# The Spirit Is Too Blunt an Instrument

## SUMMARY

The soul, the speaker says, isn't a sharp or deft enough tool to have created the baby before them. Human emotions are too clumsy to have crafted the extremely complex and demanding details of the baby's body—things like all the little bones and the ligaments controlling them; knees and the bones of the knuckles; the strong yet delicate webs of nerve cells and spinal bones; the complicated spine, with its pieces linked together like a chain.

Just look, the speaker continues, at all the individual eyelashes and fingernails shaped like crisp half-moons, at the intricate ear, which looks like a shell as its parts curve inward around tinier and tinier bones. Just think of the imperceptibly small blood vessels, of the perfect way the lungs are linked together, of the microscopic clusters of protein inside of nerve cells, which allow the fully-formed body to respond to the brain's instructions.

Look at all this and then try to name even a single emotion, thought, or feeling that's as straightforward and precise. It's impossible; no sense of longing or tenderness, no matter how rehearsed, could have accomplished what routine has done so flawlessly, and without care or concern, simply by way of the body's unthinking biological exactness. It's up to the mind's whims to create love, anguish, and dread, as well as the suffering these emotions cause.

## THEMES

### THE PERFECTION OF THE BODY VS. THE MESSINESS OF THE SPIRIT

In "The spirit is too blunt an instrument," the speaker describes the perfection of a newborn baby. Amazed by the "precision" of nature's designs, the speaker notes that every detail of this baby's body has been impeccably crafted by "habit"—by millions of years of "ignorant" biological processes. By contrast, the speaker argues that "human passions" are frustratingly imprecise; unlike the marvel of the body, thoughts and emotions are messy, mysterious, and painful. At the same time, the poem suggests an inherent link between the body and spirit: biology is an unthinking, unfeeling process, and it's only the *combination* of nature's "simple accuracy" with the more nebulous workings of the "spirit" that makes human beings *human*.

The speaker encourages the reader to marvel at the perfection of a newborn baby's body by describing all the "intricate / exacting particulars": the complicated and utterly precise details from "the knee and the knucklebones" to the "resilient / fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae" (i.e., the strong yet delicate web of nerve cells and spinal bones). They call on the reader to "Observe the distinct eyelashes and sharp crescent / fingernails" and to "Imagine the infinitesimal" (or microscopically small) "capillaries" (or blood vessels), the "flawless connections / of the lungs," and "the invisible neural filaments" of the brain. An incredible number of incredibly perfect parts, the speaker argues, seamlessly join to create a human body.

Unlike the body, the speaker finds the "human passions" that rule it rough and clumsy. The speaker says "the spirit" could never have created the baby because it is "too blunt" (or dull) "an instrument." In other words, the spirit lacks nature's "precision," which has had eons to fine-tune its processes. "Human passions" are "unskilful" and lack finesse.

And yet, there's also something rather cold and mechanical about the speaker's descriptions of the body. The speaker uses precise, medical terminology while listing out all these biological parts and processes, divorcing these disparate pieces of anatomy from the actual human being they combine to create. In calling the creation of the body mere "habit," the speaker also presents nature itself as unthinking and unfeeling. It creates "perfectly" yet "indifferently," and the body's "precision" is "ignorant"—lacking in any sort of knowledge or self-awareness. The physical body might be a natural *marvel*, then, but it doesn't sound all that *human*.

Thus, even as the speaker seems, at first, to celebrate bodily perfection over the messiness of the mind, it's not that simple. Just as the various parts of the body are seamlessly connected, so too are biological processes of the body connected to the mysterious impulses of "the mind." Nature's "ignorant precision" produces a "body" that, as soon as it's formed, "already answers to the brain."

And while the speaker claims that "no desire or affection" could have created something so perfect as the baby in front of them, the poem implies otherwise. That is, these biological processes can *only* be set in motion by some "passion" or other—be it love, sexual desire, loneliness, etc. While biological processes may be automatic, the contact that initiates them is not.

Human beings are the result of *both* "indifferent[]" biology *and* something harder to define or understand—the "vagaries" (or impulses) of the mind. These vagaries might "invent / love and despair and anxiety / and their pain," but it's up to readers to decide whether these feelings tarnish the perfection of the body or breathe life into it.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-27

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*The spirit is ...*
*... exacting particulars:*

The speaker metaphorically compares the human spirit to an unsharpened tool—a "blunt," or dull/clumsy—"instrument." Such a tool, the speaker says, couldn't possibly "have made this baby."

