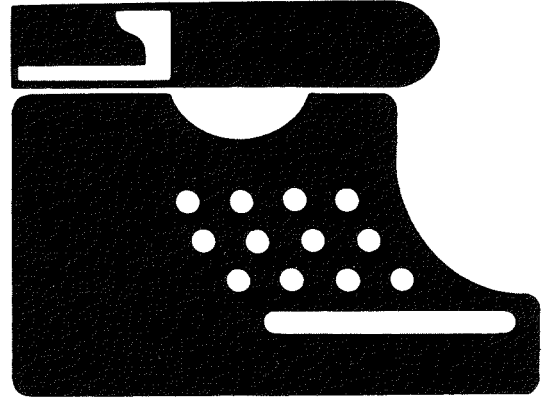


Teachers & Writers



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POETIC FORMS: A New Look

Editor's note: the following selections are adapted from T&W's new book, *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*. For the 230-page *Handbook*, 19 teaching poets have compiled 74 entries on traditional and modern poetic forms and techniques—from Abstract Poem to Word Play. The *Handbook* succinctly defines the forms, summarizes their histories, quotes good examples, and, in most cases, offers professional tricks of the trade on how to use each form. This is the first such handbook for classroom teachers, high school students, college undergraduates, and beginning writers. As with most T&W books, it can be adapted for use at all levels. Entries are cross-referenced, and a bibliography and list of cited authors are included. Copies are \$10.95 paperback and \$17.95 hardback. Shipping \$1.50 additional.

Free Verse

FREE VERSE IS JUST THAT—LINES OF POETRY that are written without rules: no regular beat and no rhyme. The *vers libre* (French for “free verse”) movement began in late nineteenth-century Europe, especially in France. But unrhymed poetry without a regular rhythm had appeared in translations of the Bible, and one of the first great poets to use the form was Walt Whitman, an American.

Whitman thought that American poetry should be free of European influence. His collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), is America's great poetic Declaration of Independence. All of it is in free verse. Here is an excerpt from the long poem that came to be called “Song of Myself.”

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the
stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the
egg of the wren,

And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all
machinery,
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any
statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of
infidels,
And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the
farmer's girl boiling her iron teakettle and baking
shortcake.

The point of free verse is not that it has thrown the traditional rules of poetry out of the window; it means that every poet who writes in this form must work to create his or her *own* rules. These rules are based on our personal thought patterns, our breath patterns, our sense of how the poem should *look* on the page, our deepest feelings about life itself. Free verse grants us the freedom to find our own rhythm, our own heartbeat, rather than traditional rhymed-and-metered poetry, which insists that we follow the patterns

1

Poetic Forms: A New Look

by Bill Zavatsky, Mary Logue,
Bernadette Mayer, Gary Lenhart,
Alan Ziegler, Geof Hewitt, Ron
Padgett, & Anne Waldman

7

Reflections on the Art of Poetry

by Jules Supervielle

10

The Kiss of Poetry: Two Stories

by David Romtvedt

11

The Teachers: Poem

by Nicanor Parra

laid down by others. No wonder Whitman saw it as a perfect expression of democracy. As his contemporary, the philosopher-poet Henry David Thoreau, wrote: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." Free verse is the "different drummer" of modern poetry. In free verse the *line* is very important. Lines can be long or short, or long and short in the same poem. With free verse, what we must ask ourselves is whether or not the line *looks* and *feels* and *sounds* right. The form (or shape) of the poem that is coming into being as we write it is telling us to watch and listen to it.

So, free verse offers no excuse for sloppy writing. In fact, it demands more of the poet, because he or she must question every word, test the shape and sound of every line, and be able to defend the choices made.

