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"My Only Swerving"

Sentimentality in Contemporary Poetry

Andrew Hudgins



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1. Philip Levine, *Not This Pig* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 79.

Before this century poets who chose to write about animals wrote mainly about birds. There are some things basically poetic about birds: They are pretty, they sing, and they can fly. And if their ability to sing makes them easily emblematic of the poet himself, their ability to fly makes them immediate and compact symbols of man's ancient desire to transcend his earthbound nature. But one seldom feels of the romantic poets, say, that their birds are real birds. Instead they are points of poetic departure. Keats's nightingale serves to call him momentarily into pure "fancy," while Shelley is even more straightforward about his Neoplatonic skylark: "Bird thou never wirt." But in contemporary American poetry there are suddenly a lot of poems about animals traditionally outside the reach of human sympathy, poems about reptiles, amphibians, rodents, game animals and predators, even insects. The shift in sensibility coincides with a shift in the perception of what the human position toward nature should be. Separated from nature by the growing urbanization of their country, most Americans now feel they should be conservators of nature rather than users of it.

In contemporary America, we have, for most practical purposes, conquered nature, and animals whose depredations were once feared now live at our sufferance—in zoos and wildlife refuges. As Philip Levine says in the title of a poem, "animals are passing from our lives."¹ When we encounter truly wild animals in our daily lives it is a surprise, and often they are dead and lying beside the road, domesticated, as it were, by the machine in the garden. Almost never do we encounter a dangerous animal—a wolf, a mountain lion, a wolverine, a bear. And when we do see one we do not—unless we are hunters and rather unusual ones at that—share the impulse Thoreau had in his famous confrontation with a woodchuck near Walden Pond. The last thing that

would occur to most contemporary Americans would be to fall on the woodchuck and devour it. When, in "Woodchucks," Maxine Kumin encounters the same animal as Thoreau the result is much different. Because she fails to destroy with a "knockout bomb" the woodchucks that are ravaging her garden, she resorts to potting them with a rifle.² Suddenly, at the end of the poem, the speaker, feeling guilty for what she has done, laments that the woodchucks would not "die unseen/gassed underground in the quiet Nazi way." While the comparison indicates effectively the depth of the poet's guilt at what she has done to nature, at another level it reveals her failure to put the incident in its proper perspective: The implicit comparison of three dead woodchucks to twelve million dead humans is sensational and grossly out of whack. It is not a mistake Thoreau would have made, though his response was instinctual, symbolic, and one that he did not act on.

Thoreau's impulse toward participatory reverence now seems not just atavistic but inappropriate, as do similar impulses in Hemingway and Faulkner. More emblematic of our time is the existential reverence of the observer that one finds in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, or at an even more extreme remove in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, in which the author *fails* to see the animal he has gone to observe. The rarity of woodchucks, and wildlife in general, has engendered a certain hands-off reverence, but that rarity has grown directly out of man's past actions—and has resulted in a distinct ambivalence toward what has come to represent "nature" in our urban lives. At the core of the ambivalence is a mixture of guilt and romanticism that Gary Snyder points to in *Earth House Hold*: "For Americans 'nature' means wilderness, the untamed realm of total freedom—not brutish and nasty, but beautiful and terrible. Something is always eating at the human heart like acid: it is the knowledge of what we have done to our continent."³ While the tension produced by simultaneously romanticizing nature and feeling guilty about what has been done to it has charged many poems with intensity, it has also put a strain on the poetry—a strain that frequently manifests itself as sentimentality.

When asked in an interview about his fondness for writing about small animals, Richard Eberhart answered by referring to Edmund Burke: "He has the idea that beauty is small, round, and smooth. Small animals are more beautiful than big animals."⁴ The distinction Burke makes is between the beautiful and the sublime, and it is instructive to consider both sides of the aesthetic problem, something Eberhart slides over. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke says:

In the animal creation, out of our own species, it is the small we are inclined to be fond of; little birds, and some of the smaller kinds of beasts. A great beautiful thing, is a manner of expression scarcely ever used; but that of a great ugly thing, is very common. There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance. In short the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without

2. Maxine Kumin, *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 155.

3. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 119.

