

Anne Carson, “Essay on What I Think About Most”

We were in Vancouver where I had been invited to participate on a panel about the Fulbright Fellowship program. My wife accompanied me to the huge, 5000-strong convention of the AWP, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. There were more attendees, people who taught creative writing, than there are buyers for poetry books or works of cutting-edge fiction.

I did my thing, talking about my experience teaching American poetry in Calcutta on a Fulbright grant. One of the high points of my life. ‘You can do this too,’ I told the audience which attended the panel.

Then we were free to wander the city and the conference. Vancouver is a great city for Asian food. We had Korean food, Japanese food, Vietnamese food, one restaurant better than the next. The downtown was a city of glass skyscrapers, a gathering of post-modern palaces.

We also attended, as you might imagine, a good number of poetry readings at the convention, some good, some not so good.

One of the best attended readings, in a huge hotel ballroom, was by the Canadian poet Anne Carson. I was transfixed, mesmerized.

So a few years later, thinking of what poem to send out next, I challenged myself to work on a poem by Anne Carson.

I had been reading Carson, and thought to send out a wonderful poem of hers, “Father’s Old Blue Cardigan.” I had doubts about taking up Carson, since in previous attempts at reading her poems I’ve felt like I had not adequately got into them. I mean the ‘got into’ quite literally, as in ‘in my mind I really entered into the poem.’ With many of her poems, I stood outside, greatly admiring her skill and intelligence and innovation. But I didn’t inhabit them, nor did they inhabit me. With one poem after another I recognized that although admiring her, I had never successfully entered her “complete little universe.”¹

¹ [From an interview with Mike Wallace, published as part of William Carlos Williams’ epic poem, Paterson:]
Q. Mr. Williams, can you tell me, simply, what poetry is?

A. Well ... I would say that poetry is language charged with emotion. It’s words, rhythmically organized A poem is a complete little universe. It exists separately. Any poem that has worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what the poet is.

I hadn't come to a sense that her poem expresses the whole life of the poet, giving a view of what she is.

Writing about "Father's Old Blue Cardigan," the one poem of hers I found accessible seemed – well, a little fraudulent. Or at least premature. One poem is so.... so.... provisional. What about the rest of Carson? Is this one of her better poems or just the only one I could approach successfully?

So I availed myself of a perk of working in the Senate complex, which is that we can easily take books out of the Library of Congress. In fact they come, delivered to our office, the day after we request them by email. I filled out a form asking for six of Carson's, and sure enough the next morning they were on my desk, five of them encircled by two bands of plastic strapping to keep them in a neat little package.

I began with the one unstrapped book, parts of which I had encountered before. It was Carson's translation of Sappho, the Greek poet who has, for much of human history, rightly been regarded as one of the preeminent women poets. The first great woman poet. The inventor of a whole genre – no, that word is much too narrow – the inventor of lyric poetry, the poetry of intense and passionate desire, who did for Greece and secular Western civilization what David did for Israel and religious Western civilization in the Biblical "Song of Songs."

After reading many of the translations, I moved on to one Carson volume after another². Meandering through the books, I came upon "Essay on What I Think About Most." I loved the poem. I loved rereading it and working through it.

² *This footnote was originally a long parenthesis in the email I sent out. I found it revealing enough that I didn't want to edit it out – nor did I want to put in the introduction.*

I hasten to say that I, most of the time, do not read poetry in serial fashion, diligently taking up one poem after another, nor do I recommend this manner of reading to you. Too often, far too often, poetry seems to most of us like something only for initiates or only for the smartest kid in English class. I emphatically reject both notions even though many poets and esthetes and intellectuals embrace one or the other of them. For I know that many of you reading this are not committed readers of poetry, that some of you may even be like many of my students who aren't at all sure how much they like poetry or how capable they are of reading it. But you'll try a poem, and like it when the poem seems to speak to you. 'That's something. I'm glad I read that.'