It might be best to begin writing free verse by imitating poets who do it best. Whitman provides an inspiring model in his greatest poems. If Whitman's line is too long for you, look at the tiny free verse poems of Robert Creeley in his collection *For Love*. Creeley's line is very short. William Carlos Williams also wrote brilliantly in the free verse form. Other major poets whose work may be examined to get a feeling for free verse are Theodore Roethke, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Sylvia Plath, Diane Wakoski, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), not to mention the great poets who have written free verse in other languages. By reading these and other poets, you will begin to get a sense of what you want in your own free verse line.

Another approach: Write your poem as a paragraph of prose. Then go back and break it up into lines. Do several versions of the poem, one with long lines, one with short lines, and so forth, until the right (for you) shape of the poem begins to emerge. As you do this, you will undoubtedly change things in the poem itself, adding words or descriptions, taking others out. When you feel that you can do no more—like a sculptor who can't cut deeper into the image without ruining it—your poem may be finished.

—Bill Zavatsky

Ghazal

THE GHAZAL IS A PERSIAN POETRY FORM THAT takes its name from the Arabic word meaning "the talk of boys and girls," in other words, flirting or sweet talk. The original Persian form was fairly simple—a poem of five to twelve couplets (two-line stanzas), all using the same rhyme, with the poet putting his name in the final stanza.

The ghazal became very popular as a poetry form in Persia around A.D. 1000. Some of the reasons for its popularity were that it was easy to sing and, because it was a relatively short poem, it was easier to write and to hear than a longer poem.

Hundreds of Persian poets, including Sanai, Hafiz, Rumi, and Jami, wrote in this style, which continues to be popular to the present day. But the golden age of the ghazal was between 1100 and 1500. Originally the main themes of the ghazal were love and drinking wine, but later poets became more philosophical and even mystical in their writings.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet and philosopher, criticized the form of the ghazal, saying the individual

lines were like the unstrung beads of a necklace, that there was little unity in these poems. In a sense he was right, as one of the characteristics of the line of a ghazal is that it can stand on its own and be understood, almost like a proverb or saying.

However, if you look at a ghazal like a piece of music where each line adds something to the whole thought, rather than like a story that needs to make sense, then you can begin to understand how the poem hangs together. The unity of a ghazal is based on the idea of a theme and its variations.

The form became known in Europe when *The Divan of Muhammed Shemsed Din Hafiz* was translated into German in 1812. *Divan* means a collection of poems and Hafiz was a famous Persian poet who wrote in the thirteenth century. Hafiz wrote about the joy of living. The German poet Goethe felt a great affinity to Hafiz and copied this form, writing his own collection called *The West-Eastern Divan*. The American poet Robert Bly has translated Rumi's ghazals in a book called *Night & Sleep*.

In its contemporary form, the ghazal doesn't usually rhyme, poets don't sign their name in the last couplet, and it isn't very often about love or drinking. So you might wonder what's left of the original Persian form.

The two important features of the contemporary ghazal are the long-lined couplets (sometimes unrhymed) and the often mystical thoughts that are expressed. Here is an example of a modern-day ghazal:

A Ghazal

There's an inside of me and an outside of me.
The clouds block the sky and the grass has dried golden.

Only a fool would try to love when the heart's in the wrong
place.

The tree is trying to tell me something but I'm deaf with
longing.

Take away my pen, my paper, the table and I am only
a woman, crouched over air, thinking.

My bed sags in the middle and my dreams get caught in my
throat.

The wind comes in my window but the stars are stuck on the
screen.

It doesn't take very long to realize you're dead, but alive,
you can go minutes without knowing it. Take a deep breath.

In this ghazal, the poet is sitting at a table trying to write, but at the same time is aware of what's going on around her. She's recording all her thoughts as they come into her mind. These thoughts come out as if they are the truths of the moment.

Try to write a ghazal. Look around you right now, notice where you are and write down some of the truths of what you see and feel. Use the form of the ghazal to structure your thoughts. Two long lines and then a break. If you feel like it, go back to the older Persian form and include your name in the last couplet.

