To make a poem, we must make sounds. Not random sounds, but chosen sounds.

How much does it matter what kinds of sounds we make? How do we choose what sounds to make?

"Go!" does not sound like "Stop!" Also, in some way, the words do not feel the same. "Hurry up!" does not sound or feel like its opposite, "Slow down!" "Hurry up!" rustles with activity, leaps to its final punch. "Slow down!" pours from the tongue, as flat as two plates. Sounds differ. Sounds matter. "No ideas out in things," said William Carlos Williams. And, for our purposes here, no things but in the sounds of the words representing them. A "rock" is not a "stone."

But, why is a rock not a stone?
Dingdong, Onomatopoeia

The “dingdong” theory, not considered seriously anymore, remains intriguing. Here is Webster's definition:

A theory of Karl Wilhelm Heyse, supported (but later abandoned) by Max Müller. It maintains that the primitive elements of language are reflex expressions induced by sensory impressions; that is, the creative faculty gave to each general conception, as it thrilled for the first time through the brain, a phonetic expression;—so nicknamed from the analogy of the sound of a bell induced by the stroke of the clapper. . . .
called also the bowwow theory, the poohpooh theory.

How disappointing that such a theory didn't survive! However, we still have onomatopoeia, individual sounds-tied-to-sense, which will be discussed later. But onomatopoeia does not extend across any great part of the language.

The Alphabet—Families of Sound

Let us look elsewhere then. What follows is from a textbook of grammar published in 1860.† It divides the alphabet—our "raw material"—into various categories.

The letters are divided into two general classes, vowels and consonants.

A vowel forms a perfect sound when uttered alone. A consonant cannot be perfectly uttered till joined to a vowel.

The vowels are a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes w and y. All the other letters are consonants.

( W or y is called a consonant when it precedes a vowel heard in the same syllable, as in wine, twine, whine. In all other cases these letters are vowels, as in newly, dewy, and eyebrow.)

The consonants are divided into semivowels and mutes.

A semivowel is a consonant that can be imperfectly sounded without a vowel so that at the end of a syllable its sound may be protracted, as l, n, z, in al, an, az.


It would be reasonable to suppose that I would reach for a more modern text. On the day I looked into Brown's book, however, I wasn't looking reasonably, but immediately; looking over titles in my own house, my eye fell upon his book, and it was so instantly rich and provocative that, for purposes of this discussion, I have stayed with it. I am not trained in linguistics, and here I only want to make a few useful and important points about sound.
The semivowels are \( f, b, j, l, m, n, r, s, v, w, x, y, z, \) and \( c \) and \( g \) soft. But \( w \) or \( y \) at the end of a syllable is a vowel. And the sound of \( c, f, g, h, j, s, \) or \( x \) can be protracted only as an aspirate, or strong breath.

Four of the semivowels—\( l, m, n, \) and \( r \)—are termed liquids, on account of the fluency of their sounds.

Four others—\( v, w, y, \) and \( z \)—are likewise more vocal than the aspirates.

A mute is a consonant that cannot be sounded at all without a vowel, and which at the end of a syllable suddenly stops the breath, as \( k, p, t \) in \( ak, ap, at \).

The mutes are eight: \( b, d, k, p, q, t, \) and \( c \) and \( g \) hard. Three of these—\( k, g, \) and \( c \) hard—sound exactly alike. \( B, d, \) and \( g \) hard stop the voice less suddenly than the rest.

Here we begin to understand that our working material—the alphabet—represents families of sounds rather than random sounds. Here are mutes, liquids, aspirates—vowels, semivowels, and consonants. Now we see that words have not only a definition and possibly a connotation, but also the felt quality of their own kind of sound.

A Rock or a Stone

The following three phrases mean exactly the same thing. But we would use each of the phrases only under certain circumstances, and not at all under others. The phrases are:

1. Hush!
2. Please be quiet!
3. Shut up!

The first phrase we might use to quiet a child when we do not want to give any sense of disturbance or anger. (No mutes are here.)

