

Disjunction & Surprise

(Contributed by Mark Leidner)

*Row, row, row your boat
gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
life is but a dream.*

What happens in the first three lines of this familiar poem? In the first line the scene is set. The reader and the speaker are rowing a boat. Note how the repetition of the word 'row' and the repetitive rhythm textually mirror the real-life act of rowing. The sentence of the first line continues on the second line. Where are we? We are still in the stream. Still rowing. 'gently down the stream' modifies all those verbs 'row' in the first line. Again, note how the rhythm is expressive of the act – which does a lot to put us, as readers, in the world of the poem, with the speaker. The lines are moving with the pace and feel of a boat being rowed through water. What happens on the third line? A bunch of 'merrily's over and over. Are we still in the stream? Certainly. Merrily modifies or describes the emotional state of the rowing.

But what about the fourth line? It's a pretty grand declaration – about the nature of existence, no less – and one that has little, specifically, to do with boats and rowing. In some ways this poem, as a whole, is built entirely to set us up for a surprise ending. To lull us into a state of dreamy, lazy 'merriment' – only to pull the rug out from under us at the end with a deceptively simple commentary on the fleeting, and possibly even false, nature of life itself. Is life 'but a dream'?

In this assignment, your goal will be to write a poem that gathers momentum in one direction throughout its beginning stages, and then in the final or later stages, shatters the expectation of the prior lines – but in a way that maintains the continuity of the poem. It's all too easy to write about X for fifteen lines, then throw in something about Z, that has nothing to do with X – at then end – surprise!

*I went to a baseball game.
The sun was bright in the sky.
The baseball players were skilled.
I bought a hot dog and a beer.
Ramirez threw a shut-out.
I caught a foul ball.
My printer ran out of ink this morning!*

That's a horrible poem. The 'surprise' at the end is shameful. Try to avoid that kind of surprise – the kind that, though technically a surprise, it is clear the speaker doesn't even care about where the poem goes. Try to let the poem take you to someplace that – while new and strange – still seems like a 'real' part of the poem. You know how a dream can seem totally random and haphazard, but somehow, overall, it still feels like a complete and unified whole? When you're having one of those really crazy dreams, while you're in the dream, even though everything seems weird, you rarely question the logic of how the dream moves. Well, in that same way, try to allow your poem to gather momentum in one direction, then at the end, let it make a 180 degree turn. Or let it explode. Or let it make a *leap*. But one that still seems 'true' to the nature of the poem, like how crazy twists in dreams still seem real. The key is not to make us *throw out* the rest of the poem (which the preceding baseball /printer example does) – but to make us have to *reconsider* or *reevaluate* the nature, meaning, or effect of the beginning of the poem.