—Mary Logue



Epic

EPIC (FROM THE GREEK *EPOS*, A SPEECH, STORY, or song) literally means to speak or to tell a tale. The epic is a very long narrative (story) poem that tells of the adventures of a hero. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are famous examples of epic poetry.

Homer's books are based on stories of the Trojan War that are thought to have been told and retold for many years before they were written down. Virgil's *Aeneid* is an extension of Homer's story, and Virgil himself appears as a character in Dante's poem.

Epics serve the purpose of enabling their audiences to understand the past and to control their own destiny through the inspiration of the poem's noble ideals. The epic poem is meant to enhance the reader's sense of good and evil. Epics most often focus on the heroism of one person who exists as a symbol of strength, virtue, and courage in the face of conflict.

The traditional epic is divided into a series of books or cantos. Many of the epics of the past were written in the poetic meter called dactylic (from the Greek *dactylos*, meaning the three joints of a finger) hexameter. This means that each line contains six metrical feet of three beats each, the first a long syllable and the second and third short syllables.

An epic must be able to tell a tale in poetry about heroism that can be retained in the reader's memory, or retell stories that everyone already knows, such as myths or historical events. Though *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville and the American Indian trickster/coyote tales are epic in nature, they are not written in the epic form. Some works are called "epic" just because they're long.

The type of epic that is comic in nature (such as Byron's *Don Juan*) is called the "mock epic."

Long modern poems that can be construed as being epics are Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (a book of poems about America in the nineteenth century in which the author himself becomes the hero), William Carlos Williams' *Pater-son* (a historical book in prose and poetry about Paterson, New Jersey), Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* (a long poem about the Civil War), and Buckminster Fuller's *Epic on the History of Industrialization*.

Subjects for a modern epic could include Martin Luther King, spaceflight, the history of native Americans, Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, Carl Sagan, the history of modern physics, Jerry Lewis, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and one day in the life of a person.

It is important to remember, when writing an epic poem, that it is not a biography of the hero or heroine, nor does it give a whole history of the subject, but begins in the middle of things and tells the story of one important year or some shorter span of time, in order to inspire the readers to be good and true.

—Bernadette Mayer

Prose Poem

AS ITS NAME SUGGESTS, THE PROSE POEM IS A cross between prose and poetry. It looks like prose but it reads like poetry without rhyme or a set rhythm. Often it has the imagery, density, quickness, and freshness of language that are associated with poetry. Prose poems tend to be short

(from a couple of sentences to a couple of pages), but there are exceptions that run as long as fifty pages. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between poetic prose and prose poetry (as in, for example, the writing of Gertrude Stein).

Aloysius Bertrand is credited with having invented the prose poem, in his *Gaspard of the Night* (1836). Bertrand influenced Charles Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose*, in which Baudelaire wrote:

Which of us, in his ambitious moments, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhyme and without rhythm, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the prickings of consciousness?

Baudelaire in turn influenced the visionary poet Arthur Rimbaud.

Notable twentieth-century masters of the prose poem include Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, Luis Cernuda, Daniel Kharms, St.-Jean Perse, Jean Follain, Henri Michaux, Francis Ponge, and Julio Cortazar.

In the past thirty years, the prose poem seems to have been revived by American writers such as Russell Edson, David Ignatow, Robert Bly, James Wright, and W. S. Merwin. Many of these writers use impishness, surprise, incongruity, and humor in their work, as if they were playing hooky and enjoying it a lot. As Stuart Dybeck noted: "The short prose piece so frequently inhabits a No-Man's land between prose and poetry, narrative and lyric, story and fable, joke and meditation, fragment and whole," so that "part of the fun of writing them is the sense of slipping between the seams." One of Max Jacob's prose poems serves as a good example of this:

The Beggar Woman of Naples

When I lived in Naples, there was a beggar woman who sat at the doorway of my building. I used to toss her a few coins before getting into my carriage. One day, surprised at never being thanked, I looked at the beggar woman. Now, as I looked, I saw that what I had taken to be a beggar woman was a green, wooden box containing some red dirt and a few half-rotten bananas. . . .

