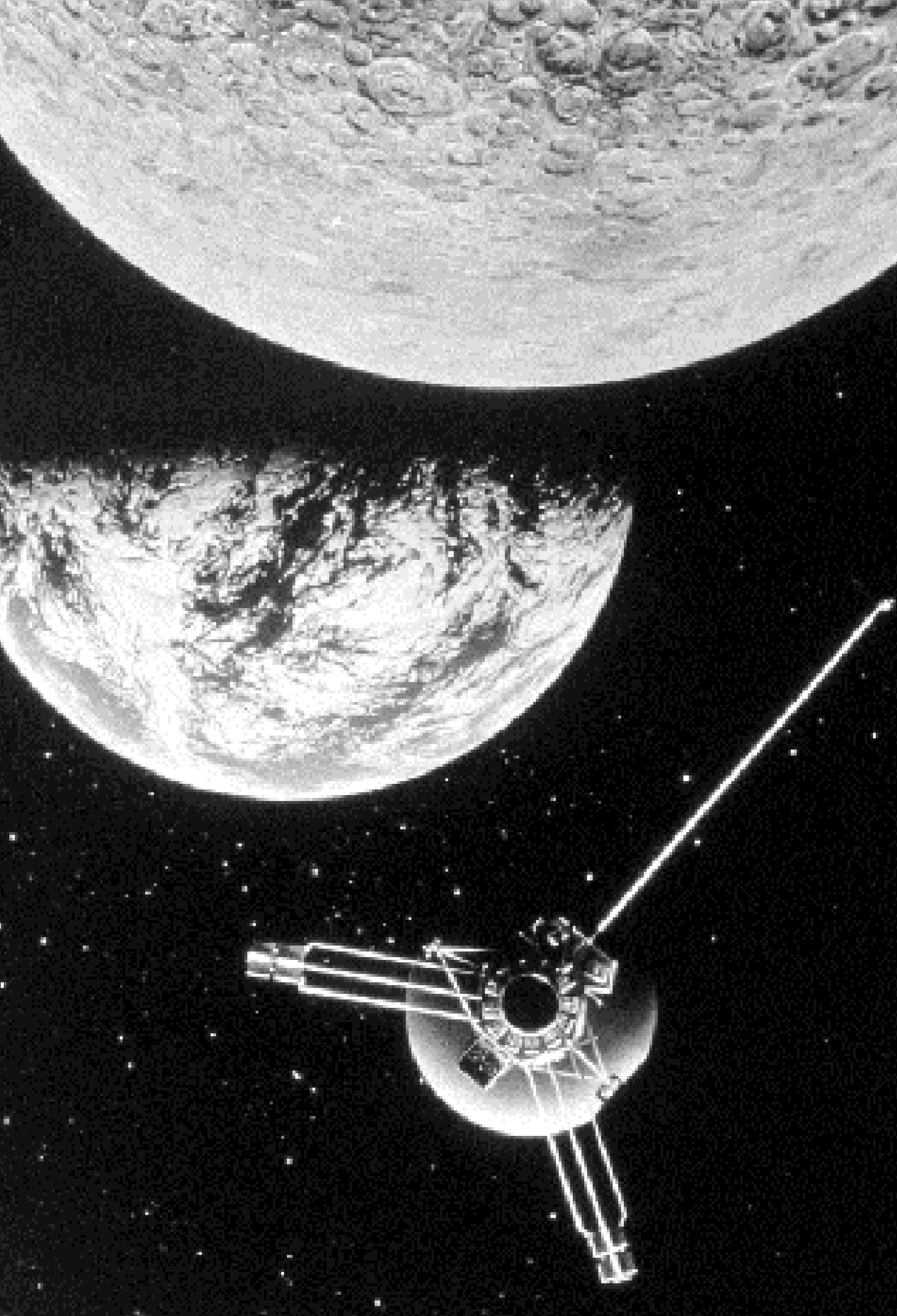

THE LITERARY ANATOMY

Teaching the Villanelle

The Satellite and the Snowball

Photograph © Bettmann/Corbis

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

The villanelle is one of English poetry's most demanding forms. Originating as a variety of Italian harvest song, the form was codified by French poet Jean Passerat in the early 1600s and imported into England in the Victorian era. Since then, the villanelle has become a sort of Gordian knot for contemporary poets to unravel.