Poems, I believe, are for everyone. Maybe not every poem, but many poems. So let me state unequivocally my conviction that the joys of poetry are not available only to initiates. In my view the best way to read poems does not entail reading a book of them from cover to cover. I think we need to pick up a book, read a poem – and for me it is sometimes only several lines of the poem – and then keep reading if the lines please us or intrigue us and skip to another poem if they don't. No need to read in order. Poets plan elaborate architecture for their book, but that planning is, for most of us, irrelevant.

Probably the most important aspect of poetry has to do with liking: Just as with music, for there is some music we like. That is the music we choose to listen to. Of course, there are moments when we want to

It occurred to me that Carson was doing what I had been doing in my emails, wandering into a poem, looking closely at how its language and structure work to tell us things we don't see as easily as we might – in the language of Aristotle which she uses in the poem, diving beneath 'ordinary language' into 'metaphorical language' – and in conclusion moving to solidify what the poem may have taught us now that we have looked at it closely.

So I decided to write about "Essay on What I Think About Most." The poem is, as you will quickly realize, an essay about reading a poem – a poetic version of what I myself have been doing with these essays you have been reading.

Anne Carson's "Essay on What I Think About Most" concerns itself with a short poem, which she translated into English, by a minor Greek poet

***[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not***

Alkman, 7th century B.C., Sparta

Before encountering the Carson poem, I never knew Alkman existed. I know nothing of his poetry except this poem which she produces in stanza nine in her "Essay."

"Essay on What I Think About Most" is Carson's analysis of Alkman's five-line lyric. She calls her writing an "essay." It *is* in fact an essay, but it is more and other: it is a remarkably fine poem. In that sense, it may be regarded as an apotheosis, an elevation into the divine, of an essay on poetry.

Let us start with a few contextual 'facts' before we address the poem. First, Anne Carson is a Canadian and, as you might guess from her interest in Alkman and from her knowledge of him, a professor and scholar of Greek poetry, language, civilization. She teaches classics at the University of Michigan. Second, a good

test ourselves, listen to something beyond or outside our usual range of hearing or liking. But if we treated song as something 'good for us' like medicine we have to swallow because it is good for a cough, the chances are we will be glad to be past song in the same way as we are glad to be past cough medicine once the cough has gone. Pleasure and art are inextricably linked.

number of her poems deal with love and desire and their dissolution, with abandonment, grief, anger, and the attempt to bind a wounded life together. So it is possible, and we may want to bear this in mind, that the first stanza about ‘error’ is more personal than it might appear and the poem, which as it proceeds is rather philosophical, might in part concern itself with how she herself works her way through and past error and the emotions attendant on it. Maybe. Maybe not³.

Before moving on to the poem, I can’t resist pointing to something that should have been obvious to me but that I didn’t notice until I typed the poem out, word by word. Each stanza has six lines.

Here is the poem, “Essay on What I Think About Most,” a poem that that uses another poem – Alkman’s – to assess deeply a role that error can play in our lives. By so doing, it penetrates into the heart of our engagement with the strangeness that marks human existence.

Essay on What I Think About Most

Anne Carson

Error.
And its emotions.
On the brink of error is a condition of fear
In the midst of error is a state of folly and defeat.
Realizing you’ve made an error brings shame and remorse
Or does it?

Let’s look into this.
Lots of people including Aristotle think error
An interesting and valuable mental event.
In his discussion of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*
Aristotle says there are 3 kinds of words.
Strange, ordinary and metaphorical.

“Strange words simple puzzle us;
ordinary words convey what we know already;
it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh”

³ My son Dave, in one of the most lovely close readings I have encountered, long ago told me that ‘maybe’ and ‘maybe not’ mean exactly the same thing. I’ve always thought that a truth about our everyday language worth knowing.

(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13).

In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?

Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself

in the act of making a mistake.

He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface

of ordinary language

when suddenly

that surface breaks or complicates.

Unexpectedness emerges.

At first it looks odd, contradictory or wrong,

Then it makes sense.