—Translated by Ron Padgett

You may find yourself writing a poem whose lines don't seem to have any natural breaking points; try recopying it as prose. Or you might find yourself trying to write a short story, when all you really want to do is to capture a moment or series of moments; try leaving out the characterization and plot. In both these cases, you can rework your piece a little and perhaps turn it into a prose poem, which might be the form it ought to have been in all along.

—Alan Ziegler

Line

WHEN MOST OF US THINK OF A POEM, WE imagine it on a page looking very different from prose. In some poems, there will be differences in capitalization and punctuation. But the most obvious difference is in the line. Most poems don't extend all the way from margin to margin, and some differ in length from line to line. For instance, we

recognize that the following is poetry because of the way it is arranged on the page:

All the leaves
are down except
the ones that aren't.
They shake or
a wind shakes
them but they
won't go oh
no there goes
one now. No.
It's a bird
batting by.

—From "Verge" by James Schuyler

We also know it's poetry because of the way the lines are arranged to emphasize and complement the musical elements of the language.

How does the poet determine the length of each line? There is either some "measure" or else we say that the poem is *free verse*. Let's consider the poem in measure first. If someone reads the following to you and asks you to arrange it in lines, you would probably have no difficulty doing so.

Hickory, dickory, dock.
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one
And down he run;
Hickory, dickory, dock.

You can hear how long these lines are, and you could probably even fill in the measure with words of your own. This nursery rhyme demonstrates several of the many patterns that are common in our language. Perhaps the most common line in English is iambic pentameter (a line of ten syllables, with five accents, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one). See if you can hear the rhythmic pattern—just as you could hear "Hickory dickory dock"—in the following lines from William Wordsworth's "Michael":

Upon the Forest-side in Grasmere Vale
There dwelt a Shepherd, Michael was his name,
An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.
His bodily frame had been from youth to age
Of an unusual strength; his mind was keen
Intense and frugal, apt for all affairs,
And in his Shepherd's calling he was prompt
And watchful more than ordinary men.

At first this is a little harder to imitate, because the line now attempts to sound like speech instead of sing-song, with the subtler and more abundant variations of measure and accent that we hear when we listen to someone talk. To promote greater variety within lines of equal length and measure, Wordsworth uses commas and a semi-colon to insert pauses within the lines (as well as at the end of two of them). Such pauses within lines are called *caesuras*, and are usually indicated by punctuation. There can be more than one caesura within a line, as in

An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.

To quicken the pace of a poem, you can break the line so that it pulls the reader into the next line. In the excerpt from

"Verge," you see examples of such *enjambment* in four consecutive lines:

a wind shakes
them but they
won't go oh
no there goes
one now. No.

From line to line the reader rushes from *shakes* to *them*, *they* to *won't*, *oh* to *no*, and *goes* to *one*, the poem continuing to pick up speed. Then the caesura in the last line interrupts this breathless rush.

The poet Charles Olson followed Wordsworth's lead, insisting that the line be determined by the breath of the particular poet. Because the pulse, rate of breathing, and regional accent vary from person to person, Olson thought you should be able to perceive the biological signature of the poet in his or her lines. But not all poets write poems to imitate talking. Walt Whitman, perhaps the greatest American poet, adapted the colorful language of the stump orator and the crusading editor with the exalted Biblical rhythms of the King James version of the Psalms to produce a new kind of democratic chant, an idiomatic and quirky but familiar rhythmic measure:

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,
When the script preaches instead of the preacher,
When the pulpit descends and goes instead of the carver that
carved the supporting desk,
When the sacred vessels or the bits of the eucharist, or the lath
and plast, procreate as effectually as the young silversmiths
or bakers, or the masons in their overalls,
When a university course convinces like a slumbering woman
and child convince,
When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the
nightwatchman's daughter,
When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite and are my
friendly companions,
I intend to reach them my hand and make as much of them as I
do of men and women.

