like other great protest poets and singers (like say, Victor Jara or Bob Dylan) combines beauty and specificity to express universality. By artistically and eloquently arguing for Deaf culture, Valli’s work becomes about a lot more than that.

Glosses have the emotional bandwidth of a telegram. Intentionally crude, they provide a way to represent ASL without even the appearance of translation. But what they can’t convey are what makes the poem a poem. Valli changes perspectives with extraordinary fluidity — he “becomes” the dandelion, the bees, even the puffballs (swaying in the wind). He makes a deliberate use of *spatial symmetry* and *physical rhythm* to delineate sections, the formal design of the poem. *Facial indicators* are used to provide subtle counterpoint to the more explicit semantic contents of his hands. Valli creates new “signs,” smoothly transferring energy in the movement of one handshape into another (two examples: the very first sign, where “yellow” morphs smoothly into “flower,” forming a new contractive sign; and the way that the flowers open/close each day/night). These latter are forms of what Lane et. al. refer to as *blending* signs.

Something that is more difficult to explain is Valli's sophisticated experimentation with what are called, in ASL, *classifiers*. He often invents new classifiers in his poems, and, as in Rennie's mimesis, he both obeys and expands linguistic rules. Classifiers are something like descriptive, moveable, general pronouns. They occur in limited form in some spoken languages, but are important, diverse, and common in ASL. There are many classifiers, referring to different *meanings* (person, vehicle, animal ...), *shapes* (box, slab, tube, spherical, circular, linear, ...), and *size*. They are malleable: one can represent, describe and move around an old, fat person walking up a hill with one finger. Classifiers are deeply embedded in the cognition of first-language signers, less so in those who learn signing later on. They are fascinating, powerful, and to someone who has to learn them, a bit mysterious.

As in Rennie's poem, Valli's whole body is involved, invoking the wind, the swaying of the puffballs and dandelions, and the shifts of perspective from "the man" to, presumably, the young boy to whom he speaks. Like "The Swan," "Dandelions" contains few indexical sign, those that directly correspond to "words." Valli doesn't need these kinds of one-to-one signs very often, nor do most other ASL poets. Arguably, conversational sign doesn't need them very much either. The fewer of these kinds of signs that occur the more a sign language is distinguished from a spoken one — the difference, say, between Signed English (manually representing English grammar and words) and ASL.

"Dandelions" consists mostly of moving classifiers, often invented or transformed to suit the poem. As Lane, et al point out, "Because speakers know the grammatical rules of their language, those rules can be violated to artistic effect." Invented classifiers, like Cook's "ray/bead," distinguish poetic from everyday signing, in the same way that Gertrude Stein's prose is not "everyday" English.

Valli's classifiers — fist, open hand, extended finger — are examples of his preference for smooth, unmarked handshapes, imbuing his poems with a gentle demeanor that, were it written or spoken, might be called *sonorous* or mellifluous. Lane et al point out that, among other things "the form of ASL poetry is dictated by the assonance and dissonance

of handshapes.” If this is true, then formally, Valli’s work (assonance) stands in stark relationship to Cook’s (dissonance). Valli’s use of handshapes is disciplined, a manual economy that shifts the focus to other things: movement, use of space, facial expressions, timing, and gestural virtuosity. It’s like speaking mostly in pronouns, using pitch, loudness, and facial expression to convey meaning. Valli’s poem shows how a fluent signer *could* communicate effectively with mittens on, as long as he or she can move freely.

Another technique in this poem is fascinating. Valli uses *fingerspelling* to acknowledge the precariousness of ASL’s strange bilinguality (what Rutherford calls *diglossic bilingualism*). ASL is typical of sign languages in its frequent borrowing from spoken language, and the most obvious example is fingerspelling, usually used for proper names, technical, scientific and unfamiliar terms, and other words that, because of the small size of the community or the context of the conversation, may not have or need their own signs. Extremely common fingerspellings often become signs of their own, in a kind of shorthand, if a subgroup of signers ends up using them frequently (this can happen quite locally, and temporarily). Some common fingerspellings become what are called *lexicalized fingerspellings*. They used to be called *loan signs* but that term is now reserved for borrowings from other sign languages, such as country names. Lexicalized signs are generally denoted in upper-case, preceded by hash-marks, and some of the most common examples are #BACK, #JOB, #CAR, #APT (“apartment”) These spellings acquire special hand movements, elisions, and locational conjugations, and become highly expressive and robust signs of their own. #BACK, for instance, can be moved around, and with two hands, to mean back to any particular place, or even “back together” (as in “they broke up, but now they’re back together”). The fluidity and integration of this kind of borrowing adds greatly to ASL’s richness and suppleness.

Fingerspelling has historically played an important role in traditional ASL storytelling and folk poetry, as in “handshape” and “number” stories — signed *abcedarians* which are often performed at high levels of virtuosity. Some handshape stories, called *ABC stories*, use a different, alphabetically ordered handshape for each line. Some number

stories “count” up to 100 and then back down again, each number handshape used in sequence (the video examples for the “green books” contains some dazzling examples). Peters discusses Rennie’s famous modern example of this technique: “Veal Boycott,” in which the word “C-A-L-F” is spelled several time, each letter showing some aspect of the making of veal. “Veal Boycott” is an example of what Rutherford calls *iconic representation* in fingerspelling — the letter shapes and movements have mimetic and semantic meanings of their own. Another of Valli’s poems, “Something Not Right” spells out the phrase “DEAF EDUCATION FAILS” in a kind of acrostic palimpsest of *initialized* signs (those in which the handshape refers to an English word), Some of these signs are awkward and non-idiomatic, ironically referring, perhaps, to English’s clumsy influence on ASL, and the use of handshape stories themselves in education.

