The Music of the Hemispheres
Poetics for Young Children

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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York
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Preface

Poetry, real poetry, is an extraordinary art form.

Being a poet is much like being a composer of symphonies. Just as a composer writes each note on a musical staff, and composes harmonies for the different instruments, and knows when to enhance the percussion or the woodwinds, a great poet has an array of tools and techniques at hand, and puts each sound on the page, one sound at a time, in a deliberately chosen rhythm, for a reason. A poet might spend a year carefully perfecting a fourteen-line sonnet.

This book, though it explores many powerful and technical things that poets can do with the sounds of words, is only a hint. It just cracks open the door, giving you a peek inside the huge world of creative life that poets live in.

Though this is but an introduction, it is nevertheless an introduction to the real thing. The purpose of this book is to find ways to reveal the reality of poem power, to give students an eyeball-to-the-letter closeup of what goes on in a poet’s thought. The architect Mies van der Rohe said that God is in the details; I hope that by putting a microscope on the beautiful details of poetry, I can show how wonderful they are.
XXXIII

Emily Dickinson

How happy is the little stone
That rambles in the road alone,
And doesn’t care about careers,
And exigencies never fears;
Whose coat of elemental brown
A passing universe put on;
And independent as the sun,
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute decree
In casual simplicity.
In the medieval ages, philosophers believed that each planet, as it zoomed around in orbit, made a sound... a note.
The sound of all the planets in space was called the music of the spheres.

Today, we say the human brain has two hemispheres, and through the magic of human language we have poetry, the music of the hemispheres.
Language is human. Many animals make sounds, but only human beings make language.

We love language for lots of reasons, and one of the most important is that we love the beautiful sounds of language.

Words are made of sounds.

When we write words, we show the sounds with letters.
The letter s sounds like 

ssssssssssssssssssssssss
Some sounds sound like woodwinds or horns or wind in the trees.
Some sounds in words are like sounds in nature:

This little piggy cried,
    Wee wee wee,
    All the way home.

This is called

onomatopoeia
(ah no mah toe pee ah)
There are two main kinds of sounds: **vowels**, and **consonants**.

**Vowels** sound like singing:

\[ \text{aeiouy} \]

and **consonants** sound like clicks, and taps, and bumps:

\[ \text{bcdfghijklmnpqrstuvwxyz} \]
We can even do a **vowel-consonant split**, by putting vowels and consonants on different lines.

What words are these?

```
i e
 cr ck t
 o e
 fl w r
 u e
 p ddl
```
By splitting the vowels away from the consonants, we can see and hear them more clearly. We can even sing a word like a song!

**baseball**

```
  a e a
  b s b l l
  b a y... s s b a h h... l...
```
Do you see that in the word *baseball*,
the first *a* and the second *a* have different sounds?

The first *a* in *baseball* sounds like *ay*,
and the second *a* sounds like *ah*.
There is even a third *a* sound, as in *bat*.
And the *e* in *baseball* is silent!

So the vowels in *baseball* sound like *ay-ah*!

English has more sounds than letters
so letters have to make several sounds,
and also join with other letters to make
special combined sounds, like *sh, th, ch*, and others.
The sounds of words almost have personalities, like people.

The letter

\[ m \]

is soft, like a hum, and reassuring.
We find \( m \) in *mama*, and *Romeo*. 
When the Scottish poet Robert Burns wanted to communicate the gentleness of love, he filled his poem with *m*:

*My Mary’s asleep by thy murmuring stream*
There are lots of consonants that are soft,
and other consonants are *scratchy*, rough, or pounding.
Some consonants are hissy, breathy, or windy.
In William Shakespeare’s love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, a play he wrote in poetry, he wrote soft, beautiful sounds for Juliet’s lines.

Juliet asks Romeo why he has to be named *Romeo*. Their two families are enemies, so Romeo is the child of her father’s foe:
O Romeo, Romeo, Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father, and refuse thy name.

(Wherefore means why!)
But in William Shakespeare’s witch story, *Macbeth*, also a play he wrote in poetry, he wrote sharp, harsh, scratchy, evil sounds for the witches to speak, sounds like *ake, kaw, and boi*.
Fillet of a fenny snake, in the cauldron, boil and bake.
Sometimes, poets hide animal sounds in their poetry, and you hear them without really realizing that you do.

In his tiny poem “Splinter,” Carl Sandburg used the s sound to represent a cricket’s chirp, and then stopped, to let us feel the loss. Do you hear the little cricket? It stops, but then it returns and reassures us, with a pretty s and i song.
The voice of the last cricket,
Across the first frost,
Is one kind of good-bye.
It is so thin a splinter of singing.
In his poem “The Cloud” the English poet Percy Shelley used drenched, rainy sounds, such as *rs*, and *sh*, and *fr*, to capture the sound of rain.

Shelley imagined the cloud as if it were a person. “I bring...” says the cloud. Portraying an object as a person is called *personification*. 
I bring fresh showers
for the thirsting flowers
From the seas and the streams.
You begin to notice that lots of words, such as *drip, drop, splash* and *trickle*, sound just like what they stand for.

The word *drip*, sounds like a *drip.*
The word *whistle* sounds like a whistle, with its *wh* and *s* sounds.

Robert Burns used *whistle* to evoke the sounds of the blackbirds in his poem “Afton Water.”
Thou stock dove whose echo resounds thro the glen,
Ye wild *whistling* blackbirds in yon thorny den
Thou green-crested lapwing, thy screaming forbear—
   I charge you,
   disturb not my slumbering fair!
Another kind of sound, different from vowels and consonants, is the stress.

When we speak, we say some parts of words with more emphasis, more firmness, more volume. We stress certain parts of words.
monkey

When we say the word *monkey*,
the first syllable is stressed.

We say MONkey,
not monKEY, and
Tiger, not tiGER.