Readers might picture the speaker holding their own baby as they marvel at the "intricate" perfection of the child's body, which the poem presents as akin to a carefully crafted work of art. The "spirit" is like a hammer or dull knife clumsily thwacking away at a block of marble or wood; the creation of something as delicate and detailed as an infant requires much more dexterity and finesse than the spirit can muster.

Alliteration and intricate consonance contribute to the speaker's emphatic tone. Listen to the bold /b/ sounds in "**b**lunt" and "**b**aby" and to the sharp, crisp /n/ and /t/ sounds throughout the line:

> The spir**i**t is too blu**n**t an instrume**n**t

There's also subtle assonance between "made" and "baby." Altogether, these sonic devices make the poem's opening lines striking and memorable.

Notice, too, that this first line is enjambed:

> The spirit is too blunt an **instrument**
> **to** have [...]

The poem pushes the reader swiftly across the line break, leaving no time to question the spirit's supposed "bluntness." Line 2 then comes to a clear pause with the full stop after "baby," adding a sense of firmness and finality to the speaker's argument.

The speaker expands on this argument in the following lines. Human "passions"—people's emotions, desires, etc.—are far too clumsy and inept to create a baby's "intricate / exacting particulars." A baby is made up of a multitude of tiny parts, in other words, each of which demands perfection. "Human passions" are messy and imprecise, and they thus lack the metaphorical dexterity to craft something so incredibly detailed.

Listen to the crisp /p/, /t/, and /k/ sounds in these lines, the sharpness of which evokes the dexterity being described:

> Nothing so unskilful as human passions
> could have managed the intricate
> exacting particulars: [...]

Lines 3-5 are also all enjambed, giving the poem a burst of momentum and excitement that perhaps suggests the speaker getting wrapped up in the wonder that is the baby's body.

This speed is then curtailed by the pronounced caesura in line 5, which is created by the colon after "particulars." This dramatic pause signals to the reader that the speaker is about to launch into a list of the "particulars" that make up the body of this amazing, newborn human being.

### LINES 5-9

*the tiny ...*
*... the difficult spine.*

The speaker goes on to describe those "intricate / exacting particulars" in great detail, and they also emphasize just how connected these "particulars" are. That is, the speaker calls attention not only to the body's distinct parts, but to the way that each of those distinct parts depends on, and strengthens, one another:

- The speaker first mentions the baby's "tiny / **b**lind **b**ones." The /b/ alliteration adds emphasis to this image, which suggests that the body, unlike the mind or spirit, doesn't know what it's doing; like an earthworm or mole moving blindly through the dirt, it's working purely from instinct.
- These bones, the speaker continues, are controlled by "tendons" (or ligaments), the effects of which can be seen in the "knee" and in the "knucklebones." The alliteration in "**kn**ee" and "**kn**ucklebones" again adds rhythm to the poem and emphasizes the way these individual parts of the body are connected.
- The next images further emphasize the connected nature of the body as the speaker describes "the resilient / fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae." "Ganglia" are clusters of nerve cells while "vertebrae" are the bones and cartilage that make up the spine. These mesh together to create a delicate yet sturdy web.
- Finally, the speaker turns to the "chain" of the spine that these stacked vertebrae create in the spine. A chain is a series of linked rings, and this imagery provides not only a clear sense of how these "vertebrae" interlock but also suggests the *strength* that results from this design. That the "spine" is "difficult" implies that such a design requires a great deal of precision—the slightest error in its development could mess up the whole body, as everything is ultimately connected to the backbone and its nerves.

Notice the use of persistent /n/ and /ng/ consonance in these lines: "blind bones," "manipulating tendons," "resilient / fine meshings of ganglia," etc. Such abundant consonance connects all these different words to each other on the level of sound, mimicking the "meshings" the speaker is describing. In other words, just as the backbone seems to hold the whole body together, so too does consonance seem to glue these lines together.

## LINES 10-14

*Observe the distinct ...*
*... ossicles.*

The speaker continues to describe various parts of the baby's body, now pointing out the "distinct eyelashes and sharp crescent / fingernails." The imagery suggests the speaker is taking in each and every tiny detail of the body in front of them in amazement. Again, the human body comes across as remarkably intricate.

