

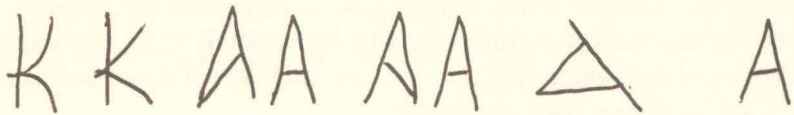
Betsy Warland / EXCERPTS FROM *BREATHING THE PAGE—THE MATERIALS OF WRITING*

ALPHABET

Alphabet: alph, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, the first of anything + beta, the second letter of the Greek alphabet, the second item in a series or system.

Once there are two there are more.

The origins of our alphabetic letters trace back to the Phoenicians and Semites of Syria and Palestine around 1,000 B.C.



Phoenicians

Greek

Roman

Medieval

Modern

Many of these precursory letters were symbols for the basics of everyday life: *A*, *alph*, 'ox'; *B*, *beth*, 'house'; *C* and *G*, *gimel*, 'camel'; *D*, *daleth*, 'door'; *I* and *J*, *yod*, 'hand'; *K*, *kaph*, 'hollow of the hand'; *M*, *mem*, 'water'; *N*, *nun*, and *X*, *smekh*, 'fish'; *O*, *cayin*, 'eye'; *P*, *pe*, 'mouth'; *Q*, *qoph*, 'monkey'; *R*, *resh*, 'head'; *S*, *shin*, 'tooth'; and *T*, *taw*, 'mark'.

Shapes of the natural world also appear in some letters: the *M* of mountain peaks; the slithering *S* of snake; the *O* of sun, moon, and our mouth's "O" of comprehension.

Written alphabetic letters connote absence. Unlike footprints, inevitably left behind in the natural world, alphabetic letters involve

choice — choice more akin to a mammal intentionally leaving its scent. Scents are left to warn, to excite and invite, to inform others of one's species, or to assist one's own memory. For us *Homo sapiens*, various configurations of letters forming a word function in much the same way.

Conceptually and instinctively, the alphabet's lineage is pictograms, ideograms, hieroglyphs, and petroglyphs.

Like these other systems, the act of inscribing letters of the alphabet disembodies its users. Yet these very letters springboard us into transcending the specificity and time-based constraints of our lives — enabling us to enter others' lives and time, and enabling others to enter ours.

With the advancement of civilization, the alphabet was a strategy for not getting lost: a map. Small-scale, basic survival nomadism was gradually replaced by large-scale economic, religious, and cultural “nomadism.” Letters — like storage pots — contained the essences (scents) of one's origins which could be retrieved by their users and passed on to their offspring, and to those with whom they co-existed or traded, or whom they conquered.

The existence of the alphabet confirms that with expansion came an increased recognition of our limitations. With our experience of bridging greater complexities came our realization that our human voice was no longer sufficient. The spoken voice's range required proximity.

Breath is life. Civilization awakened another sense of breath. When reciting the alphabet out loud the *vowels' free passage of breath* opens outward — then crests periodically — between the accumulating waves of *consonants' partial or complete obstruction of the air stream*. It is as if the alphabet replicates our lungs' movements. It is as if the alphabet is breathing itself. Where lungs animate voice now alphabet animates words.

Breath is believed to be a manifestation of the deities. Vowels may evidence this as vestiges of Divine speech. An infant's early word-sounds are nearly all vowel. Our final dying word is often vowel. It is with vowel we come into this life from elsewhere. It is with vowel we leave this life for elsewhere.

But, while we are fully here, *Latin, vowel, vox, voice* persistency seeks *consonant, Latin, consonare, to harmonize*. This is the Yin & Yang of our alphabet.

A WORD

Written word is our declarative mark left for others.

Just as a dog exhales its warm breath onto a blade of grass to reactivate a scent-message left by a previous dog, a reader's eyes focus on a written word to reactivate what the writer has expressed.

A word — comprised of inscribed alphabetic letters — is a locus of visual symbols which represent speech, thought, and emotion.

Sometimes words mimic the exact sound they represent: cuckoo; snap. This is known as onomatopoeia.

A word is a thought-stream we drink from. Some of the thought-streams are: personal streams, in which a word like "house" contains the specific houses each writer and reader has known; collective streams, in which the word "earth" contains the meanings of how the earth has been recalled, experienced, and understood in one's lifetime; and linguistic streams, which reveal the etymological lineage of a word and its word relatives.

Word, wer-, to speak, Latin, verbum, verb, verve, proverb, irony.

Word is morphosis. A gathering of one or more *morpheme, mer-gwh, to gleam, sparkle*. These linguistic, cellular units attract and transform one another into meaning. Over time and territories, words themselves change and adapt as any organism must to survive.

Word: verb.