4. Richard Eberhart, *Of Poetry and Poets* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 288.

5. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 113–14.

*considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions.*⁵

Snyder's contention that Americans view nature as both "beautiful and terrible" parallels almost exactly Burke's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The ambivalence that Americans feel toward nature gives rise, then, to aesthetic difficulties.

Poems about the deaths of small animals, which is what I want to look at most closely, have become increasingly common in American poetry, and Eberhart's "The Groundhog" is one of the most famous. But the poems, by the nature of their subject, attempt something Burke says is almost impossible: They attempt to bring together in one poem the beautiful—a small animal—and the sublime—death. The result quite often is poems that go awry, the speaker's reactions veering wildly out of proportion to their immediate cause. And while Snyder points out the historical and ecological background to these reactions, there are also psychological ambivalences to be considered.

A good poem to examine is Eberhart's "The Groundhog." Walking in a field the poet sees a dead groundhog. How does he respond? His "senses shook"; "the fever arose, became a flame," and through his frame there runs "a sunless trembling."⁶ But that is not all:

*Then stood I silent in the day
Watching the object, as before;
And kept my reverence for knowledge
Trying for control, to be still,
To quell the passion of the blood;
Until I had bent down to my knees
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.*

Returning a year later, the poet finds the "bony sodden hulk" but is no longer moved by it; his mind has walled off the first, highly emotional response:

*But the year had lost its meaning,
And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.*

When he returns a third and final time, the groundhog is gone. This time he is able to think about the death in the abstract contexts of history and philosophy. But both types of response—emotional and intellectual—are inadequate in the face of death:

*I stood there in the whirling summer.
My hand capped a withered heart,
And thought of China and of Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.*

The poem, though stunning, is emotionally out of balance. The movement from a dead groundhog to, in the last four lines, China and Greece, and Alexander, Montaigne, and Saint Theresa is breathtakingly unjustified by the internal logic of the poem up to that point. When, at the end, the poem tries to step up from the beautiful to the sublime, the object—the dead groundhog—won't bear the weight. The poem attempts to produce the desired effect by fury of language and wild

6. Richard Eberhart, *Collected Poems, 1930–1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 23.

extrapolation of geographical, historical, philosophical, and religious implications. The strain that results is, I think, obvious.

This out-of-balance response is not limited to Eberhart. To take only fairly prominent examples, something similar happens in Richard Wilbur's "The Death of a Toad," Alan Dugan's "Funeral Oration for a Mouse," and Theodore Roethke's "The Meadow Mouse." In each poem the death or vulnerability of the animal is extrapolated into the human realm and the emotional response grows until it is all out of proportion to what elicited it. The poems, then, are sentimental, if we accept I. A. Richards's simple and elegant definition of sentimentality: "A response is sentimental if it is too great for the occasion."⁷

Wilbur, Dugan, and Roethke—like Eberhart—attempt to put their emotional responses in perspective, though they use humor instead of pure intellectualization. But in each case the attempt collapses. Considering a toad that has lost a leg to a lawn mower, Wilbur playfully alludes to the dead toad's returning, in death, to "lost Amphibia's emperies" but quickly switches to a serious tone, too serious for the occasion.⁸ Dying, the toad turns:

*Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.
Day dwindles, drowning, and at length is gone
In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear
To watch, across the castrate lawn,
The haggard daylight steer.*

The death of the toad affects the world. This isn't just the pathetic fallacy—it is the pathetic fallacy operating in sympathy for a toad, and the fact that the point of view shifts into the mind of the toad does little to obscure the point. J. D. Salinger defines sentimentality as "giving to a thing more tenderness than God gives it,"⁹ and while God may be aware of the fall of every sparrow he does not cause the sun to become "haggard" as a consequence.

