

The Spirit is too Blunt an Instrument

By Anne Stevenson

Anthology by Peter & Wonsuek

The spirit is too blunt an instrument
to have made this baby.
Nothing so unskilful as human passions
could have managed the intricate
exacting particulars: the tiny
blind bones with their manipulating tendons,
the knee and the knucklebones, the resilient
fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae,
the chain of the difficult spine.

Observe the distinct eyelashes and sharp crescent
fingernails, the shell-like complexity
of the ear, with its firm involutions
concentric in miniature to minute
ossicles. Imagine the
infinitesimal capillaries, the flawless connections
of the lungs, the invisible neural filaments
through which the completed body
already answers to the brain.

Then name any passion or sentiment
possessed of the simplest accuracy.
No, no desire or affection could have done
with practice what habit
has done perfectly, indifferently,
through the body's ignorant precision.
It is left to the vagaries of the mind to invent
love and despair and anxiety
and their pain.

Ganglia: a mass of nerve
tissue existing outside the
central nervous system.

Involution: the act of
complicating and
entangling.

Concentric: having a
common center

Infinitesimal: indefinitely
or exceedingly small

Biographical Details

- Ann Stevenson was born in England, to American parents in 1933.

- She was educated in Ann Arbor, Which is a large town in Michigan, where the largest part of the campus for the university of Michigan is located.

- Her father was professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan. Her fathers occupation had an effect on her life, and undoubtedly had an influence on the way she writes.

- After obtaining her bachelor's and master's degrees, and graduating with honours from Michigan, she moved to Great Britain where, claiming citizenship, she has lived for most of her life.



- From 1974 through 1996 OUP published eight collections of her poems. Since 2000, Bloodaxe Books has published three more, including a new and substantial *Poems 1955-2005*.
- She has been married four times.
- She was the inaugural winner of the Northern Rock Writers Award in 2002.

Interpretation

'The spirit is too blunt an instrument' talks quietly and lovingly of the amazement felt by a parent looking at her child. She wonders how could any clumsy human passion have led to the creation of such intricate perfection. To almost everybody except the parents involved, a birth is an everyday event of little interest, but the thoughts aroused by the birth in the poem are extremely interesting. The last three lines, in some sense, almost out of place, make a powerful and striking suggestion about our minds and emotions. And it is strange that the final word of the poem, after its marvelling at the beauty and perfection of creation, should simply be "pain".

Annotation

Lines 1-2: The spirit is too blunt an instrument
to have made this baby.

This is saying that the spirit that humans possess, does not have the ability to create something as intricate and beautiful as a new born baby.

Lines 3-5: Nothing so unskilful as human passions
could have managed the intricate
exacting particulars

This explains how human passions are unskillful and almost unreliable. It says that the passions of humans could not have made a being with such exact and particular specifications.

Lines 5-9: the tiny
blind bones with their manipulating tendons,
the knee and the knucklebones, the resilient
fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae,
the chain of the difficult spine.

These lines describe the complicated nature of the baby's body. She describes the baby in great detail, using interesting and almost out of place adjectives such as manipulating, and resilient. The interesting language she uses paints a complex picture of the baby, and reinforces the idea that human passion could not have created a being with such intricate detail.

Lines 10-14: Observe the distinct eyelashes and sharp crescent fingernails, the shell-like complexity of the ear, with its firm involutions concentric in miniature to minute ossicles.

These lines focus on describing the parts of the body, that you can see on its exterior. The language gives a sense that the narrator is in awe of the complexity of the baby. She observes the "distinct eyelashes" and compares the complexity of the ear, to that of a shell.

- **Lines 14-18:** Imagine the infinitesimal capillaries, the flawless connections of the lungs, the invisible neural filaments through which the completed body already answers to the brain.

In contrast to the previous phrase, these lines focus on describing the internal structure of the baby. Instead of observing, the narrator tells you to imagine, giving the idea that the parts of the baby, such as the capillaries are to “infinitesimal” and intricate to be seen with the human eye. The “flawless connections” and “completed body that already answers to the brain” tells how the baby is already completed and functioning perfectly, before the human spirit has manipulated it. Thus giving the idea that the human spirit is not needed to create a perfectly formed baby.

Lines 19-20: Then name any passion or sentiment
Possessed of the simplest accuracy.

This simply means name any passion or sentiment in the simplest terms.

Lines 21-24: No, no desire or affection could have done
with practice what habit
has done perfectly, indifferently,
through the body's ignorant precision.

These lines explain that no human affection could have created the baby as accurately as it has been by habit of nature. It says that nature can create such beauty and perfection, with no effort at all because it has “practiced” and works through habit, rather than the lack of precision the spirit possesses.

Lines 25-27: It is left to the vagaries of the mind to invent
love and despair and anxiety
and their pain.

These last few lines say that after the baby has been born, perfect in some ways, and ignorant of feelings and emotions, it is up to the unpredictability of the human mind to create feelings such as love, despair, anxiety and pain.

Language

- The poem is made up of three stanzas, each holding a different idea.
- The poem does not contain any rhyme scheme, it is more a freely written poem, that puts more emphasis on the adjectives and description of ideas to create effect.
- Ann Stevenson often used precise and perhaps unfamiliar scientific terms, combined with what may appear to be unemotional and even quite cold language, but nonetheless create a sense of real wonder and joy by still holding a feeling of excitement and amazement in the Language.
- The last three lines of the poem seem almost out of place, as the rest of the poem is marveling at the beauty of the baby, and the last three lines create a dark image of the human mind, and end simply with the word “pain”.