The speaker then notes "the shell-like complexity / of the ear." This vivid simile compares the ear's "involutions"—the curves of cartilage—to the swirls of a seashell. These curves are "concentric," meaning that they emanate from the same center (the ear canal). And these tiny, concentric arcs of cartilage surround even tinier bones ("minute ossicles"). The alliteration of "miniature" and "minute" adds emphasis to the description, conveying the extreme complexity of a baby's ear; those tiny, beautiful curves shrink down to even smaller pieces that the naked eye can't see.

Listen, too, to the sharp /k/ alliteration and consonance, short /i/ assonance, and sibilance: "distinct," "crescent," "shell-like complexity," "concentric," "ossicles."

These sounds add both intensity and lyricism to the poem, helping to push the reader through its rather challenging vocabulary and syntax. Indeed, this isn't ordinary, everyday language. Rather than cooing at the baby and praising its adorableness, the speaker uses precise, scientific jargon that might make readers forget they're talking about a child!

Lines 10-14 are all enjambed, creating propulsive momentum that perhaps suggests just how carried away the speaker is getting. Asyndeton—the absence of any coordinating conjunction between "fingernails" and "the shell-like complexity"—also contributes to this sense of speed and exhaustiveness. The speaker is seemingly listing every incredible thing they can think of about this baby's physical form.

Of course, caesura contributes to the poem's pacing as well. There's a dramatic pause in line 14 (the period after "ossicles") that conveys a threshold about to be crossed: the speaker goes from talking about exterior parts of the body—"eyelashes," "fingernails," and the curves of the "ear" narrowing toward the ear's opening—to parts that can only be "Imagine[d]."

## LINES 14-18

*Imagine the ...*
*... to the brain.*

The speaker moves beyond the parts the eye can see, now telling readers to "Image" the invisible inner workings of the baby's body. These include the "infinitesimal" (or extremely tiny) "capillaries" (blood vessels), the "flawless connections / of the lungs," and "the invisible neural filaments" (or protein clusters in neurons that allow communication between cells).

Though the speaker can't literally see any of these things, the speaker knows they're there, "invisibl[y]" allowing the baby's body to function. And this contrast between the visible and invisible parts of the baby's body subtly echos the contrast between the body and spirit, between precise biology and the pieces of human beings that can't be quantified and explained (like those messy "human passions" from the first stanza).

Indeed, the speaker says that all of these unseen mechanisms within the body are what allow "the completed body" to "answer[] to the brain." In other words, the body is no sooner "complete" than it is "already" responding to the brain's signals.

Though the brain is of course part of the body, it's also somehow separate; people have been debating just *how* separate forever, basically! Because though the brain is seated in the body and controls the body, it also connects human beings to the "passions" that seem somehow *beyond* the body—to the "spirit" that can't be seen or touched and yet which guides everything that humans do.

Once again, alliteration, consonance, and assonance imbue these lines with musicality and emphasis. Just listen to the dense repetition of sounds here:

> infinitesimal capillaries, the flawless connections
> of the lungs, the invisible neural filaments

All of these sonic connections also continue to echo the *bodily* connectivity the speaker is describing—the way that tiny blood vessels stretch across the body, the way the lungs, on opposite sides of the body, "flawless[ly]" link together.

## LINES 19-24

*Then name any ...*
*... body's ignorant precision.*

In the third stanza, the speaker again compares the "spirit" unfavorably to the body. Having already asked the reader to "Imagine" the incredible, unseen inner workings of the body, they now ask readers to "name any passion or sentiment / possessed of the simplest accuracy."

In other words, the speaker is practically daring the reader (or maybe even themselves) to point to a single emotion or feeling that's as straightforward and efficient as the physical body. The insinuation is that, unlike the body, the spirit is messy and

mystifying; there *are no* "simple[]" explanations for how it functions.

The intense /p/ and /s/ consonance of these lines add emphasis to the speaker's statement, making it sound almost as though they're spitting out these words in disgust:

> [...] passion or sentiment
> possessed of the simplest accuracy.

The speaker then answers their own question, saying that "desire or affection" could never have accomplished what "habit / has done." Epizeuxis ("No, no desire or affection") emphasizes the speaker's point: there's not a single human emotion or desire that could accomplish what nature has.

Nature also performs its task "perfectly, indifferently," words that emphasize the precision of biology but also make these processes sound rather cold and mechanical. Only the "ignorant precision" of "habit" can create a human being. Biology doesn't need self-awareness or knowledge to do what it does. It is completely efficient without these distracting, difficult "passions."

