

HANDOUTS I

BLANK VERSE, PROSE POEMS AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

First class, April 23, on Zoom and sponsored by the Putney Public Library

ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT IT:

Meter and rhythm are similar but not identical. Rhythm refers to the distance between stressed syllables, which will determine the overall tempo at which the poem unfolds. Meter refers to the measured beat established by patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. Often, poets who write free verse or prose poems de-emphasize or (try to) ignore meter and focus instead on refining their natural speech rhythms to suit the poem's tone and content. (I would quote Ezra Pound here, about the “musical phrase” versus “the metronome,” but I’m tired of forgiving dead people for pro-Fascist racist anti-Semitic vitriol.)
adaptation of paragraph on website POETRY EXPRESS

ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING AT IT:

Meter is rhythm. In the words of the Scots professor who, in the nineteenth century, edited, with a preface, Walker’s eighteenth century *Rhyming Dictionary*; “A little consideration will lead to the conclusion, that verse, in most languages, differs from prose in the return of a certain number of syllables that have a peculiar relation to one another as accented and unaccented, or as long and short. It is universally felt that a degree of pleasure arises from this definite arrangement, and the origin of that pleasure is to be traced back to the sense of time with which men [sic] are generally endowed...” We think of certain tasks, the rhythm of which has become set. Sowing, reaping, threshing, washing clothes, rowing and even milking cows go to rhythm. The variety of rhythm in sea shanties depends upon the variety of tasks on board a sailing ship, with the doing of which a sailor was confronted. Hauling up sail or pulling it down, coiling rope, pulling and pushing and climbing and lifting, all went to different rhythms; and these rhythms are preserved for us, fast or slow, smooth or rough, in sailor’s songs. Louise Bogan

A THIRD WAY OF LOOKING AT IT:

Meter is a given in verse of all forms. Whether we intend it or not, whether it is strong and driving or weak and watery, meter exists in poetry and influences how we hear and read. A poet can consciously choose to move as far away from meter as possible, but that is still working with meter. Then what is rhythm? Is it merely the distance between stressed syllables? What are the other elements that determine rhythm—rhyme, repetition, line length, word choice, thickness of sound, density and repetition of image? And isn’t there a rhythm of revelation in all writing, prose or poem? Essays, short stories and novels have rhythms, which are different from but connected to pace. As we read and write, we are tuning our bodies, ears, all our senses to the rhythms of language and content. The more conscious we are of these pleasures, the more pleasure we give and receive. MB

Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

OUT OF THE CRADLE ENDLESSLY ROCKING

Whitman

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
Over the sterile sands the fields beyond, where the child leaving his bed wander'd alone,
 bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they were alive,
Out from the patches of briars and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with tears,
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such as now they start the scene revisiting,
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

The incantatory power of this is tremendous as the repetitions loosen the intellect for reverie. It seems to me that Whitman creates here the very rhythm of a singular reminiscence emerging out of the depths of mind, out of the sea waves and the rocking cradle, out of all the undifferentiated sensations of infancy, out of the myriad memories of childhood, out of all possible experiences the formative event of a boy leaving the safety of his bed and walking the seashore alone, moving “Out,” “Over,” “Down,” “Up,” “From,” exchanging the safety of the indoors for the peril of the outdoors, facing his own vague yearnings and the misty void, mixing his own tears and the salt spray of the ocean,

listening to the birds, understanding the language—the calling—of one bird. He walks the shore on the edge of the world, the edge of the unknown. He has entered the space that Emerson calls “I and the Abyss,” the space of the American sublime.

Edward Hirsch

It was not Death, for I stood up, (355)

BY EMILY DICKINSON

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down -
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their **Tongues**, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt **Siroccos** - crawl -
Nor Fire - for just my marble feet
Could keep a **Chancel**, cool -

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial
Reminded me, of mine -

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some -

When everything that ticked - has stopped -
And space stares - all around -
Or Grisly frosts - first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground -

But most, like Chaos - Stopless - cool -
Without a Chance, or **spar** -
Or even a Report of Land -
To justify - Despair.