Valli’s use of fingerspelling in “Dandelions” is not arbitrary. For Deaf people it is an unambiguous cultural reference. He spells two words: “D-A-N-D-E-L-I-O-N-S” and “T-H-E-R-E.” The first word is shouted by a man immediately after Valli invents the beautiful new *compound* sign YELLOWFLOWER— two languages, the same thing. The act of spelling clearly signifies that the “man” is “The Man” — hearing, in charge, and derisive of ASL and Deaf culture. The second spelling — “T-H-E-R-E” — is even more connotative. There is no reason to spell that word — in ASL you just point. But that’s Valli’s point: spelling the word is awkward, stilted, and in this context, authoritarian.

Valli also mouths each word, in what could be a reference to *contact signing*, how Deaf signers communicate with hearing people who aren’t native, or fluent in ASL. This involves slower signing, changing word order to be more like English, and often mouthing words. Oddly, this is another example of ASL’s ability to do “two things at once,” like the way that Graybill sets different handshapes and meanings for each hand, which is something unique to signing. “When a signer produces an ASL sign and simultaneously speaks, whispers or mouths its English referent, he is doing something that no user of a spoken language can do” (Lane, et al).

When hearing people learn sign, the first thing they learn (and unfortunately, often the last) is fingerspelling. Valli's "man" is how many Deaf children view their teachers and parents who do not learn sign. The man evokes a smothering American English language culture. In Valli's poem, fingerspelling is synecdoche for an oppressive, non-Deaf world.

Valli is a brilliant, inventive, and spellbinding signer. Of the three poems under discussion in this essay, this is the one in which explanation perhaps accomplishes the least, viewing the most. The level and beauty of Valli's signplay is also what sets this poem apart as such a powerful pedagogical tool—like learning English by reading Elizabeth Bishop.

As I said, several English translations of Valli's poetry exist, including a fine one by Raymond Luczak, included in Clark's *Deaf American Poetry* (also see Christie and Wilkins for an English translation of a different Valli poem, "Hands"). A few years ago, as an experiment, I gave a video and gloss of the poem to a friend who is an accomplished poet, teacher and scholar. My friend is hearing, and doesn't know ASL. I explained the poem to him, and pointed out things I considered interesting (similar to what I've written above). I asked him to try and translate the poem into English poetry. He made five translations, using slightly different styles (for example, one was a prose poem).

Yellow Flower

The wind rolls yellow flowers in the grass.
When a man sees them he grows angry,
Screams "Dandelions!"
He yanks them, mows,
Leaves the lawn perfectly green.

Watered by rain, warmed by the sun,
Roots stir beneath the soil.
Shoots poke through, yellow flowers bloom.
In the breeze bees dance among the waving plants.
Every night the flowers fold, at dawn open.
The yellow flowers become white puffs
Swaying in the wind
Until the man returns, "They're back!"

He uproots a dandelion
And the seeds scatter.

This isn't bad —the transformation of the second spelled English word is nice, and by using simple, unadorned English, it retains something of Valli's rhythm, representing the mood of Valli's gestural elegance. It also captures the sectionality of the poem. But if the measure of success of a poetic translation is the power, the artistry of a poem, this ultimately fails (no fault of my friend, who was a cheerful guinea pig in this experiment). Valli's poem is written in the air, not on the page.

Next?

ASL poetry presents difficult, maybe insurmountable problems for a translator. It is possible that conventional assumptions about poetic translation don't suffice. How then, to bridge the gap between this isolated poetry community and its larger hearing artistic cohort? The most obvious solution, learning ASL, is not a realistic option for most people.

Bimodality, the thing that separates ASL from English, is both essential to this poetry's beauty, and a hurdle to its accessibility. The typical poetic translation — a parallel poem which functions as stand-in for the original — may not really be appropriate. One thing we can all do, though, is watch and listen at the same time — something Flying Words Project relies on. Maybe a better approach towards appreciating this work includes something like what I've done here —a combination of viewing, explanation, gloss, and more conventional translation attempts.

The ubiquity of personal video recording devices combined with the Internet means that there are now few obstacles to seeing the originals, whether classic poems by Valli, or recent efforts by Flying Words Project, Shira Grabelsky, Ayisha Knight-Shaw and other amateur or accomplished ASL poets. Gallaudet University's young web-based *Deaf Studies Journal* includes poems (on video) in every issue. Perhaps "translations" might be "crowd-sourced" — bilingual glosses and explanations posted along with the poems themselves.

Regardless of the challenges of translating this work, it certainly behooves hearing and Deaf artists alike to get to know it, and to understand its history, techniques, and possibilities. The composer James Tenney used to imagine an alien race, after visiting Earth, commenting on how strange it was that “humans seem to have fun by vibrating the air.” As a musician, and as someone fascinated with ASL poetry, it seems to me art is art, whether it’s handfults or vibrations of air.

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Santa Cruz, March, 2013

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Thanks to Patrick Graybill, Kenny Lerner, Mary Essex and Dennis Cokely for their tutelage. Many of the ideas in this essay emanate from my conversations with them and their work. and to Gary Lenhart and Tim Chamberlain for their insights on this essay itself.