—From *Leaves of Grass*

Because this line is so sustained and long-limbed, some people can't hear the measure in it. (In fact, many of these lines are so long that they run over the margins of the printed page. When that happens, the poetic line is continued on the next printed line, but is indented, as here, or in some other way marked to show that it is a continuation and not a new line.) A line this long demands a patient attention, and for some readers breaks down into shorter units. Some ears might prefer the fourth line above divided into more compact lines:

When the sacred vessels
or the bits of the eucharist,
or the lath and plast,
procreate as effectually
as the young silversmiths or bakers,
or the masons in their overalls

Can you see how this change in the line arrangement affects the speed and emphasis with which you read the passage?

The number of ways to determine the length of a poetic line are almost as many as the number of poets. Marianne

Moore wrote poems in which the lines were determined according to the number of syllables in each, with the same pattern applying to separate stanzas. Jack Collom's lures specify the number of words in each line. And of course there is also free verse where you can do anything you want.

Some poets don't even bother with the line, writing prose poems or free prose. Others continue to rely on traditional forms, in which the line conforms to some traditional accentual or numerical measure. With the increasing dissemination of poetry via cassette, radio, and record, some poets treat line breaks primarily as reading instructions for oral performance.

Finally, many poets consider the arrangement of the poem on the page the equivalent of musical notation—the best means to indicate how the reader might hear the poem just like the poet did, before it was written anywhere except on the wind.

—Gary Lenhart

Spoonerism

NAMED AFTER W.A. SPOONER (1844-1930), AN Englishman who was a known botcher of words, a spoonerism is the swapping of the initial sounds of two words to create two different words, as in "word botcher" (from "bird watcher.")

A list of spoonerisms might be longer than you think. Consider the number of words that rhyme and realize that any two words that have rhymes are candidates for spoonerization, since all spoonerised words rhyme with the two words from which they have been spoonerised. A *great day* would be a *gray date*. The *right time* would be a *tight rhyme*. A character named Lew Tate might never arrive on time, unlike Sue Toon.

If you develop the habit of playing with language, hunting for spoonerisms may become a natural extension of your thinking process. As words are spoken, you are thinking "spurred are woken," making a special list of those that convert into especially interesting and meaningful spoonerisms.

Placing spoonerisms too close to each other in a poem calls attention to the cleverness of your find. A better possibility for spoonerisms is to split them so their appearance in a poem provides a sense of unconscious unity, and is noticed only by the most careful readers. Indeed, some writers like to use imperfect spoonerisms or half-spoonerisms. In the following poem, notice the imperfect spoonerisms in "bound by worlds" and "blinded by words," and in "blood guess" and "God bless."

The Moon

lasted all night & seemed to burn
toward noon
after just that brief blue darkness
nightfall bound by worlds.

And we turn to that rising
again & again
we turn and like stars, like debutantes,
like false teeth
we come out.

How would we know
blinded by words

as we are

the blood guess of morning on the rocks
how it dawns on the gulls
creak of their throats against salt wind.

Here are some examples from Spooner himself, who was Dean and Warden of New College at Oxford:

(In a sermon): Yes, Our Lord is indeed a shoving leopard.

(In another sermon): Which of us has not felt in his heart a half-warmed fish?

(Proposing a toast): Let us drink to the queer old Dean.

(To a flunking student): Sir, you have tasted a whole worm. You have hissed my mystery lectures. You were fighting a liar in the quadrangle. You will leave Oxford by the town drain.

—Geof Hewitt

Imitation

FOR MANY CENTURIES, PHILOSOPHERS AND writers have discussed how art imitates life and how words imitate things. But in talking about imitations here, we mean a poem that derives from a poem in another language, and yet cannot be called a translation.