The second phrase is slightly curt, but the tone remains civil. We might use it in a theater when asking strangers to stop talking. (This phrase makes use of four mutes—\( p, b, q, \) and \( t \), but in almost every case the mute is instantly “calmed down,” twice by a vowel and once by a liquid.)

The third phrase is the most curious and instructive. It is abrupt; it indicates, unarguably, impatience and even anger. Someone using this phrase means business. (In this phrase the mutes, \( t \) and \( p \), are not softened; rather, the vowel precedes them; the mutes are the final brittle explosion of the word. Both words slap shut upon their utterance, with a mute.)

One group of phrases does not give conclusive evidence, but it does suggest that there is, or can be, a correlation between the meaning, connotation, and actual sound of the word.

Now, what is the difference between a rock and a
stone? Both use the vowel o (short in rock, long in stone),
both are words of one syllable, and there the similarity ends. Stone has a mute near the beginning of the word
that then is softened by a vowel. Rock ends with the
mute k. That k “suddenly stops the breath.” There is a
seed of silence at the edge of the sound. Brief though
it is, it is definite, and cannot be denied, and it feels
very different from the -one ending of stone. In my
mind’s eye I see the weather-softened roundness of
stone, the juts and angled edges of rock.

Robert Frost’s
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Read the poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,
by Robert Frost, keeping in mind exactly what is going
on—the pause within a journey, the quiet, introspective
voice of the speaker, the dark and solitary woods, the
falling snow.

The initial four lines are rife with w’s and th’s; f is
there, and v. Three sets of double ll’s. The heaviness
of the vowels is increased by the use of diphthongs. The
two words that end with a mute (think and up) are set
within the lines and thus are softened. All other mutes
are softened within the words themselves. One could
scarcely read these lines in any other than a quiet, mus-
ing, almost whispered way.

One can say any number of things about the little
horse of the second stanza. It is the only object in the
poem on which the speaker focuses. It is the only other
living thing in the poem, and it is as willing as the speak-
er for the moment is hesitant to continue the journey.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
In any case, we are drawn by the speaker to look at the little horse too, and as we do so the sounds of the whispery introduction, the interior monologue, no louder than the snow falling, are interrupted with little raps of sharper sound—not mallets, not that heavy, but different. “My little horse must think it queer” is not a very rattling line, but the sound of “think,” with its lightly snapping k this time followed not by a softer sound but by the snippet “it,” and “queer,” an echo of the k, makes it altogether livelier than the first stanza. “Stop” is a rap of a sound, then it is quieted by the rest of the line. After “lake” there is a momentary chasm, a fracture of silence out of which a different kind of electricity flows before the line swings and the adjective “darkest” repeats the k once more, two taps of disquietude.

In stanza 3 the reversal has taken place. Instead of the guttural mutes being quieted—swallowed up in a splash of softer sounds—they rise up among and after the soft sounds, insisting they be heard. The first hard g in the poem occurs on the first line of this third stanza: “he gives his harness bells a shake . . .”. Though the g is instantly quieted by the two b’s, the moment of introspection is almost over, and the ear anticipates this with “bells” and with the word “shake”—louder than “lake,” more forceful. In the following line the k repeats in the very meaningful word “ask” (the traveler is not the only “asking” creature in the poem); and this line as well as the following lines of the third stanza end with mutes. Altogether, in this stanza, we have “shake,” “mistake,” “sweep,” and “lake,” while, in the two stanzas preceding, there has been only one such moment (the end word “lake” in line 7).

Something is stirring, in the very sound; it leads us to ready ourselves for the resolution in stanza 4. There, “the woods are lovely” takes us exactly back to the mood of the first stanza, but the second half of that line thumbs out “dark and deep,” both words beginning with a mute and ending with a mute. They represent, in the sound, themselves, and more than themselves. They say not only that the woods are dark and deep, but that the speaker has come to another place in his mind and can speak in this different way, designating with the voice, as with the gesture of an arm, a new sense of decision and resolution.