Punctuation, usually so helpful in making the meaning clear, isn't here. Instead, the silence that takes its place is meant to warn and make us wary, to pause and parry, so that we lurch and linger—and turn back to the emphatic import of every capitalized noun. When we listen, it's hard not to hear the multiple meanings in a phrase like “first Autumn morns,” whose implication of mourning isn't lost on the ear. And it's impossible not to hear the insistent rhythm and rhyme of the ballad, as if Dickinson were tapping her toes

under every deliberate line.

If hymn meter (lines of eight syllables alternating with lines of six) was Dickinson's metronome, ballad meter (4/3/4/3)—what she's using here—was her "double time." We can hear in that quickened and hypnotic pace—and in those *short, sharp, shocked* syllables ("Flesh," "crawl," "feet," "cool") the urgency of her message. As logic and syntax break down, the relentless, marching rhythm of the ballad's sound-sense steps in to drive us onward.

It's here that Dickinson's poem stages a "battle of the bands," as secular and spiritual music duel it out. If despair was a song, wouldn't it sound like this: clipped, repetitive, taut—as imperative as church music, as regular as a ballad's refrain? In the face of internal—and *eternal*—questions about loneliness and self-loathing, Dickinson's poem is a rebellious music that laments those particular states of adolescence we never quite outgrow. Robin Ekiss (poet, THE MANSION OF HAPPINESS)

LINK to some sea shanties: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CuyLbC2TZo>

Easter, 1916

BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school

And rode our wingèd horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith

For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The Moose

BY ELIZABETH BISHOP

For *Grace Bulmer Bowers*

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,
sometimes the sun sets
facing a red sea,
and others, *veins* the flats'
lavender, rich mud
in burning *rivulets*;

on red, gravelly roads,
down rows of sugar maples,
past clapboard farmhouses
and neat, clapboard churches,
bleached, ridged as clamshells,
past twin silver birches,

through late afternoon
a bus journeys west,
the windshield flashing pink,
pink glancing off of metal,
brushing the dented flank
of blue, beat-up enamel;

down hollows, up rises,
and waits, patient, while
a lone traveller gives
kisses and embraces
to seven relatives
and a collie supervises.

Goodbye to the elms,
to the farm, to the dog.
The bus starts. The light
grows richer; the fog,
shifting, salty, thin,
comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens' feathers,
in gray glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and **lupins** like **apostles**;

the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences;
bumblebees creep
inside the **foxgloves**,
and evening commences.

One stop at **Bass River**.
Then the **Economies**—
Lower, Middle, Upper;
Five Islands, Five Houses,
where a woman shakes a tablecloth
out after supper.

A pale flickering. Gone.
The **Tantramar marshes**
and the smell of salt hay.
An iron bridge trembles

and a loose plank rattles
but doesn't give way.

On the left, a red light
swims through the dark:
a ship's port lantern.
Two rubber boots show,
illuminated, solemn.
A dog gives one bark.

A woman climbs in
with two market bags,
brisk, freckled, elderly.
"A grand night. Yes, sir,
all the way to Boston."
She regards us amicably.

Moonlight as we enter
the New Brunswick woods,
hairy, scratchy, splintery;
moonlight and mist
caught in them like lamb's wool
on bushes in a pasture.

The passengers lie back.
Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy **divagations**
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination....

In the creakings and noises,
an old conversation
—not concerning us,
but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents' voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
what he said, what she said,
who got **pensioned**;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;

the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened.
She died in childbirth.
That was the son lost
when the schooner foundered.

He took to drink. Yes.
She went to the bad.
When Amos began to pray
even in the store and
finally the family had
to put him away.

“Yes ...” that peculiar
affirmative. “Yes ...”
A sharp, indrawn breath,
half groan, half acceptance,
that means “Life’s like that.
We know *it* (also death).”

Talking the way they talked
in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on,
dim lamplight in the hall,
down in the kitchen, the dog
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it’s all right now
even to fall asleep
just as on all those nights.
—Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,
in the middle of the road.
It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus’s hot hood.

Towering, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man’s voice assures us

“Perfectly harmless....”

Some of the passengers
exclaim in whispers,
childishly, softly,
“Sure are big creatures.”
“It’s awful plain.”
“Look! It’s a she!”

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

“Curious creatures,”
says our quiet driver,
rolling his r’s.
“Look at that, would you.”
Then he shifts gears.
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there’s a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

Elizabeth Bishop, “The Moose” from *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*. Copyright ©
1980 by Elizabeth Bishop