The poet Robert Lowell used the word this way in the title of his *Imitations*, a collection of Lowell's poems based on his translations of poems by other poets. The traditional translator tries to make the translation as close an approximation to the original text as possible. Lowell, a poet, found that his translations took on a life of their own, a life that was different from that of the original text. What resulted were poems that couldn't really be called translations, nor could they be called original poems: they were half way between. Lowell called them "imitations."

Other poets have been more casual in turning foreign language poems into English. For example, look at the following poem by Giuseppe Ungaretti. (It doesn't matter if you don't understand Italian. Just look at the words.)

Tutto Ho Perduto

Tutto ho perduto dell'infanzia
E non potrò mai più
Smemorarmi in un grido.

L'infanzia ho sotterrato
Nel fondo delle notti
E ora, spada invisibile,
Mi separa da tutto.

Di me rammento che esultavo amandoti,
Ed eccomi perduto
In infinito delle notti.

Disperazione che incessante aumenta
La vita non mi è più,
Arrestata in fondo alla gola,
Che una roccia di gridi.

This is a serious poem about losing one's childhood and feeling lost in an infinity of nights. Poet Ted Berrigan, who

knew almost no Italian, turned this poem into:

Tooting My Horn on Duty

Tooting my horn on duty in the infantry
Made my name mud P-U!
In the army I had nosebleeds

The infantry was distracting
It kindled up in my nose
An invisible odor
That hindered my toots

One day while on duty I rammed into a chestnut
And got blood all over my flute
Not to mention this nosebleed

I spat out so many teeth I knew it was an omen
The vitamins I took made me ill
Ten blood transfusions! It was almost all over
When two big rocks stopped the bleeding

This then was my unhappy childhood

Notice that Berrigan focused on certain words and ignored others. He took *tutto* (which means “all” or “everything” in Italian) and translated it as *tooting*. He took *infanzia* (“infancy”) and translated it as *infantry*, which probably made him see the word *army* in the last four letters of *smemorarmi*.

Berrigan’s method is sometimes called intentional “mis-translation,” that is, a translation error made on purpose. A more extreme type of mistranslation, in which the English version becomes more abstract and perhaps crazy, is when Pierre Reverdy’s line “Un bonheur qui tremble encore est né” becomes “A bomb ear trembles in core of the knee.”

If you understand even a little bit of a foreign language, try writing an imitation. You don’t have to know any foreign language to do mistranslations. In either case, these kinds of poems are good to write because they teach you how to focus on the words, how they sound and fit together, and not to worry too much about the theme or subject. This is important, because ultimately poems are made not of feelings or ideas, but of words.

—Ron Padgett

Villanelle

THE WORDS *VILLAIN* AND *VILLANELLE* COME from the Latin (or Italian) word *villa*, which means “country house” or “farm.” Originally a villain wasn’t a bad character in a story, he was simply a farm servant, a country bumpkin. The *villanella* was an old Italian folk song with an accompanying dance. Since the seventeenth century, the villanelle has had its current form, although it has moved, in the hands of contemporary poets, to themes other than love or the joys of country living.

A French poet, Jean Passerat (1534-1602), wrote a poem in the late 1500s that he entitled “Villanelle,” and the form of this poem came to be the strict form for all villanelles.

In the villanelle there are six stanzas; the first five stanzas are three lines long and the final stanza is four lines long. The first line and last line of the first stanza take turns repeating as the final line of the next four stanzas, and then are rejoined as the last two lines of the poem. The poem has

a rhyme scheme of *aba* throughout, except in the last stanza where there is a slight variation.