I find the circular motion of the villanelle its most compelling aspect. Unlike the pantoum or sestina, which can progress with a modicum of backtracking, the villanelle is tethered to its beginning. The first stanza determines the ending of each successive stanza, which means that the poet can never stray more than two lines from his first assertion. This circularity lends the villanelle an obsessive quality and forces the poet to fixate on a single idea, claim, or mood. Resisting progression, the form demands that exploration be inward, that the mood or fear or desire laid out in the initial stanza expand in understanding and in texture—rather than in narrative stages.

Most students find the villanelle an oddity upon first encounter—awkward and artificial, an exercise in stagnation designed to frustrate. Introducing students to the villanelle has helped me to analyze the form more thoroughly and to discover two distinct ways in which it unfolds—as a satellite or as a snowball.

A satellite's path is constant. A satellite falls at the same curve as the curve of the planet it orbits, maintaining a consistent distance from the planet. I like to compare the circular motion of villanelles that remain static in meaning to satellites. The repeating lines of a satellite villanelle remain equidistant (in tone and theme) from the original subject. The subject is explored or expanded with each stanza's newly intro-

duced lines, but the significance revolves around a stable site of obsession or fixation.

Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is a primary example of a satellite villanelle. From the first stanza, the meaning of the two rhyming lines is clear and remains fixed: One ought to fight death.

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The poem presents the first stanza as a thesis, and then provides a supporting example in each subsequent stanza. Stanza 2: Wise men fight death. Stanza 3: Good men fight death. Stanza 4: Wild men fight death. Stanza 5: Grave men fight death. Only in the last stanza does Thomas deviate from his theorem. Having argued that all admirable men fight death, Thomas narrows his focus down to a single survival:

> And you, my father, there on the sad height.

Though this final address forces the reader to reconsider each of the preceding stanzas as a plea for his father's life, it returns the reader to the same point, the same longing, the same fixation. One ought to fight death.

A contemporary example of a satellite villanelle—and one of my favorites—is Agha Shahid Ali's "A Villanelle." It appears towards the end of The Country without a Post Office, a book filled with the horrors of history and the violent past and present of Ali's native Kashmir. The lush and encompassing villanelle begins: "When the ruins dissolve like salt in water,/ only then will they have destroyed everything" and proceeds gently through a succession of disasters: "A woman combs—at noon—the ruins for her daughter./ Chechnya is gone" and "O Kashmir, Armenia once vanished." The poem maintains a graceful orbit around history and memory, as the catalogue of losses maintains a close arc with the beauty of his language. A dark poem, it fixates on the difficulty of the individual in a larger context, a difficulty that will not end.

Perhaps the most consciously static satellite villanelle that I teach is David Trinidad's "The Chatty Cathy Villanelle." This quirky poem fulfills the formal requirements of a villanelle through an arrangement of the mechanical utterings of a wind-up doll: "When you grow up, what will you do?" asks the doll, "I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?" The doll's voice is monotone and stable. Her lines retain the same meaning throughout the poem because they have no meaning. Chatty Cathy expects no response to her rhetoricals—she is, after all, a doll. Trinidad is playing on the very nature of the form: that it is not cumulative, that her phrases do not amount to some ultimate revelation. Rather, they revolve around the repetitive pull of a string.

The snowball villanelle refuses such fixity. Like a snowball, which grows as it rolls downhill, picking up additional snow and speed, the meaning of the repeating lines in a snowball villanelle changes and increases with each recurrence.

The villanelle is a challenging form, but one uniquely suited to an obsessive or progressive meditation.

Each revolution (or stanza) finds the snowball villanelle larger and less predictable.

Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" is the quintessential snowball villanelle. The opening line of "One Art" increases in meaning and power as it repeats. The initial point of entry into the poem is intriguingly ambiguous—"The art of losing isn't hard to master." Does Bishop want the reader to address the art of losing or the capacity to master? The "art of losing" is introduced so casually that Bishop has moved on to the simplicity of mastery before the reader can even understand what it is being mastered. The obvious attack on our notions of loss (bad) and art (good) makes us question the text, and compels the reader forward.

The next two lines in "One Art" are enjambed, which is something of a surprise:

> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Usually, the second line of a villanelle is self-contained, a nod to the necessity for a self-sufficient third line (which allows it to repeat). Bishop, however, stretches the form, repeating only the final word "disaster" rather than the entire line. This frees her to fully enjamb a number of stanzas, giving the poem a propulsion and elasticity equal to the avalanche of lost things.