A word traces the very activity of beingness and simultaneously creates it: synapses of syllables arching endlessly; axon & dendrite.

Word is reincarnation. As new words are created, old words fall into disuse and die. "Dead" words return in other decades, lifetimes, centuries, with altered or new meanings.

It is interesting to note that contemporary definitions as well as the etymological lineage of "word" denote only verbal, spoken references: there is no specific word that indicates the phenomenon of the written word. Our inscribed units of alphabetic sound, thought, and emotion essentially remain nameless. The implications of this are worth pondering.

In contrast, the definitions of "alphabet" are entirely writing-based. This suggests that the alphabet doesn't exist in our experience of oral communication, only words. Conversely, in our experience of written communication, only alphabetic letters exist. When we write we must physically construct each word, letter-by-space-letter every time. The "same word" we speak and write is, in fact, not experientially the same at all.

Word is enigma.

FORM — POETRY

With the iambs of our infant breathing, rhythmic cycles of our bodily functions, patterns of sound and motion within our domestic surroundings, repetitive song of our distinctive crying and comforting melodies of our parents' voices, poetry embraces us into our being here.

The structure or nature of the poem is before, after, inside, and outside of words. We call it rhythm, rhyme, pattern, meter, cadence, intonation. We call it the poem's musicality and form.

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Because the very form and spatiality of a poem is based on what can never be fully said or known — more than on what can be said and known — poetry may be as close as we come through language to the sacred.

It is no happenstance that the sacred texts of most cultures (religious or mystical) are essentially lyric in form. This is the lineage of the poem.

There are many different kinds of poetics. The poems which prick our imagination, pulse within us (from generation to generation), are those composed with an awareness of poetry's lineage.

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Like music, poetry is intrinsically an airborne art form. Although contemporary poetry has become more a visual art form, the poem must still navigate the page like the voice in space.

The body breathes the poem and the poem breathes the page.

When the orality of a poem and the poet's body share a profound intimacy, the inscribed poem and page become lovers — nose to nose — inhaling & exhaling one another's breath.

The poem's scored spaces inhale.

The poem's scored lines exhale.

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All systems we have devised to represent meaning — written language, sheet music, math, and visual art — rely on a related progression of scored lines and spaces. In poetry, these systems of inscribed representation converge.

Language (scored lines and spaces) evidences our separateness.

Silence (scored space) evidences what we share.

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Concurrent silences may mean different things to different people; nevertheless, their meanings do not have to be articulated. This is what we share. Silence and the uninscribed space of the page are

powerful forms of communication which are often mistaken for nothingness, blankness, meaninglessness.

Silence and space hold all language, all meaning.

Language acknowledges our separateness by telling us something specific. The inscription of language is generated from our desire to communicate, to bridge a sensed gap in memory, perception, or feeling.

Poetry is a riptide where language and silence negotiate one another's powerful currents. Ultimately, sound (language) and silence (scored space) are the same thing: emphasis and meaning.

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The poem is a wave.

At its base is the depth of our unknowing. At its crest is our knowing. Within the movement between is the poem's gathering momentum.

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Accurate scoring of the poem is critical. The inscribed poem must remain faithful to the intonation, pausing, emphasis, rhythm, and acoustic spatiality of its oral roots and sensibilities otherwise its meaning is compromised. Confused. Like a piece of music, the intricate scoring of a poem enables a reader to breathe and sound it as its poet has done.

The integrity of a poem is rooted within a set of specific circumstances — just as a composer writes a piece of choral music to move through the time and space of a cathedral in a particular way

for particular occasions, or a lullaby to move through domestic time and space in another way — so the poet composes each poem.

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The poem merely gestures toward, hints at. It is a sketch. A note. A Chinese brush painting. Poetry and the sacred move us through their purity of articulated sensation not their proof of explanation.

The poem is porous.

Its scored pauses create pores for inhales of anticipation, exchanged glances, sighs of recognition, and exclamation.

Its scored stanza breaks allow time for the reader's recognition of her or his own associations, thoughts.

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The poem is a field of molecular word activity. The poet senses what is *already there* and navigates accordingly. If we navigate accurately, faithfully, we return years later and are startled by the poem's wisdom, insight, beauty, which we were not fully cognizant of when we composed it.

Poetry is change in its very motion. Like beauty, its fluidity surprises and transforms us. As with species' survival, the poem's words organize themselves with resilient inventiveness. Intention.

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The poem enters your heart like an idea enters your mind.

Although poetry often has narrative elements, its creative and formal instincts are not to be confused with prose narrative's creative and formal instincts.

Poetry and prose can be hybridized into prose-poems, poetic prose, and lyrical theory yet poetry and prose inherently resist merging.

Narrative takes us on a journey.

Poetry is the journey.