Notice the string of /p/ alliteration connecting "practice," "perfectly," and "precision," and the /i/ alliteration connecting "indifferently" and "ignorant." This alliteration calls readers' attention to the flawless yet thoughtless way that the body operates. These forceful, plosive /p/ sounds also perhaps evoke the speaker's rather disdainful tone; it's as if they feel people would be better off without "passion or sentiment."

### LINES 25-27

> *It is left ...*
> *... and their pain.*

The speaker has just declared that the body is precise yet ignorant and indifferent. It's up to the mind, they continue in the poem's final lines, to fill the unthinking body with "love and despair and anxiety / and their pain."

Notice the use of polysyndeton in this list: "love and despair and anxiety / and their pain." This repetition makes it feel as though all these "vagaries" are piling up on top of each other, perhaps even threatening to overwhelm the speaker.

Note, too, how this polysyndeton contrasts with the sleek asyndeton the speaker has used thus far in the poem when describing the body. That asyndeton made the speaker's lists of body parts feel elegant, sleek, and swift; polysyndeton, meanwhile, makes this list of emotions feel cumbersome.

These words are all very simple and abstract compared to the complex, specific, often scientific jargon used elsewhere in the poem (in phrases like "resilient fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae," "infinitesimal capillaries," "sharp crescent fingernails," "invisible neural filaments," and so on). These emotional words are, essentially, *blunter*, less precise, than those used to describe the physical body.

All of these imperfect, messy feelings that drive people seem somehow separate from the intricate, precise "habit" that resulted in a "completed" baby. On one level, perhaps the speaker is arguing that the "pain" of these feelings tarnishes what would otherwise be "flawless"—that is, that human emotions mar the perfection of the human body.

Or, perhaps, the opposite is true: the "vagaries of the mind" don't tarnish the body but give it life. After all, a human being with no "mind"/"spirit" isn't a human being at all! The speaker's detached, almost medical treatment of the baby's body throughout the poem seems to point to the fact that, without the mysterious, self-aware impulses that drive human beings, there are only mere clusters of unthinking, "indifferent" biological processes.

The spirit might be a messy, vague, *blunt* tool, but it's also part of what makes people *human*.

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality and lyricism to the poem. Though the speaker uses lots of dense, scientific language, alliteration (plus frequent consonance and assonance) means that it still sounds pleasing and *poetic*.

For example, listen to the alliteration in lines 6-7:

> blind bones with their manipulating tendons,
> the knee and the knucklebones, the resilient

The alliteration adds emphasis to these body parts, and it also generally heightens the poem's language. In this way, alliteration helps to convey just how *incredible* the human body is.

Alliteration also emphasizes the intricate connections within the body. For example, notice how the phrase "miniature to minute" evokes the way the cartilage of the ear curves inward, like the concentric revolutions of a seashell, getting smaller and smaller closer to the ear canal. The same sounds slip across the line as the words themselves shrink (moving from "miniature" to positively "minute").

Alliteration also overlaps with consonance and assonance. Together, these devices make the poem sound richly musical and memorable, and they also evoke the images being described. Just listen to the crisp /t/ and /k/ sounds in the phrase "intricate exacting particulars"; the sharp, quick consonance *itself* feels intricate, exacting, and particular.

Another passage dense with sound patterning comes at the start of stanza 2. There's the alliteration of phrases like "sharp cresent [...] shell-like complexity," as well as broader consonance

of /k/, /s/, /sh/, /t/, and /n/ sounds:

> 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. [...]

This latticework of sounds evokes the interconnected nature of the body itself, which functions because it has countless links between all these seemingly disparate parts.

The second half of the stanza is likewise filled with alliteration, consonance, and assonance. /C/, /m/, /l/, /n/, and short /i/ and /n/ sounds trickle down the page, lending a kind of connective musicality to the long lists of complex words. Take lines 14-16:

> ossicles. Imagine the
> infinitesimal capillaries, the flawless connections
> of the lungs, the invisible neural filaments

Again, the richly layered sounds suggest just how beautifully complex the body itself is.