And at this moment, according to Aristotle,

the mind turns to itself and says:

“How true, and yet I mistook it!”

From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned.

Not only that things are other than they seem,

and so we mistake them,

but that such mistakenness is valuable.

Hold onto it, Aristotle says,

there is much to be seen and felt here.

Metaphors teach the mind

to enjoy error

and to learn

from the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case.

There is a Chinese proverb that says,

Brush cannot write two characters with the same stroke,

And yet

that is exactly what a good mistake does.

Here is an example.

It is a fragment of ancient Greek lyric

That contains an error of arithmetic.

The poet does not seem to know

That $2 + 2 = 4$

Alkman fragment 20:

[?] *made three seasons, summer*

*and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not.*

Alkman lived in Sparta in the 7th century B.C.
Now Sparta was a poor country
and it is unlikely
that Alkman led a wealthy or well-fed life there.
This fact forms the background of his remarks
Which end in hunger.

Hunger always feels
like a mistake.
Alkman makes us experience this mistake
with him
by an effective use of computational error.
For a poor Spartan poet with nothing

left in his cupboard
at the end of winter—
along comes spring
like an afterthought of the natural economy,
fourth in a series of three,
unbalancing his arithmetic

and enjambling his verse.
Alkman's poem breaks off midway through an iambic metron
with no explanation
of where spring came from
or why numbers don't help us
control reality better.

There are three things I like about Alkman's poem,
First is that it is small,
light
and more than perfectly economical.
Second that it seems to suggest colors like pale green
without ever naming them.

Third that it manages to put into play

some major metaphysical questions
(like Who made the world)
without overt analysis.
You notice the verb “made” in the first verse
has no subject: [?]

It is very unusual in Greek
for a verb to have no subject, in fact
it is a grammatical mistake.
Some philologists will tell you
that this mistake is just an accident of translation,
and the poem as we have it

is surely a fragment broken off
some longer text
and that Alkman almost certainly did
name the agent of creation
in the verses preceding what we have here.
Well that may be so.

But as you know the chief aim of philology
is to reduce all textual delight
to an accident of history.
And I am uneasy with any claim to know exactly
what a poet means to say,
So let’s leave the question mark there

at the beginning of the poem
and admire Alkman’s courage
in confronting what it brackets.
The fourth thing I like
about Alkman’s poem
is the impression it gives

of blurting out the truth in spite of itself.
Many a poet aspires
to this tone of inadvertent lucidity
but few realize it so simply as Alkman.
Of course his simplicity is a fake.
Alkman is not simple at all,

he is a master contriver—
or what Aristotle would call an imitator
of reality.

Imitation (*mimesis* in Greek)
is Aristotle's collective term for the true mistakes of poetry.
What I like about this term

is the ease with which it accepts
that what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
the willful creation of error,
the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
out of which may arise
unexpectedness.

So a poet like Alkman
sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse
and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes
in order to engage
the fact of the matter.
The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection.

Alkman breaks the rules of arithmetic
and jeopardizes grammar
and messes up the metrical form of his verse
in order to draw us into this fact.
At the end of the poem the fact remains
and Alkman is probably no less hungry.

Yet something has changed in the quotient of our expectations.
For in mistaking them,
Alkman has perfected something.
Indeed he has
more than perfected something.
Using a single brushstroke.

Let's start at the beginning. We are in a sense prepared for what follows by the title: an essay⁴ is a meditation on a subject guided more by the mind's deliberations than by an external form or a rigorous logic. The subject Carson thinks about most? It is clearly announced in the first line of the poem:

Error.
And its emotions.
On the brink of error is a condition of fear
In the midst of error is a state of folly and defeat.
Realizing you've made an error brings shame and remorse
Or does it?

Many of Carson's poems are about error, about mistakes – she works in a vein somewhere in the indeterminate territory between autobiography and fiction. Following Freud, one could easily claim all fiction is at base autobiographical. Similarly, we in our day are aware that as narrative and a sense of identity is always imposed on autobiography, all autobiography is in some sense fiction, a made thing.

