

## HANDOUTS II

### BLANK VERSE, PROSE POEMS AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Second class, Thursday April 30, Zoom, Offered by the Putney Public Library

Below I've included a mix of both contemporary formal verse and contemporary poems that appear to move toward prose. If you have time and space to read some of them out loud, listen for the rhythm and meter. What happens as language away from meter and rhyme towards an approximation of prose? Is there meter in the Anne Carson and the Claudia Rankine poems?

#### **Sonnet 13**

BY JOHN BERRYMAN

I lift—lift you five States away your glass,  
Wide of this bar you never graced, where none  
Ever I know came, where what work is done  
Even by these men I know not, where a brass  
Police-car sign peers in, wet strange cars pass,  
Soiled hangs the rag of day out over this town,  
A juke-box brains air where I drink alone,  
The spruce barkeep sports a toupee alas—

My glass I lift at six o'clock, my darling,  
As you plotted . . . Chinese couples shift in bed,  
We shared today not even filthy weather,  
Beasts in the hills their tigerish love are snarling,  
Suddenly they clash, I blow my short ash red,  
Grey eyes light! and we have our drink together.

#### BERRYMAN'S SONNETS

April Bernhard

POETRY MAGAZINE

Why sonnets? Why on earth, in the middle of the twentieth century, a sonnet sequence?

In the case of John Berryman, the turning to sonnets, and more specifically, love sonnets, is completely of a piece with the nature of the personal crisis that prompted them. He was in his thirties; he had been contentedly married for several years; he was happily—and for him, luckily—teaching literature at Princeton. And then, out of the blue, inconveniently—and almost from the first, evidently unluckily—he fell in love with a young woman who was the wife of a colleague.

To a writer as self-scrutinizing as Berryman, this was a wonderful, terrifying, and guilty predicament. It was also a familiar one, at least literarily. The history of lyric poetry is,

among other things, a history of passionate folly; and the best chronicles of this folly are to be found in sonnets. From the original fourteenth century Canzoniere of Petrarch, to Petrarch's Elizabethan translators and emulators, to nineteenth century writers as diverse as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Meredith, poets have told their tales of joy and pain, longing and doubt, praise and blame, in the story form of multiple sonnets. Functioning as a stanza in the long poem that is the sequence, each sonnet in itself, a powerfully knit, compact fourteen lines, is also designed to stand alone. Over the course of many such sonnets, a story about love unfolds along with a story about poetry as the sonnets converse with one another by repeating tropes, repeating rhymes, returning to themes with variations.

When Berryman embarked on these sonnets, he was already in the midst of his affair. Many of the early poems are explicitly addressed to the beloved, to "Lise," as he would later rename her for public eyes. In these first private envoys he writes to dazzle, to praise, and to persuade.

### **Reading The Brothers Grimm To Jenny by Lisel Mueller**

Jenny, your mind commands  
kingdoms of black and white:  
you shoulder the crow on your left,  
the snowbird on your right;  
for you the cinders part  
and let the lentils through,  
and noise falls into place  
as screech or sweet roo-coo,  
while in my own, real, world  
gray foxes and gray wolves  
bargain eye to eye,  
and the amazing dove  
takes shelter under the wing  
of the raven to keep dry.

Knowing that you must climb,  
one day, the ancient tower  
where disenchantment binds  
the curls of innocence,  
that you must live with power  
and honor circumstance,  
that choice is what comes true--  
oh, Jenny, pure in heart,  
why do I lie to you?

Why do I read you tales

in which birds speak the truth  
and pity cures the blind,  
and beauty reaches deep  
to prove a royal mind?  
Death is a small mistake  
there, where the kiss revives;  
Jenny, we make just dreams  
out of our unjust lives.

Still, when your truthful eyes,  
your keen, attentive stare,  
endow the vacuous slut  
with royalty, when you match  
her soul to her shimmering hair,  
what can she do but rise  
to your imagined throne?  
And what can I, but see  
beyond the world that is,  
when, faithful, you insist  
I have the golden key--  
and learn from you once more  
the terror and the bliss,  
the world as it might be?

**The Glass Essay**  
**(referred to by the poet as a “lyric essay”)**  
BY ANNE CARSON

I

I can hear little clicks inside my dream.  
Night drips its silver tap  
down the back.  
At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking

of the man who  
left in September.  
His name was Law.