Finally, notice all the plosive /p/ alliteration in the poem's closing stanza: "passion," "possessed," "practice, "perfectly," "precision." These sounds evoke the speaker's biting tone: they seem to be almost sneering at "passion" and "sentiment," which compared to biology are clumsy and inaccurate and impossible to understand.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "blunt"
- **Line 2:** "baby"
- **Line 3:** "passions"
- **Line 5:** "particulars"
- **Line 6:** "blind," "bones"
- **Line 7:** "knee," "knucklebones"
- **Line 10:** "sharp," "crescent"
- **Line 11:** "shell," "complexity"
- **Line 12:** "involutions"
- **Line 13:** "concentric," "miniature," "minute"
- **Line 14:** "Imagine"
- **Line 15:** "infinitesimal," "capillaries," "connections"
- **Line 16:** "invisible"
- **Line 19:** "passion," "sentiment"
- **Line 20:** "possessed," "simplest"
- **Line 22:** "practice"
- **Line 23:** "perfectly," "indifferently"
- **Line 24:** "ignorant," "precision"

## ENJAMBMENT

About two-thirds of the poem's lines are enjambed, creating a sense of fluidity and momentum as the poem unfurls down the page. This, in turn, evokes the speaker's building awe and amazement at the human body. In linking the poem's lines, enjambment also mirrors the links between the distinct parts of the body that the speaker lists.

For example, the entire second stanza is enjambed until its final line. Take a look at 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. Imagine the

So much enjambment is particularly noticeable in a poem filled with so much dense, scientific language; the reader doesn't get time to sit and unpack all of these uncommon words! Instead, they rush at the reader, conveying the overwhelming *complexity* of the human body. The reader has to pay close attention as they're pushed from one line to the next, or they risk losing track of the various parts of the body the speaker is describing.

Note, too, how frequent asyndeton enhances the poem's fluid momentum. The speaker never connects all these pieces of the body with coordinating conjunctions.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "instrument / to"
- **Lines 3-4:** "passions / could"
- **Lines 4-5:** "intricate / exacting"
- **Lines 5-6:** "tiny / blind"
- **Lines 7-8:** "resilient / fine"
- **Lines 10-11:** "crescent / fingernails"
- **Lines 11-12:** "complexity / of"
- **Lines 12-13:** "involutions / concentric"
- **Lines 13-14:** "minute / ossicles"
- **Lines 14-15:** "the / infinitesimal"
- **Lines 15-16:** "connections / of"
- **Lines 16-17:** "filaments / through"
- **Lines 17-18:** "body / already"
- **Lines 19-20:** "sentiment / possessed"
- **Lines 21-22:** "done / with"
- **Lines 22-23:** "habit / has"
- **Lines 25-26:** "invent / love"
- **Lines 26-27:** "anxiety / and"

## METAPHOR

In the opening lines, the speaker calls the "spirit" "too blunt an instrument." This metaphor presents the "spirit" as a kind of dull tool, something far too clumsy and bulky to have crafted something as delicate and intricate as the human body.

If readers picture the body as a sculpture, then the "spirit" is like a hammer—something too heavy and inexact to carefully

craft all the "intricate / exacting particulars" of the body. Nature is like a sharp, deft chisel, capable of carving "tiny" bones, "infinitesimal capillaries," and so forth. This metaphor shapes the entire argument of the poem, which personifies "human passions" (things like desire and despair) as "unskilful" in comparison to the incredible perfection of the body.

At the same time, however, the poem presents biological processes as "ignorant" and "indifferent." In other words, nature isn't consciously aware of what it's creating; the bones, tendons, neural filaments, and so forth are just the result of thoughtless "habit."

Thus while the spirit might be awkward, vague, and imprecise, it's also part of what makes human beings human. Without it, the poem implies, the body is just a bunch of "ignorant" pieces unknowingly linking together. The "vagaries of the mind" might "invent / love and despair and anxiety / and their pain," but these things are also part of what it means to be a *conscious* being.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-5:** "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:"
- **Lines 21-27:** "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."

## IMAGERY

The poem's imagery illustrates the beautiful, overwhelming complexity of the human body. In relying on scientific jargon, this imagery also makes the human body seem, somewhat ironically, inhuman. That is, all these descriptions convey the intricate processes happening inside human beings without our knowledge or input; the imagery makes the body feel alien or foreign, a well-oiled machine that people's conscious minds had no hand in creating.

The speaker mentions "tiny / blind bones with their manipulating tendons" in the first stanza, for example. The speaker subtly personifies the different pieces of the baby's body, treating the "bones" as unable to function without the control of the "tendons" they're attached to. This imagery underscored the connections between the disparate parts of the body.