Theodore Roethke is more affectionate to the small animal he encounters in "The Meadow Mouse" than Wilbur is to his toad. Out walking in the meadow, the poet found a "baby mouse" that he took home and placed "in a shoe box stuffed in an old nylon stocking."¹⁰ He feeds the mouse "three kinds of cheese" and gives him water in a "bottle-cap watering trough." When, after it has eaten, he approaches it, he imagines the mouse "no longer trembles/When I come close to him." Despite his hope that the mouse has come to accept his presence, when he goes out on the porch in the morning and checks the box he finds the mouse has escaped:

*Where has he gone, my meadow mouse,
My thumb of a child that nuzzled in my palm?
To run under the hawk's wing,
Under the eye of the great owl watching from the elm-tree,
To live by courtesy of the shrike, the snake, the tom-cat.*

If the poem ended here, it would be a solid and balanced, if small, poem about the mouse's leaving the protection afforded by the poet and returning to its natural position in the food chain. The poem points up the changing relationship of poets to nature; it is difficult to imagine Emerson, Whitman, Lanier, Hart Crane, or Eliot, as adults, keep-

7. I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), p. 244.

8. Richard Wilbur, *The Poems of Richard Wilbur* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 152.

9. J. D. Salinger, as quoted in Daniel Halpern, "The Pursuit of Suffering," *Antaeus* (Winter-Spring 1981), 432.

10. Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), p. 219.

ing a mouse in a box on the back porch. But the poet's realization that the mouse has chosen to return to a situation in which it is subject to predators has a crisp sense of perspective to it. He realizes that he is foolhardy to think that the wildness can be domesticated out of nature, and he realizes that though he sees himself as a protector the mouse does not share that perception. In spite of his longing to join with it, man remains separate from nature.

But the poem does not stop here. It goes on for four more lines that greatly raise the emotional and intellectual ante:

*I think of the nestling fallen into the deep grass,
The turtle gasping in the dusty rubble of the highway,
The paralytic stunned in the tub, and the water rising—
All things innocent, hapless, forsaken.*

The abrupt and clumsy transition "I think" is followed by two examples from nature that limit rather than expand the story about the mouse. They serve primarily to set up the third example, the one that violently yanks the poem into the human realm. The nestling is larger than the mouse and is isolated from its natural element—the air; and the turtle, larger yet, gasps in the dust, separated from its element—water. But the leap from the turtle to the paralyzed human is too great, and it raises questions. How, for instance, does the paralytic get in this predicament? The context of the mouse's situation is provided by the poem, and it is easy enough to imagine a bird falling from its nest or a turtle wandering too far in search of water; but a paralytic who is "forsaken" in a tub of rising water can have got there only through the actions of another person. Also, though the word "innocent" raises philosophical and theological considerations that the poet may not be concerned with, it is safe to say that a human being cannot be considered innocent in the same way an animal can. And to call a paralytic in imminent danger of drowning "hapless" is simply peculiar. Surely he is more than just unlucky. But the last four lines of the poem introduce other problems as well.

The ending extends the scope of the poem way past what it has been. There is a huge qualitative difference between a mouse living under the threat of a tomcat and a paralyzed human being who is unable to escape from rising water. Everything up to the last four lines has served to emphasize the smallness and cuteness of the mouse—its beauty, to use Burke's term—and the sudden appearance of the endangered paralytic introduces the terrible, the overwhelming—the sublime. The disjunction between the beautiful and the sublime leads us, once more, to the processes of the poet's mind, and though I may be pushing the evidence further than it wants to go, the paralytic seems to me emblematic of the poet's own paralysis of will in the face of approaching and inexorable death. The first part of the poem represents his attempt to domesticate that fear by projecting it onto the body of the mouse, the "little quaker" that he has removed from the depredations of "the shrike, the snake, the tom-cat." But the mouse resists the projection when it instinctively returns to the world in which it is subject to sudden and violent death. In the end, the poet's fear erupts, frighteningly, into the human realm, though it is still displaced—this time onto the body of a paralytic. The discrepancy between the meadow mouse and the emotional weight the mouse is being made to bear makes the poem sentimental, and the sentimentality arises from the poet's displacement

of his own fear onto an inappropriate situation instead of confronting it head on.