“Error,” which comprises the whole of the first line, is in the following four lines regarded temporally: as we head toward it, we are afraid; in the midst of it we feel stupid; after we have committed it, looking in our rearview mirror, we feel ashamed and remorseful.

Even before we leave the first stanza, Carson indicates that we may already have been in error, asking of what she has just said: “Or does it?” Maybe error is not the occasion for shame and remorse? Can that be true? Should we really not be ashamed of making an error?

Let's look into this.
Lots of people including Aristotle think error
An interesting and valuable mental event.
In his discussion of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*
Aristotle says there are 3 kinds of words.
Strange, ordinary and metaphorical.

So she steps back, and asks us, poet and reader alike, to “look into this.” Being herself a classicist, she thinks back to Aristotle, who she claims thought error “an interesting and valuable event.” Carson has recourse to his

⁴ ‘Essay’ comes from the French *essayer*, to try, and was first used in the form we understand it today by Montaigne in the late sixteenth century as the title of his prose explorations, the *Essais*.

Rhetoric, bringing into the poem a classical citation; in the next stanza she will provide both a quotation and an actual scholarly reference as we encounter a footnote in the middle of the poem, a strange circumstance.

But for now, she gives us Aristotle's analysis of language, saying there are three types of language: the transparent and factual language of everyday life ('ordinary' language), strange terms (we might think of the specialized jargon of science, or engineering, or even haute cuisine), and metaphor. She goes on to cite Aristotle in the next stanza:

“Strange words simple puzzle us;
ordinary words convey what we know already;
it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh”
(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13).

In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?

Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself⁵

In the fifth line she asks another question: “In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?” She proposes an answer in the next line, a line made especially rich by the placement the line/stanza break. The break – the technical term for a break which ends a line even though the thought and syntax hurtle onward and into a new line, is enjambment⁶ – propels us to one conclusion before the enjambment, while the ongoing syntax in the next stanza brings us to a second conclusion. Before the enjambment the answer is that “metaphor causes the mind to experience itself.” It appears, at this juncture, that metaphor is a kind of self-consciousness.

⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1410b: “We may now consider the above points settled, and pass on to say something about the way to devise lively and taking sayings. . . . We will begin by remarking that we all naturally find it agreeable to get hold of new ideas easily: words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get hold of new ideas. **Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh.** When the poet calls “old age a withered stalk,” he conveys a new idea, a new fact, to us by means of the general notion of bloom, which is common to both things. The similes of the poets do the same, and therefore, if they are good similes, give an effect of brilliance. The simile, as has been said before, is a metaphor, differing from it only in the way it is put; and just because it is longer it is less attractive. Besides, it does not say outright that “this” is “that,” and therefore the hearer is less interested in the idea. We see, then, that both speech and reasoning are lively in proportion as they make us seize a new idea promptly. For this reason people are not much taken either by obvious arguments (using the word “obvious” to mean what is plain to everybody and needs no investigation), nor by those which puzzle us when we hear them stated, but only by those which convey their information to us as soon as we hear them, provided we had not the information already; or which the mind only just fails to keep up with. These two kinds do convey to us a sort of information: but the obvious and the obscure kinds convey nothing, either at once or later on.

⁶ Enjambment not only characterizes many lines of this poem: Carson in stanza 13 also explicitly notes it in the Greek poem, where she refers to Alkman's “enjambing his verse.”

But no, that is error. Having been bound prematurely by the line ending, we find this reading to have been an error⁷. We must leap to the next stanza to get it right. For the mind experiences itself, we learn, because it makes a mistake; it experiences itself

in the act of making a mistake.
He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface
of ordinary language
when suddenly
that surface breaks or complicates.
Unexpectedness emerges.

Wittily, having just talked about Aristotle's discussion of metaphor, Carson proceeds to give us a metaphor. About Aristotle. In her metaphorical trope, Aristotle imagines the mind as a vehicle (a boat, perhaps, or a wagon) moving on a surface of language, when suddenly a gap appears so that there is no more solid ground, or supporting water, to hold things up without complication. "Unexpectedness emerges."