As the poem unfolds, the losses become more encompassing, her denial deeper—"the lost door keys" give way to lost "places, and names," the loss of "two cities" and "two rivers, a continent." Unlike the satellite villanelle, Bishop's grief has grown over the course of the poem, progressing from quotidian to grandiose and finally settling in the personal and immediate.

> Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
> I love)…

Like Thomas's villanelle, Bishop's ends with an intimate and focused address but it is a jarring break from the list of inanimate losses.The poem's close is not prescribed by its opening, and the unexpected arrival at such a personal loss foregrounds her devastation.

The poet Sean Hill employs a similar progression from distance to immediacy in his haunting villanelle, "Nightmare 1947." In this snowball villanelle, a character named Silas is taunted by the vision of his own lynching.

> If they hang you from a tree, you'll need a will.
> Ain't none of us ever promised tomorrow.
> Silas, you might not be here come April.

The first line is at once hard and cold. The voice is later identified as "Zekial,/ the insurance man"—a figure who stands to profit from Silas's death, but from an emotional and physical remove. Over the course of the poem the identity of the speaker changes from Zekial to the attackers, and the violence grows more imminent. By the time we reach the final stanza, the opening line has undergone a brutal transformation: "After we hang you, they'll put you in a

hole." The lynching is no longer potential, but planned. Silas's corpse spirals into the foreground; the messy business of disposing of his body. The second repeated line of the villanelle follows a similar trajectory. It begins as the tentative "Silas, you might not be here come April," and ends as the definitive "Silas, you won't be here next April." Hill's poem picks up speed and potency as it rolls.

The villanelle is a challenging form, but one uniquely suited to an obsessive or progressive meditation. Students often write stunning villanelles after being exposed to the form, finding its grounded nature freeing. I have found Thomas's poem to be a good villanelle to start with. Most students appreciate the poem's formalized language of protest. "One Art," on the other hand, tends to be somewhat off-putting due to its ironic stance. "I don't understand: how did she lose a city?" Overall, however, my students seem to appreciate the satellite and snowball analogies. The distinction helps them to analyze the villanelle rather than to judge it. It has also given me a way to think about the value and qualities of this alluring form.

TEACHING EXERCISES

The villanelle is often hard to explain, and the form has to be understood by students before they can enjoy it as readers or approach it as writers. Here are two ways that I have taught students the poem's pattern.

In the first method, I talk the students through writing their own villanelles line by line. I have abbreviated my handout below:

1) Write a line.
2) Write another line.
3) Write a line that rhymes with the first line.
3b.) Stanza break.
4) Write a line that rhymes with the first line.
5) Write a line rhymes with the second line.
6) Copy the first line of the poem.
6b.) Stanza break.
[…]
16) Write a line that rhymes with the first line.
17) Write a line that rhymes with the second line.
18) Copy the first line of the poem.
19) Copy the third line of the poem.

I have used this technique with high school and college students. I find it most effective with restless groups of students, and ideal for individual meetings. The greatest fault of this method is that it is time-consuming. It also seems to inspire villanelles that don't make a great deal of sense. However, by immersing students in the anatomy of the form, they engage with it immediately and avoid being intimidated by its "mystery."

The second method works well with groups of more advanced undergraduates. I give them a villanelle that does not deviate from the form

(such as Ernest Dowson's "Villanelle of His Lady's Treasure's") and make them read all of the repeating lines out loud in unison. "Read the first line," I tell them, "Now read the sixth line. Now read the twelfth line. Now read the second to last line." After that rather hypnotic exercise, I have them read the last word of the first line of each stanza and then the last word of the second line of each stanza to experience the rhyme. I end the class by writing the following diagram on the board, and we review it by using another standard villanelle (such as Thomas's).

```
    ________ a
    ________
A1  ________ b

A2  ________ a
    ________
    ________
             a
A1  ________
    ________ b
    ________
             a
A2  ________
    ________
    ________ a

A1  ________ b
    ________
    ________ a

A2  ________
    ________ a
    ________
    ________ b
A1
A2
```

The capital letters mark repeating lines, and precede the line. The small letters mark end rhymes, and appear after the line. A great source for villanelles is John Hollander's remarkable book Rhyme's Reason.

Ali, Agha Shahid. The Country without a Post Office. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.
Bishop, Elizabeth. The Complete Poems 1927–1979. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979.
Hill, Sean. "Nightmare 1947." Painted Bride Quarterly, 2001.
Thomas, Dylan. The Poems of Dylan Thomas. New York: New Directions, 1939.
Trinidad, David. Plasticville. Chappaqua, N.Y.: Turtle Point Press, 2000.