

The Wordplay Project

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with T&W's recent publication, The Dictionary of Wordplay, Teachers & Writers Magazine invited several contemporary poets to write poems that incorporate wordplay into their form and/or content. Here are Mary Jo Bang's and Charles Bernstein's responses, followed by the description of their respective wordplay forms.

MARY JO BANG

The Common Green Libretto

The birds were singing themselves silly.
Two books fell from the wooden shelf.
The pilot light produced tinny spitting sounds behind her dress.

The pilot light flickered but of course it couldn't be seen.
Sight divided from sound. Outside, suffering.
Some unhappy boy cuffed his dog. The dog set up his howl.

The closed window reduced the mezzo-forte of teens with boomboxes
to the fossil of poverty,
ever stuck to her mind's eye. Didn't life concede to the horrible?
Sure it did. The morning's speech of the Times hitting the stoop.
Three minus two shuffled down the corridor.
The endless cry—

(trilobite of sound mirrors missing their silver lining
thus becoming windows) —of someone's poor forgotten issue.
The sock stuffed in the child's mouth.
Storms bringing surreptitious puddles.
Essence of borrowed speech,
written, spelled, suffused throughout with ether

or ethered sleep.
The little lyric bottom
of the grooved green moon

redeeming nothing.
Off-white shimmering
doom-kiss. Goodnight, goodmorning.

DOUBLED LETTER: a letter occurring twice in a row. E.g., in COMMON, M is a doubled letter.

LIPOGRAMMATIC POEM: a poem written entirely with words that exclude a specified letter. (In Bang's case, the letter is A.) The lipogram was invented by Laŕus of Hermione in the sixth century B.C. He excluded the letter sigma from two poems. More recently, *La Disparition* by Georges Perec (DeNoel, 1969) was so well written that several reviewers didn't notice the missing E. It was translated equally E-lessly into English under the title *A Void* (HarperCollins, 1995). In the spirit of the book, *Time Magazine* reviewed it without E's.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

Johnny Cake Hollow

Xo quwollen swacked unt myrry flooped
Sardone to fligrunt's swirm, ort
Jirmy plaight org garvey swait ib
Giben durrs urk klurpf. Sheb
Boughtie bloor de dazzy dule dun
Fruppi's ghigo's gly, jud
Chyllrophane jed jimmsy's cack
Exenst aerodole fump glire. Eb
Horray bloot, ig orry sluit neb
Nist neb ot neb gwon. Shleb

Atsum imba outsey burft allappie
 Merp av ords. Een ainsey swish
 len ansley sploop ughalls dep dulster
 Flooge, ig ahrs unt nimbet twool
 Begroob, ig ooburs quwate ag blurg.

Empty Biscuits

Ceylon's ox slaked Mary's goard
 Cycloned to flagrant dawn, sat
 Jimmy's plight on gravy sprain as
 Gibes in fairies lorn. Shed
 Bright blood then, doled dizzy
 Frappes along the gogos gay, jug
 Silo pain, good Jimmy's caulk,
 Ensued irradiant flame. Say
 Hooray bloat, say irksome slit, as
 Nestling slights no gasp. Rail
 At sum, imbue outset, burnt
 Thronement merely pines. Then
 Aeons swish in Eden's sway
 Slops hulls in duster's flow
 Airs numbed till gab, obeyers
 Chewed, blur the blur ingests.

JABBERWOCKIAN POEM: a poem that substitutes nonsense words for words in other texts. In Bernstein's case, "Johnny Cake Hollow" does not have a source text. It is simply a poem composed of made-up words.

HOMOPHONIC TRANSLATION: a translation that uses words that sound (or look) like the original instead of words that approximate the original's meaning. **HOMOPHONE:** a word that is pronounced like another word, but is spelled differently and has a different meaning. For instance, ORAL-AURAL or NO-KNOW. "Empty Biscuits" is a homophonic translation of "Johnny Cake Hollow."