Irony helps keep Alan Dugan's "Funeral Oration for a Mouse" in balance, and only when the irony is relinquished does the poem run into trouble. Like Roethke's "little quaker," Dugan's mouse is a "living diagram of fear."¹¹ But Dugan is fully aware that the mouse, which has been killed in a trap that he and his wife have set out, is a pest: "full of health himself/he brought diseases like a gift/to give his hosts." And when Dugan feels guilty for killing the mouse, he realizes both that the guilt is real and that it is a "minor guilt." His tone indicates that he does not blow the guilt out of its proper proportion, while, at the same time, he acknowledges the brutality of the mouse's demise:

*Lord, accept our felt though minor guilt
for an ignoble foe and ancient sin:
the murder of a guest
who shared our board: just once he ate
too slowly, dying in our trap
from necessary hunger and a broken back.*

The deep awareness of the different perspectives on what has happened—his perspective and the mouse's—is developed explicitly in the second strophe, and the mixture of wit and compassion is very adroit:

*the mousetrap was our own
opinion of the mouse, but for the mouse
it was the tree of knowledge with
its consequential fruit, the true cross
and the gate of hell.*

But in dying the mouse has, in a sense, acquired knowledge denied any living creature. Even this somewhat ponderous insight is quickly undercut by the poet, who acknowledges the disparity between him and his wife and the mouse; they "pinch" and he, as a consequence, "spasms":

*Younger by far, in dying he
was older than us all: his mobile tail and nose
spasmed in the pinch of our annoyance. Why,
then, at that snapping sound, did we, victorious,
begin to laugh without delight?*

The poet admits his ambivalence. Though he laughs at killing the pest, it is a laugh without delight because he knows that when he goes to remove the dead mouse from the trap he will encounter not just the limp body of the mouse but also death itself. In dying the mouse assumed an aspect of the terrible that removes it from the reach of the poet's wit that has tried to diminish the terror. The mouse has become a memento mori, and the poet and his wife instinctively shy away from the idea of death; their stomachs "demanded a retreat/from our machine and its effect of death":

*as if the mouse's fingers, skinnier
than hairpins and as breakable as cheese,
could grasp our grasping lives, and in
their drowning movement pull us under too,
into the common death beyond the mousetrap.*

11. Alan Dugan, *Collected Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 39.

The logic of the poem, certainly, is all of a piece. The poet is fully aware that the emotion he feels is not really for the mouse; it arises because the mouse's death makes him consider his own. But the last three lines lack the wit and discerning ambivalence that charge the rest of the poem. They are, in fact, slightly leaden. The irony and wit that have kept the poem balanced between the beautiful and the sublime are dropped when the mouse's death begins to have human implications. Though the imbalance is slight, the problem is caused by the poet's inability to be as witty about his own death as he is about the mouse's. And, in the end, Dugan's wit, like Eberhart's passion, Wilbur's irony, and Roethke's strained earnestness, seems a bit like whistling in the existential dark.

Just as humor and irony are used to tease away sentimentality, so too are animals that are not usually the objects of human concern—rodents and amphibians. If the poems were about kitty cats and sad-eyed puppies, the sentimentality would be glaringly clear, and the evocation of a stock response—to use another of I. A. Richards's concepts—would be too obvious. But if these poems of Eberhart, Wilbur, Roethke, and Dugan have problems, they are conceptual problems of a very high level. And if the poems are sentimental, it is in a certain sense a technical sentimentality—not the syrupy excess of emotion normally associated with the term. Just to make clear the degrees of sentimentality, it is useful to consider Rod McKuen's "Thoughts on Capital Punishment," which advocates the death penalty for running over animals:

*There ought to be capital punishment for cars
that run over rabbits and drive into dogs
that commit the unspeakable, unpardonable crime
of killing a kitty-cat still in his prime.*¹²

12. Rod McKuen, "Thoughts on Capital Punishment," in X. J. Kennedy, *An Introduction to Poetry*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974), pp. 249–50.