Similarly, in lines 7-9, the speaker describes "the resilient / fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae, / the chain of the difficult spine." By describing the "ganglia" (nerve tissue) and "vertebrae" (the small bones of the "spine") as "fine meshings," the speaker draws attention to the intricate *relationship* between these different parts of the body. Bones, tendons, cells—they're all linked, like fabric in a web or pieces of a "chain."

The speaker goes on to describe "the distinct eyelashes and sharp crescent / fingernails." "Distinct" can mean noteworthy or making a strong impression, but it can also mean that whatever is being perceived is made up of discrete parts. So the speaker might be saying that the eyelashes are particularly noticeable—maybe they are especially thick or curled!—or they may simply be saying that each and every eyelash is discernible from all the others. Either way, the speaker conveys just how amazingly detailed the body is; every teenie, tiny part is worth noticing.

In lines 11-12, the speaker uses a simile to describe "the shell-like complexity" of the baby's "ear." The speaker is using a "shell" to help the reader visualize the way the cartilage and "minute" (or tiny) bones of the ear all curve around the cavity of the ear canal.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- **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."
- **Lines 10-16:** "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"

## ASYNDETON

The poem contains several instances of asyndeton, which works alongside the poem's frequent enjambment to convey the speaker's breathless amazement at the complexity of the human body. It's as though they have no time to stop and include coordinating conjunctions because there are just so many different parts to mention!

Take lines 14-16:

> [...] Imagine the
> infinitesimal capillaries, the flawless connections
> of the lungs, the invisible neural filaments

The speaker's language is precise as they swiftly bounce between all these extraordinary parts, yet the use of asyndeton makes these lists move so quickly that they might overwhelm the reader. This, in turn, reflects just how *incredibly* intricate the body is.

The poem also contains polysyndeton, which is the *opposite* of asyndeton, in its final lines:

It is left to the vagaries of the mind to invent
love and despair and anxiety
and their pain.

Here, a *surplus* of coordinating conjunctions emphasizes makes this list of "human passions" feel slower and clunkier than the lists of body parts. This reflects the speaker's point: that the "spirit" is blunt and imprecise.

**Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **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."
- **Lines 10-12:** "Observe the distinct eyelashes and sharp crescent / fingernails, the shell-like complexity / of the ear"
- **Lines 14-16:** "Imagine the / infinitesimal capillaries, the flawless connections / of the lungs, the invisible neural filaments"

## VOCABULARY

**Instrument** (Line 1) - A tool.

**Blunt** (Line 1) - Dull; not sharp.

**Intricate exacting particulars** (Lines 3-5) - The complicated, demanding, specific elements of the human body.

**Manipulating tendons** (Lines 5-6) - *Tendons* are cords of connective tissue that run through the body. The speaker is describing them as *manipulating*—or controlling—the body's bones.

**Resilient fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae** (Lines 7-8) - *Ganglia* refers to a collection of nerve cells, while *vertebrae* refer to the small bones that make up the spine. The speaker describes these cells/bones as being interwoven into a strong yet delicate web.

**Involutions** (Line 12) - Shrinkings. The speaker is describing the way the curves of the ear get smaller and smaller.

**Concentric** (Lines 13-14) - Sharing the same center (in this case, this is describing the various overlapping curves of the "ear").

**Ossicles** (Lines 13-14) - Extremely small bones.

**Minute** (Lines 13-14) - Very little.

**Infinitesimal capillaries** (Lines 14-15) - Imperceptibly small blood vessels.

**Neural filaments** (Line 16) - Extremely thin clusters of protein found in neurons (or nerve cells). These are the cells that communicate with each other, allowing the brain to send messages to the rest of the body and vice versa.

**Possessed of** (Line 20) - That has.

**Indifferently** (Lines 22-23) - Without care, interest, or concern. The natural processes of biology don't care about anything, in other words; they just *happen*.

**Ignorant precision** (Line 24) - The speaker is saying the body works perfectly without being conscious of what it's doing.

**Vagaries** (Line 25) - Unpredictable thoughts, feelings, actions, etc.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem consists of 27 lines of free verse, which are divided into three nine-line stanzas. Not coincidentally, the human gestation period is nine months long; the stanza lengths suggest the nine months it takes for a baby to grow inside the womb.

Beyond stanza length, the poem doesn't stick to any regular form. This allows the poem to move in a way that feels natural and conversational even as the speaker is using complex language to describe the details of the human body.