At first it looks odd, contradictory or wrong,
Then it makes sense.
And at this moment, according to Aristotle,
the mind turns to itself and says:
"How true, and yet I mistook it!"
From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned.

'This cannot be,' the mind exclaims, again according to Aristotle. Whatever has appeared from beneath the placidity of "ordinary" language must be wrong: it is so odd, so contradictory to what we thought language meant. And here is where the mind has that moment when it can "experience itself:" "How true [this metaphor is], and yet I mistook it."

A brief stop to look at metaphor. The example I always use to myself of a metaphor (actually, two metaphors) is from the late 18th century poet William Blake,

When the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like
a guinea? O no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly
host crying Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.

⁷ Remember: The first line of the poem was "Error." In a poem about error, at this juncture, this temporal lag at the enjambment, we make an error as we read the poem.

Two metaphors for the price of one: the sun is not the sun, but to us in terms of a comparison/identity to the everyday it is a bright, bright golden coin; to the mystic Blake, it is a choir of angels singing in praise of the creator⁸.

Not only that things are other than they seem,
and so we mistake them,
but that such mistakenness is valuable.
Hold onto it, Aristotle says,
there is much to be seen and felt here.
Metaphors teach the mind

Ah, if we read the stanza above slowly we see that a momentary ambiguity presents itself: just what is the “them” that we mistake? When things are “other than they seem,” which of the two possibilities is the mistake? Is it the golden coin and the hosts of angels? Or could the ‘them’ be the everyday, the ordinary, which we mistake because we consume it without looking at it – ‘no, no, it is just the sun.’ I’d hazard that the ambiguity is resolved in the next line, since the ‘mistakenness is valuable’ indicates that “there is much to be seen and felt” by seeing the sun as a host of angels, or even a disk of fire. Metaphors, the stanza ends, again with enjambment across the stanza break, “metaphors teach the mind”

to enjoy error
and to learn
from the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case.
There is a Chinese proverb that says,
Brush cannot write two characters with the same stroke,
And yet

We enjoy the eruption of the strange and odd, the unexpected, that occurs through metaphor. We learn from metaphor, though what we learn – “*what is* and *what is not* the case” – is again ambiguous. In a metaphor, which is which?

What is put into play in the stanza above is paradox and syllogism. Rationality, insofar as it is based on logic, proceeds through syllogism: a thing is itself and not another thing. It cannot be itself, and something else. Except, as we have been learning from Aristotle by way of Carson, in

⁸ There is a third metaphorical element, “like a guinea.” The comparison made explicit is what we call, as Aristotle before us called, a simile. Aristotle thought, as a previous footnote revealed, that their very explicitness causes similes to lack the power of metaphors.

metaphor. The sun can be the sun and disc of fire and a golden coin and a host of angels.

Nor, Carson points out, is this syllogism just Western logic. She cites an ancient Chinese proverb that tells us a thing must be itself, and not another. The stanza ends with yet another enjambment. “And yet.”

And yet, //
that is exactly what a good mistake does.
Here is an example.
It is a fragment of ancient Greek lyric
That contains an error of arithmetic.
The poet does not seem to know
That $2 + 2 = 4$

She is about to launch into an extended analysis of a poem, “a fragment of ancient Greek lyric.” It “contains an error of arithmetic. “The poet does not seem to know/that $2 + 2 = 4$.” Silly poet. Though we have already been softened up, because of what precedes this stanza and the brief lyric which follows, we already have an inkling that in not knowing arithmetic, in making an “error,” the Greek poet may “make sense,” teach us “a lesson to be learned,” give us something “true” and “valuable.”

Alkman fragment 20:
*[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not.*

There is not much to say about this stanza⁹, which provides Alkman’s poem, nor about the next, which gives us the modest background we may need to situate the poem.