The structure isn’t as complicated as it sounds. Take this first villanelle by Passerat:

Villanelle

I have lost my dove: *A*¹
Is there nothing I can do? *b*
I want to go after my love. *A*²

Do you miss the one you love? *a*
Alas! I really do: *b*
I have lost my dove. *A*¹

If your love you prove *a*
Then my faith is true; *b*
I want to go after my love. *A*²

Haven’t you cried enough? *a*
I will never be through: *b*
I have lost my dove. *A*¹

When I can’t see her above *a*
Nothing else seems to do: *b*
I want to go after my love. *A*²

Death, I’ve called long enough, *a*
Take what is given to you: *b*
I have lost my dove, *A*¹
I want to go after my love. *A*²

The letters at the end of each line stand for the rhyme scheme. All the *a*’s rhyme and so do all the *b*’s. *A*¹ is the first line of the poem and *A*² is the last line of the first stanza. Sometimes when either of these two lines reappear, they take on a new meaning.

There’s something soothing or hypnotic about the sound of a villanelle, the way the lines come back, like waves at the ends of the stanzas. The form also carries a tone of conviction that reinforces its sentiments.

In the nineteenth century, another French writer, Leconte de Lisle, used the form of the villanelle but wrote more serious, philosophical poems. Continuing in this vein, the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote a somber villanelle (“House on the Hill”) just after the turn of the century. About a house that has been left empty, it is written in short, simple sentences. “They are all gone away, / The house is shut and still, / There is nothing more to say.” In 1935, Dylan Thomas wrote “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.” This very serious villanelle is about not giving in to death and it is written eloquently, with long, dramatic lines.

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

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.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Another notable villanelle is Theodore Roethke's
"The Waking."

The Waking

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

It is possible to write all different sorts of poems using the basic, fairly complex structure of the villanelle. Think of something you feel strongly about. Then write two lines that are approximately the same length and that rhyme. These two can be your repeating lines, in other words lines A^1 and A^2 . Once you have those two lines and you are happy with what they say, then let your head and heart dance around with the other lines of the poems. Writing a villanelle is like working a jigsaw puzzle; you can move the lines around quite a bit until they finally seem to fit, to make a kind of poetic sense.

—Anne Waldman and Mary Logue

GEOF HEWITT is a poet who has worked in poets-in-the-schools programs and is Program Officer for the Vermont Council on the Arts. GARY LENHART is a poet and Associate Director of T&W. MARY LOGUE is a poet and fiction writer who worked in the T&W program for two years. BERNADETTE MAYER is a poet and the publisher of United Artists Books; this is her second year in the T&W program. RON PADGETT is Publications Director at T&W and the editor of *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*. ANNE WALDMAN is a poet and co-founder, with Allen Ginsberg, of the Jack Kerouac School at Naropa Institute. BILL ZAVATSKY is a poet, translator, publisher, and teacher. He co-edited T&W's *The Whole Word Catalogue 2*. ALAN ZIEGLER is a poet and author of T&W's *The Writing Workshop: Volumes 1 & 2*.

Reflections on the Art of Poetry

by Jules Supervielle

POETRY COMES TO ME FROM AN ALWAYS latent dream. I like to direct this dream, except on days of inspiration, when I have the impression that it directs itself.

I don't like the dream that just drifts (I was going to say that just dreams). I try to make a substantial dream of it, a kind of ship's figurehead that, after crossing inner space and time, confronts outside space and time—and for it the outside is the blank page.

JULES SUPERVIELLE (1884-1960) was a French poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist. "Reflections on the Art of Poetry" (1951), his most famous essay, is from his *Selected Poems and Reflections on the Art of Poetry*, translated by George Bogin and published by SUN Press, 347 West 39th St., New York, NY 10018. Copies are \$9, which includes shipping.

To dream is to forget the materiality of one's body, to confuse in a way the outer and the inner world. The omnipresence of the cosmic poet has perhaps no other origin. I always dream a little that what I see, even at the precise moment of seeing and as I go along seeing, is what I experienced in *Boire à la Source*¹ and is always true; when I'm in the countryside the landscape suddenly becomes almost interior by I don't know what process of gliding from the outside to the inside and I move on in my own mental world.