Line 2 of the last stanza both begins and ends with a mute, and there is the heavy p in “promises” in the center of the line. Lines 3 and 4, the same line repeated, are intricate indeed. “Miles,” that soft sound, representative of all one’s difficult mortal years, floats above the heavy mutes pacing to the end of the line—“go,” “before,” “sleep.” The unmistakable, definite weights that are the mutes help to make the final line more than an echo of the third line. Everything transcends from the confines of its initial meaning; it is not only the transcendence in meaning but the sound of the transcendency that enables it to work. With the wrong sounds, it could not have happened.

I don’t mean to suggest that Frost sat down and counted out the mutes, aspirates, etc., while writing the poem. Or that any poet does anything like this. I mean to suggest that poets select words for their sound as well as their meaning—and that good poets make good
initial selections. Of course they also revise. But they have already—"naturally," one wants to say—worked from such a font of knowledge and sensitivity that often near-miracles of sound-and-sense have already happened.

How do they do this? Language aptitude differs from person to person, we know. Also, just as a bricklayer or any worker—even a brain surgeon—improves with study and experience, surely poets become more proficient: with study and "practice."

Verbal skills can be learned. They can be discussed and practiced. Then, a wonderful thing happens: what is learned consciously settles, somewhere inside the chambers of the mind, where—you can count on it—it will "remember" what it knows and will float forth to assist in the initial writing.

Frost kept no jottings about sound while he wrote *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. He did not need to. He was a master poet. The poem is an extraordinary statement of human ambivalence and resolution. Genius wrote it. But more than one technical device assisted, the first of which is an extraordinary use of sound.
Revision

What you are first able to write on the page, whether the writing comes easily or with difficulty, is not likely to be close to a finished poem. If it has arrived without much effort, so much the better; if it was written with great toil, that does not matter either. What matters is that you consider what you have on the page as an unfinished piece of work that now requires your best conscious and patient appraisal.

One of the difficult tasks of rewriting is to separate yourself sufficiently from the origins of the poem—your own personal connections to it. Without this separation, it is hard for the writer to judge whether the written piece has all the information it needs—the details, after all, are so vivid in your own mind. On the other hand, because of this very sense of ownership, the poem is often burdened with a variety of “true” but unhelpful details.

Poems begin in experience, but poems are not in
fact experience, nor even a necessarily exact reportage of an experience. They are imaginative constructs, and they do not exist to tell us about the poet or the poet's actual experience—they exist in order to be poems. John Cheever says somewhere in his journals, "I lie, in order to tell a more significant truth." The poem, too, is after "a more significant truth." Loyalty to the actual experience—whatever got the poem started—is not necessarily helpful; often it is a hindrance.

I like to say that I write poems for a stranger who will be born in some distant country hundreds of years from now. This is a useful notion, especially during revision. It reminds me, forcefully, that everything necessary must be on the page. I must make a complete poem—a river-swimming poem, a mountain-climbing poem. Not my poem, if it's well done, but a deeply breathing, bounding, self-sufficient poem. Like a traveler in an uncertain land, it needs to carry with it all that it must have to sustain its own life—and not a lot of extra weight, either.

A caution: there are poems that are packed full of interesting and beautiful lines—metaphors on top of metaphors—details depending from details. Such poems slide this way and that way, they never say something but they say it twice, or thrice. Clearly they are very clever poems. Forsaken however in such writing is the pace—the energy between the start and the finish, the sense of flow, movement, and integrity. Finally the great weight of its glittering pulls it down. How much wiser to keep a little of the metaphoric glitter in one's pocket, and let the poem maintain, without excessive

interruption, its forward flow. Cutting is an important part of revision.

In truth, revision is an almost endless task. But it is endlessly fascinating, too, and especially in the early years it is a process in which much is learned.

In my own work, I usually revise through forty or fifty drafts of a poem before I begin to feel content with it. Other poets take longer. Have some lines come to you, a few times, nearly perfect, as easily as a dream arranges itself during sleep? That's luck. That's grace. But this is the usual way: hard work, hard work, hard work. This is the way it is done.

It is good to remember how many sweet and fine poems there are in the world—I mean, it is a help to remember that out of writing, and the rewriting, beauty is born.

It is good also to remember that, now and again, it is simply best to throw a poem away. Some things are unfixable.