My face in the bathroom mirror  
has white streaks down it.  
I rinse the face and return to bed.  
Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother.

## SHE

She lives on a moor in the north.  
She lives alone.  
Spring opens like a blade there.  
I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books—

some for my mother, some for me  
including *The Collected Works Of Emily Brontë*.  
This is my favourite author.

Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.  
Whenever I visit my mother  
I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë,

my lonely life around me like a moor,  
my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation  
that dies when I come in the kitchen door.  
What meat is it, Emily, we need?

## THREE

Three silent women at the kitchen table.  
My mother's kitchen is dark and small but out the window  
there is the moor, paralyzed with ice.  
It extends as far as the eye can see

over flat miles to a solid unlit white sky.  
Mother and I are chewing lettuce carefully.  
The kitchen wall clock emits a ragged low buzz that jumps

once a minute over the twelve.  
I have Emily p. 216 propped open on the sugarbowl  
but am covertly watching my mother.

A thousand questions hit my eyes from the inside.  
My mother is studying her lettuce.  
I turn to p. 217.

“In my flight through the kitchen I knocked over Hareton  
who was hanging a litter of puppies  
from a chairback in the doorway. . . .”

It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass.  
Now and then a remark trails through the glass.  
Taxes on the back lot. Not a good melon,

too early for melons.  
Hairdresser in town found God, closes shop every Tuesday.  
Mice in the teatowel drawer again.  
Little pellets. Chew off

the corners of the napkins, if they knew  
what paper napkins cost nowadays.  
Rain tonight.

Rain tomorrow.  
That volcano in the Philippines at it again. What's her name  
Anderson died no not Shirley

the opera singer. Negress.  
Cancer.  
Not eating your garnish, you don't like pimento?

Out the window I can see dead leaves ticking over the flatland  
and dregs of snow scarred by pine filth.  
At the middle of the moor

where the ground goes down into a depression,  
the ice has begun to unclench.  
Black open water comes

curdling up like anger. My mother speaks suddenly.  
That psychotherapy's not doing you much good is it?  
You aren't getting over him.

My mother has a way of summing things up.  
She never liked Law much  
but she liked the idea of me having a man and getting on with life.

Well he's a taker and you're a giver I hope it works out,  
was all she said after she met him.  
Give and take were just words to me

at the time. I had not been in love before.  
It was like a wheel rolling downhill.  
But early this morning while mother slept

and I was downstairs reading the part in *Wuthering Heights*  
where Heathcliff clings at the lattice in the storm sobbing  
Come in! Come in! to the ghost of his heart's darling,

I fell on my knees on the rug and sobbed too.  
She knows how to hang puppies,  
that Emily.

It isn't like taking an aspirin you know, I answer feebly.  
Dr. Haw says grief is a long process.  
She frowns. What does it accomplish

all that raking up the past?  
Oh—I spread my hands—  
I prevail! I look her in the eye.  
She grins. Yes you do.

(This is a much longer poem. Find the rest on POETRY FOUNDATION website, along  
with just about anything else you would like to read in the world of poetry, including  
interesting articles of form, meter and various writers.)

*from Citizen: "You are in the dark, in the car..."*

BY CLAUDIA RANKINE

[NB:

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by  
speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many  
great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted  
or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel okay saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police  
siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, be  
propelled forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.

As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and the before isn't part of the now as the night darkens <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub> and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

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When you arrive in your driveway and turn off the car, you remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists a medical term — John Henryism — for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the build up of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>silence you are bucking the trend.

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When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers. Hey, I am standing right here, you responded, not necessarily expecting him to turn to you.

He is holding the lidded paper cup in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

Now there you go, he responds.

The people around you have turned away from their screens. The teenagers are on pause. There I go? you ask, feeling irritation begin to rain down. Yes, and something about hearing yourself repeating this stranger's accusation in a voice usually reserved for your partner makes you smile.

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A man knocked over her son in the subway. You feel your own body wince. He's okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and apologize. And yes, you want it to stop, you want the black child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet and be brushed off, not brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.

The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers.

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The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house. What are you doing in my yard?

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.

(More from this book by Rankine, *CITIZEN*, is also included on Poetry Foundation website.)