### METER

The poem is written in free verse and therefore does not use any regular meter. This keeps its language conversational, natural, and unpredictable.

A steady meter might have made the poem feel too self-consciously *crafted*. The lack of meter, then, perhaps echoes the idea that nature/the body creates new life "indifferently" and with "ignorant precision." That is, there's a matter-of-factness created by the absence of meter that might suggest the matter-of-fact way the body goes about doing exactly what the body is built to do, without self-awareness.

### RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "The Spirit is Too Blunt an Instrument" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. This lack of rhyme keeps the poem feeling serious and reflective; it would probably feel rather odd for the speaker to be describing the body in such scientific detail if the poem also had a predictable, sing-song rhyme scheme.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Spirit is Too Blunt an Instrument" is someone marveling at a newborn baby. The poem doesn't reveal whether the speaker is the baby's parent; in fact, the poem doesn't reveal much about the speaker at all. Instead, it focuses almost entirely on the speaker's descriptions of the

baby's body.

These descriptions are highly detailed and "precis[e]," much like the body the speaker is regarding. The speaker isn't thinking about how cute the baby is nor how much they love the baby. They're also not wondering who the baby will grow up to be, or whether they're going to be a good parent. Instead, they're mapping out what makes the baby's body so perfect and thinking about how the mind/spirit could never have accomplished what the body has done without even thinking about it. They seem to understand human biology, but human emotions—"love and despair and anxiety / and their pain"—mystify them.

## SETTING

The poem isn't set in any particular time or place. Its detailed descriptions of human biology indicate a contemporary understanding of science, but other than that, this poem could take place anywhere at any time.

The lack of setting highlights the poem's philosophical concerns. The question of body vs. mind/spirit is an ancient one; people have been debating what makes humans *human* for a very, very long time!

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

The American-British poet Anne Stevenson (1933 to 2020) attended the University of Michigan with the intention of becoming a professional musician. When she began to lose her hearing, however, she turned to writing instead. She then studied poetry under American poet Donald Hall, who encouraged her to continue writing.

In addition to poetry, Stevenson is known for a biography she wrote about the American poet Sylvia Plath, titled *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. She has also written two books about Elizabeth Bishop.

Both Plath and Bishop had a profound influence on Stevenson's own work. Reading Bishop taught her how to merge an impartial understanding of nature with her own personal feelings and experiences. Plath, on the other hand, was Stevenson's contemporary, and of her Stevenson has said:

> Sylvia, two months older than I, was, as a poet, far ahead of me in the '60s, but we experienced the same confusions about marriage, children and ambition, and we both had terribly naive, idealistic expectations when we came to England. When *Ariel* appeared I recognized the world of Plath's madness without actually going mad myself. It was a near miss, though. I suppose *Ariel* became a sort of substitute breakdown for lots of women at that time.

Stevenson did not identify with any particular school or tradition of poetry. She wrote formal as well as free verse, but, in general, she was moved more by "the long, varied tradition of English poetry—Donne, Blake, Keats, Dickinson, Whitman, Frost—" than by contemporary verse.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During World War II, women often worked outside the home while men served in the military. In the years following the war, women across Western society faced immense pressure to return to the home and fulfill their supposedly natural roles as wives and mothers.

Many women during this period felt profound unhappiness at their lack of autonomy, described by feminist writer Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as "the problem that has no name." Anne Stevenson was no different—all around her, she saw women giving up careers and personal freedoms to become housewives whose lives revolved entirely around their children and their homes.

Stevenson very nearly became one of these women. She gave birth to her first child in 1957 and found herself feeling smothered by domestic life. She was so miserable that she couldn't eat, read, or write. Having witnessed her own mother put aside her creative ambitions to raise a family, Stevenson chose instead to divorce her husband and pursue life as a poet. She has said that ultimately it took her "two unhappy marriages and three children" for her to "reconsider [her] assumptions" about marriage and motherhood.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — A Poetry Out Loud recital of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZW9-ez9T5w&ab_channel=LancerMediaFCPS)
- More About Anne Stevenson — A brief introduction to the poet's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-stevenson)
- An Obituary of the Poet — A Guardian obituary for Stevenson, who died in 2020. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/18/anne-stevenson-obituary)
- The Poets who Influenced Stevenson — A Reader's Loft interview with the poet in which she discusses her relationship to the poets Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath. (https://readersloft.com/author-interview/an-

interview-with-anne-stevenson/)

## HOW TO CITE

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