

Attending Autumn

Amy Shortt

*And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;
O, it's then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest...*

I woke this morning with those words in my head, decades after I last said them aloud to a third-grade teacher. I hadn't tried to remember them. They simply arrived.

Not the whole poem. Just fragments:

*They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here—*

And the refrain that rolls through every stanza:

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

I learned James Whitcomb Riley's poem in third grade. Our spelling book had poems in the back, and we would recite them aloud from memory to our teacher for a grade.

I hadn't gone looking for those lines. They surfaced on their own, somewhere below my to-do list. Learning by heart is a slow way of knowing, and in this case, a lasting one.

Iain McGilchrist, a psychiatrist, neuroscience researcher, and philosopher, has spent his career exploring the different ways we attend to the world. One is narrow and focused. It grasps, categorizes, and manipulates, and it's what we use to finish a task, read a spreadsheet, or answer an email. The other kind of attention is wide and receptive. It stays open to what is actually there and takes in the whole, with its connections and context.

McGilchrist is clear that we need both kinds of attention. The trouble comes when narrow attention becomes our habitual way of meeting the world, leaving less room for the wider, more receptive kind. In our goal-driven, digitally fragmented world, that describes a good many of our days.

I'd like you to read the poem below slowly. Aloud, if you can. See what you notice.

When the Frost Is on the Punkin

James Whitcomb Riley

*When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,
And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock,
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;
O, it's then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,
As he leaves the house, bareheaded, and goes out to feed the stock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.*

*They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here—
Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossums on the trees,
And the mumble of the hummin'-birds and buzzin' of the bees;
But the air's so appetizin'; and the landscape through the haze
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airly autumn days
Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.*

*The husky, rusty russel of the tossels of the corn,
And the raspin' of the tangled leaves, as golden as the morn;
The stubble in the furries—kindo' lonesome-like, but still
A-preachin' sermons to us of the barns they growed to fill;
The strawstack in the medder, and the reaper in the shed;
The hosses in theyr stalls below—the clover overhead!—
O, it sets my hart a-clickin' like the tickin' of a clock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!*

*Then your apples all is getherd, and the ones a feller keeps
Is poured around the celler-floor in red and yeller heaps;
And your cider-makin's over, and your wimmern-folks is through
With theyr mince and apple-butter, and theyr souse and saussage, too! . . .
I don't know how to tell it—but ef sich a thing could be
As the Angels wantin' boardin', and they'd call around on ME—
I'd want to 'commodate 'em—all the whole-indurin' flock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!*

Notice how Riley teaches us to attend. He begins with sound, before any idea.

*And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock,
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;*

Then he notices the landscape.

*The husky, rusty russel of the tossels of the corn,
And the raspin' of the tangled leaves, as golden as the morn;
The stubble in the furries—kindo' lonesome-like, but still
A-preachin' sermons to us of the barns they grewed to fill;*

He isn't analyzing; he's attending.

Even the spelling asks something of us. Riley's dialect won't let us skim. We have to slow down, sound the words, and let the rhythm carry us. Poetry insists on the pace at which it can be received.

Then comes the last stanza. After the apples and cider and apple-butter, the speaker admits what every honest lover of beauty eventually admits:

*I don't know how to tell it—but ef sich a thing could be
As the Angels wantin' boardin', and they'd call around on ME—
I'd want to 'commodate 'em—all the whole-indurin' flock—*

Language runs out. What follows isn't argument, but hospitality. Perhaps attention widened becomes welcome.

Autumn works similarly. The light lowers, the days shorten, and the landscape asks us to look longer. We miss the flowers, Riley admits, and yet the season is full in its own way. Loss and abundance sit side by side, and we're invited to hold both.

Beauty can do this whenever we find it, in a poem, a piece of music, a painting, a hillside. It draws our attention outward, away from our own agenda and toward something we don't get to manage. That slows us down, and slowing down widens the view. We begin to see ourselves, other people, and the world around us a little differently.

So much of our days requires a certain kind of attention. We look at things for what they can do for us, at people for the role they play, at the hour for what it can still produce. This is the narrow mode of attention at work, and we are rewarded for it. Our notification-driven days reinforce it, and slowly this habit of attention becomes our way of being in the world.

Beauty interrupts this. A poem, a piece of music, a field white with frost doesn't ask what we can do with it. It asks only that we be present, and in being present, we are opened for a moment beyond our own agenda. The world turns out to be larger than our productivity. And what begins with a poem doesn't stay there. The person across the table, so easily sorted and managed, becomes someone to know.

It is a quiet truth, and an easy one to forget, that a life is shaped not only by what we decide, but by what we return to again and again: what we look at, what we listen to, what we linger over, what we attend.

Beauty gives us something worth attending. It doesn't demand our attention; it invites it. And perhaps, in attending, we learn to see a little more clearly.

I didn't try to remember any of the poem from my childhood. No one told me in the third grade that these sounds and rhythms would still be there decades later. I said the lines aloud for a teacher once and moved on, and yet they had been kept, tucked in my heart somewhere beneath the noise, until a morning when it was quiet enough to hear them.

Perhaps some of what we truly attend stays with us. It settles into us, becomes part of what we're made of, and waits.

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

Notes

Iain McGilchrist. *Ways of Attending: How Our Divided Brain Constructs the World* (Routledge, 2018). McGilchrist develops his larger account of hemispheric attention in *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press, 2009; expanded ed., 2019).

James Whitcomb Riley. "When the Frost Is on the Punkin," in *The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley, Memorial Edition*, vol. 3 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1916), 826–28. The poem is in the public domain. Text verified against the University of Toronto's Representative Poetry Online edition, which identifies the Memorial Edition as its source text.