As if the image of cars being executed isn't enough, McKuen goes on to evoke the pathos of Mrs. Badger waiting for a husband who will never return:

*There ought to be something, something that's fair
to avenge Mrs. Badger as she waits in her lair
for her husband who lies with his guts spilling out
cause he didn't know what automobiles are about.*

In case we begin to wonder if this is a parody of sentimental poetry, the poet ends the poem by looking us right in the eye and informing us, "Who kills a man kills a bit of himself/But a cat too is an extension of God." McKuen is, of course, a convenient, and deserving, whipping boy, but his poem does, by contrast, point up the virtues of the other poems whose sentimentality occurs at a much higher level.

The sentimental reaction to dead animals is, as you might expect, hard to find in poets with rural backgrounds. It is more or less absent from the work of Robert Frost, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and southern poets in general. But as America becomes ever more urban and suburban, I suspect there will be more and more poems about the deaths of small animals, and my casual reading of literary journals backs up this intuition. The poems are a minor, literary consequence of our changing relationship to nature. We no longer fear and hate mice. One mouse in the house no longer raises the specter of hundreds munching their way through the corncrib and thus threatening our very survival.

The word *vermin* is almost never used anymore in its literal sense of “objectionable animals” and exists now for its metaphorical connotations. Roethke in “The Meadow Mouse” and James Wright in his “A Mouse Taking a Nap” feel as if they menace the mouse, and each feels, in varying degrees, as if he is its protector. Though Wright, for instance, admits he does not like the mouse, he takes evident pleasure in its enjoying a respite from its predators, which “are gone for a little while, hunting someone else for a little while.”¹³ Because we live divorced from nature and the natural cycle, when we see the harm we inflict on nature it is most often in the form of a dead small animal. The nineteenth-century literary myth that Leo Marx traces in *The Machine in the Garden* has moved into high gear in the twentieth century as advanced technology has raced across the eden of North America. The machine has penetrated into even the most casual and domestic levels of our lives. Dugan takes no pleasure in the “machine” that killed the mouse over which he delivered his funeral oration, and William Stafford in “Traveling through the Dark”—a poem to which I will return—is aware that the car that carries him through the darkness can also destroy the animals that live there, as someone else’s car already has. So thoroughly is nature subject to technology that a toad hit by a lawn mower becomes a metaphor for the current state of man’s relationship with nature.

13. James Wright, *This Journey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 71.

But guilt at the subjugation of nature, though real and hovering in the background of many poems, does not entirely account for the deep-seated emotion that throws the poems out of whack. Machines, after all, aren’t present in Eberhart’s “The Groundhog” or Roethke’s “The Meadow Mouse.” Also, guilt about the misuse of the environment is too intellectualized to provoke such a clearly displaced response: People who resent what humanity has done to nature generally know how they feel and have no qualms about expressing those feelings. Richards, following Freud, sees sentimentality as a consequence of inhibition: “As a rule the source of such inhibitions is some painfulness attaching to the aspect of life that we refuse to contemplate.”¹⁴ The repressed emotion will, however, find a way out. And the pain the poems are hiding—I suspect, I cannot know—is the poet’s fear of his own death. He displaces his fear of death onto the dead animal, and that is why the poems suddenly become anguished and why the death of the animal is treated as though it were as important as the death of a person. The smallness allows the poet to minimize death so he can try to master it. But the attempt to tuck something as overwhelming as death into a small and manageable box is bound to rupture the box. The poets in these poems are in a situation analogous to that of the young girl in Hopkins’s “Spring and All.” Facing the issue head on, Hopkins tells the girl who is grieving at the falling leaves, “It is the blight man was born for,/It is Margaret you mourn for.”¹⁵

The psychological problem leads, in turn, to an aesthetic one. The attempt to make death manageable is an attempt to convert the sublime into the beautiful. And the attempt, by its very nature, is bound to fail because death is not subject to human domestication. Though he is not talking specifically of death, Burke warns the artist of the aesthetic problems it can pose. While admitting that the beautiful and the sublime are rarely to be found in their pure forms, he cautions against

14. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, p. 253.

15. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Spring and Fall,” *A Hopkins Reader*, ed. John Pick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 19.

confusing the two:

*They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions.*¹⁶

16. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 124.

Yet the distinction often is forgotten because of the natural impulse to convert, by psychological and aesthetic alchemy, the painful into the pleasurable—the impulse to deny death.

Is it possible, then, to write a totally successful nonironic poem about the death of a small animal? Burke would be dubious, and I cannot think of an example that would convince him it can be done. Even William Stafford in "Traveling through the Dark" has to write about a fairly large animal to make his poem work.

"Traveling through the Dark" is one of the few completely successful poems dealing with the deaths of animals, and it owes much of its success to Stafford's exquisite awareness of the significance of the dead deer he finds beside the road. He does not attempt to diminish the importance of the animal's death, but neither does he attempt to make more of it than it is. When he finds the dead deer, the poet is tempted to sentimentalize it—to "swerve"—but he knows that to do so would be to endanger those who will come behind him.¹⁷ Precisely because the deer's dead body is dangerous, the poet must make a hard choice about what to do, and the danger the deer poses is a result of its size. In other words, Stafford gives himself a technical, aesthetic advantage that the other poets deny themselves: He writes about a larger animal than they do. The deer is very close to human size and is, therefore, suspended between the sublime and the beautiful. If anything, it is closer to the sublime. And the sublimity of the animal is accentuated by the fact that it is dangerous to those who might hit it and lose control of their cars. Because of its size, it has to be treated with some measure of thought and dignity. It is substantial. It has to be *pushed* into the river; it cannot simply be kicked off into the underbrush, as you might do to a dead rabbit if you worried about it at all:

*Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.*

*By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back to the car,
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.*

*My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.*

*The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.*

17. William Stafford, *Traveling through the Dark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 11. Copyright © 1960, 1962 by William Stafford. Reprinted with permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

*I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.*

*I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.*

Though he is, in fact, tempted to swerve—to make more of it than he should—the speaker's emotions are totally appropriate to the occasion. To those that follow, he has an existential obligation, as it were, to remove the deer, even though he did not cause it to be there. He treats the deer with respect, he is attentive enough to notice she is "large in the belly" and then to touch her belly and find out she is pregnant. Even the doe's pregnancy and the fact that the unborn fawn is still alive, which in a lesser poet might strengthen the impulse to sentimentality, serve as a temptation that he resists.

This is not to say he is unmoved by the situation. As the poet realizes the implications of the doe's warm belly, the poem intensifies, but the intensity parallels the poet's own deepening understanding: "her fawn lay there waiting, / alive, still, never to be born." He hesitates. But his first commitment is to the people who might be injured if he lets his emotions prevail to no purpose. The poem strikes an astoundingly sure balance between sorrow and responsibility, between the instinctive emotional response and the need to do what must be done. And the balance is all the more impressive in that it does not become self-justifying or sanctimonious. If the poet doesn't become overemotional, neither does he minimize the deer's death. He hesitates, thinks seriously about the situation, and realizes there is nothing he can do. Then, putting the incident in the larger perspective, he puts aside his own feelings and reacts for the good of others: "I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, / then pushed her over the edge into the river." There is deep emotion in the poem but not a trace of sentimentality; every emotion grows out of the situation and is perfectly in proportion to what the situation calls for. The poem is so clear-eyed about the world and emotionally responsible about what it sees that it can properly be called wise, and that, for all their considerable virtues, is not true of the other poems.