Alkman lived in Sparta in the 7th century B.C.
Now Sparta was a poor country
and it is unlikely
that Alkman led a wealthy or well-fed life there.

⁹ Except to highlight what I noted earlier, that including a scholarly reference within the poem, “Alkman fragment 20” is, like the earlier reference to Aristotle “(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13)” in a poem is a stunning transgression of what we think the form of a poem to be. So, for that matter, is the inclusion of the simple arithmetical formula “ $2 + 2 = 4$.”

This fact forms the background of his remarks
Which end in hunger.

Why does hunger feel like a mistake, as Carson states immediately thereafter? Perhaps because the fear, defeat, and shame that characterized error (in stanza one) also characterize hunger prospectively, presently, and retrospectively. In this way, hunger/mistake is a metaphor in one of the senses Aristotle proposed, that it creates an identity out of shared quality. Perhaps because hunger is so contrary to the self-preservation which runs so deeply – in a Darwinian sense, most deeply – in us.

Hunger always feels
like a mistake.
Alkman makes us experience this mistake
with him
by an effective use of computational error.
For a poor Spartan poet with nothing

Would we, reading the fragment of Alkman's, have seen the "computational error" resulting from his referring to three seasons and then naming four? As a fine critic, Carson not only makes us see the error but focus on it. The mistake in arithmetic is similar to the error of hunger: the 'afterthought' in the arithmetical sequence is similar to the poet left with nothing even though the year has ended and winter is over, "a poor Spartan poet with nothing"

left in his cupboard
at the end of winter—
along comes spring
like an afterthought of the natural economy,
fourth in a series of three,
unbalancing his arithmetic

I have already pointed out that enjambment characterizes not only the verse of Alkman but also the Carson poem we are in the midst of reading.

and enjambing his verse.
Alkman's poem breaks off midway through an iambic metron
with no explanation
of where spring came from
or why numbers don't help us
control reality better.

Metron is Greek for measure. It refers to the iambic meter of Alkman's poem, broken seemingly because what we have is a fragment – although Carson will contest this, choosing as we shall shortly see to read it as an entire poem. The mystery of spring, its oddness, is reflected by the error: there are three seasons, and yet in the series he names, Alkman adds spring as a fourth, as disconcerting as hunger. And neither numbers nor logic 'control reality,' the reality which brings us things as uncontrollable as hunger, error – the subject of this poem – and inexplicable facts.

In poems, and this is especially true of great poems, often there is no better route toward understanding than saying: I like this¹⁰, and if I point it out to you, maybe you will like it as well. So here is Anne Carson, telling us what she likes about this short poem:

There are three things I like about Alkman's poem,
First is that it is small,
light
and more than perfectly economical.
Second that it seems to suggest colors like pale green
without ever naming them.

Not hard, that stanza above. She likes three things¹¹ about the poem. First, she praises the poem for being economical. That was Ezra Pound's definition of a poem: he noticed in a German-Italian dictionary that the German word "dichten", to make a poem, was translated by the Italian word "condensare," to condense¹². Economical. As that third line is, one word, the lightness of the line

¹⁰ When I write about poems, just as when I teach poems to my students, I always point out things I admire, things that please me. Long ago, maybe four decades and more, introductory courses in poetry were often called "Appreciation of Poetry." We've lost that sense of wonder, that poems are things we can like and admire: today, in our very scientific and technical world, professors often think complex theorizing is the proper route to approaching literature. You and I know better: there are things we like, and sometimes poems happen to be one of the things we like. When I took an ethics course long ago, one of the philosophical explanations of 'the good' that impressed me most was the one which suggested that calling something 'good' meant: I like this course of action, and I want you to like it as well.

¹¹ If you are really paying attention, both to the poem's embrace of error, and to Alkman's error in arithmetic that this "Essay" addresses, you might expect that as with the "three seasons" in Alkman that become four, the three things she likes will turn out to be four. And your expectation will turn out to be right!

¹² In his strange and wonderful book, *The ABC of Reading*. Pound's view undoubtedly influenced his old and good friend William Carlos Williams, whom I cited at the beginning: "A poem is a complete little universe. It exists separately. Any poem that has worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what the poet is."

mirroring the semantic content. Nor is it hard to see that a poem about spring – even if it speaks of hunger – also suggests something like pale green.

Third that it manages to put into play
some major metaphysical questions
(like Who made the world)
without overt analysis.
You notice the verb “made” in the first verse
has no subject: [?]

Carson here approaches the poem not as a fragment, but as a whole complete poem. This view of Alkman’s five lines transforms the uncertain opening into a major gambit. In Carson’s reading, by eliding the subject Alkman in a most economical fashion addresses the question of where the world we inhabit came from – the world of not only seasons, but of hunger.

It is very unusual in Greek
for a verb to have no subject, in fact
it is a grammatical mistake.
Some philologists will tell you
that this mistake is just an accident of translation,
and the poem as we have it

is surely a fragment broken off
some longer text
and that Alkman almost certainly did
name the agent of creation
in the verses preceding what we have here.
Well that may be so.

Philologists may have their way, reason may have its way, but Carson here chooses to embrace error, a textual “mistake.” She chooses to read a fragment as an intentional whole in order to make the poem reveal far more than it would otherwise. Remember when she told us that in “the act of making a mistake....Unexpectedness emerges”? Well, by embracing the “mistake” here instead of resorting to a conventional academic explanation, a whole unexpected dimension of the poem and its comprehension of the world has emerged. As she will say in the following stanza, “the chief aim of philology/is to reduce all textual delight to an accident of history.” No wonder she eschews the philological explanation.

Carson also understands the insight I credited to my son Dave, that ‘maybe’ and ‘maybe not’ mean the same thing. “Well, that may be so,” the stanza concludes. “And that may not be so,” we hear faintly – maybe, or maybe not.

But as you know the chief aim of philology
is to reduce all textual delight
to an accident of history.
And I am uneasy with any claim to know exactly
what a poet means to say,
So let’s leave the question mark there

at the beginning of the poem
and admire Alkman’s courage
in confronting what it brackets.
The fourth thing I like
about Alkman’s poem
is the impression it gives

In the six-line sentence which links the two stanzas above – the last three lines of the first, the first three lines of the second – she emphasizes the immense scope of Alkman’s five line poem, “confronting” the origin of the universe.

And then, in the last three lines of the second stanza above, she imitates Alkman: just as he says there are three seasons and then names four, so she says that there are “three things I like about Alkman’s poem,” and then rushes headlong into a fourth.

of blurting out the truth in spite of itself.
Many a poet aspires
to this tone of inadvertent lucidity
but few realize it so simply as Alkman.
Of course his simplicity is a fake.
Alkman is not simple at all,

Alkman tells the truth, seemingly by accident in a moment of “inadvertent lucidity” (almost another ‘error,’ that ‘inadvertent’).

One aspect of the truth told by the poem is that, in the words of the opening line of what may be the twentieth century’s greatest poem T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “April is the cruelest month.” The land springs forth anew, and we do not: we grow older, we have hungers, we continue without a similar rebirth.

Alkman's seeming "inadvertent lucidity" is a "fake. Alkman is not simple at all."

"He is a master contriver." Another truth told by the poem, a truth the following stanzas will explore. The fake that is real, the error that reveals the truth: that is the core of art, in both Aristotle's view and Carson's. For art imitates reality.

he is a master contriver—
or what Aristotle would call an imitator
of reality.
Imitation (*mimesis* in Greek)
is Aristotle's collective term for the true mistakes of poetry.
What I like about this term

Art mistakes, intentionally, the poem for the world, words for things, a created simulacrum for 'the real thing.'

So we come upon one of the oldest of truths about art – art is imitation, *mimesis* – in a new and unexpected way. The "simple . . . inadvertent lucidity" in Alkman's five lines, lines which are composed by "a master contriver," instill "the ease with which it accepts/ that what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error."

is the ease with which it accepts
that what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
the willful creation of error,
the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
out of which may arise
unexpectedness.

We have in the stanza above reached the conclusion of the poem. All the rest will be recapitulation and summary. "What we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,/the willful creation of error." The poet *deliberately* breaks with reason and syllogism and the rigors of mathematical reasoning, with "2 + 2 = 4," in order to make complicating mistakes. "The deliberate break and complication of mistakes" enables us to confront "unexpectedness¹³."

¹³ Remember the last line of the poem's fourth stanza: after the error of metaphor, "unexpectedness emerges."

So a poet like Alkman
sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse
and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes
in order to engage
the fact of the matter.
The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection.

Alkman breaks the rules of arithmetic
and jeopardizes grammar
and messes up the metrical form of his verse
in order to draw us into this fact.
At the end of the poem the fact remains
and Alkman is probably no less hungry.

When art imitates the world, when it recreates it in words, it substitutes an ‘error’ for the real thing. But art, because it allows the unexpected to arise in consciousness, provides us with a new relation to reality.

Creating unexpectedness through contriving willful error is what Alkman achieves, and he leaves us, his readers, richer for the process. The poem, being an imitation of life and not life itself, can “break the rules of arithmetic. . . . jeopardize grammar, mess” things up, to “draw us into this fact:” that hunger reigns, that we will not be satisfied by reality itself, that we need error in order to understand the world we live in. By creating an alternative to reality, a “mistake” and “imitation,” the poem can give us error, error with the wonderful capacity to “sidestep *fear*, anxiety, *sham*, *remorse*.” The three of those four words which I have italicized were used in the first stanza of the poem, to denote the emotions that in actuality (but not in the poem!) accompany error.

“The imperfect is our paradise,” wrote Wallace Stevens in his wonderful meditation on a bowl of carnations, “The Poems of our Climate.” What he writes in the poem’s conclusion is exactly what Anne Carson is saying when she writes “The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection.” Here is Stevens’ conclusion to *his* poem:

The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

This poem ends by pointing out that something has changed. Although Alkman remains hungry, by creating the ‘error’ of his poem, he is richer and so are we. He has been able “to draw us into this fact,” that we live in an imperfect world, that we have hungers, that need and desire are always with us.

Alkman is “probably no less hungry,” since reality is less tractable than we might hope, never really changed by a poem. Or, as we used to say, words are not things that do real things in the real world: ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones/But words will never harm me.’ Or that old saw, “You can’t eat words.” Even with this poem, Alkman is still hungry.

But you will notice that in Carson’s poem, reality (“the fact remains”) does not get the last word.

Something has changed in the poet, and something has changed in *us*. Alkman enables us to see what we had not seen previously, and he has makes something – call it a work of art, fragmentary though it may at first appear – that is perfect, that is even characterized as more than perfect. Art allows “the mind to experience itself,” to “make sense” of the “unexpected.” From art “a lesson can be learned,” and through its “mistake” it “blurts out the truth.”

Error, as Aristotle had proposed, allows us to “get hold of something new and fresh.” It leaps beyond syllogism and a careful and parsed rationality to do what the Chinese proverb, which Carson quoted earlier, insists is impossible. For it turns out, by the conclusion of this poem, the proverb “Brush cannot write two characters with one stroke” is itself an error.

Yet something has changed in the quotient of our expectations.
For in mistaking them,
Alkman has perfected something.
Indeed he has
more than perfected something.
Using a single brushstroke.

I realize that as we have approached the end of this poem, it has turned – as so often poems do – into being about poetry. Carson leads us there. But I think she means to go beyond poetry, that poetry is used here as a symbol for human existence¹⁴. For Carson’s essay is ultimately not about something as limited as ‘the need for poetry.’ No, it is about how error need not be crippling. We can

¹⁴ The concluding stanzas, then, are themselves a “mistake,” as Aristotle claimed metaphor always is.

survive error, learn from it, and make something new of it: not just a poem, but a life.