People are sometimes surprised over my marvelling at the world; this occurs as much from the permanence of my dreams as from my bad memory. Both lead me from surprise to surprise and force me to be astonished at everything. "Why, there are trees, there is the sea. There are women. There are even very beautiful women . . ."

But if I dream, I am not less drawn to poetry by a great precision in the dream, by a kind of hallucinated exactness. Isn't it in just that way that the dream manifests itself to the dreamer? It is perfectly defined even in its ambiguities. It is on waking that the shapes erase themselves and the dream becomes blurred, inconsistent.

If I have revealed myself fairly late in life it is because for a long time I eluded my deep self. I did not dare confront it directly and "Poèmes de l'Humour Triste"² resulted. I needed to have very strong nerves to face the vertigoes, the traps of the inner cosmos for which I have always had the most vivid and most coenesthetic feelings.

I was long in coming to modern poetry, in being attracted to Rimbaud and Apollinaire. I couldn't leap the walls of flame and smoke that separate these poets from the classics and romantics. And if I may make a confession, one that is only a wish perhaps, I have attempted consequently to be one of those who dispersed that smoke in striving not to extinguish the flame, a conciliator, a reconciler of ancient and modern poetry.

Since poetry had been quite dehumanized, I proposed, in the continuity and light dear to the classics, to reveal the torments, hopes, and anguish of a poet and a man of these times. I think of a certain virtually unknown preface of Valéry's to a young poet. "Don't be dissatisfied with your verses," said the poet of *Charmes* to André Caselli. "I find exquisite qualities in them, of which one is essential for my taste; I'm speaking of a sincerity of tone which for the poet is the analogue of true pitch in singers. Keep this *real* tone. Don't be surprised that it's I who notice it in your poems and praise it. But the immense difficulty lies in combining this exact sound of the soul with the artifice of art. There must be enormous art in order to really be oneself and simple. But art alone would not know how to be enough."

This real and sincere tone, this simplicity, is what I, too, have always tried to retain; they were sufficiently submerged in my dreams not to stand in the way of poetry. People in our time have made such a goal of madness in verse and prose that this madness no longer has an appetizing virtue for me. I really find more spice and even mustard in a certain wisdom governing this madness and giving it the appearance of reason than in delirium abandoned to itself.

There is certainly an element of delirium in all poetic creation, but this delirium should be decanted and separated from the ineffective or harmful residue with all the precautions due such a delicate operation. For me it is only by dint of simplicity and transparency that I succeed in arriving at my essential secrets and in decanting my deepest poetry. I strain until the supernatural becomes natural and flows naturally (or seems to). I see to it that the ineffable becomes familiar at the same time that it guards its fabulous origins.

The poet has two pedals at his disposal, one clear permitting him to attain transparency, the other obscure ending in opaqueness. I think that I have only rarely pressed on the obscure pedal. If I veil, I do so naturally and it is, I hope, only the veil of poetry. The poet often operates warmly in darkness, but the cold operation also has its advantages. It permits us greater audacities because they are more lucid. We know that we shall not blush over them one day as from a passing intoxication and transport we no longer understand. I need this lucidity all the more because I am naturally obscure. There is no poetry for me that doesn't begin with a certain confusion. I try to bring some light to it without making it lose its subconscious vitality.

I like the strange only when it is acclimated, brought to human temperature. I try my skill at making a straight line out of one or several broken lines. Some poets are often victims of their trances. They abandon themselves to the sole pleasure of their freedom and never worry about the beauty of the poem. Or to use another image, they fill their glass to the brim and forget to serve you, the reader.

I have scarcely known the fear of banality which haunts most writers, but fear rather to be thought incomprehensible and peculiar. Not writing for mystery specialists, I have always suffered when a sensitive person has not understood one of my poems.

The image is the magic lantern that lights up the poets in the darkness. It is also the illuminated surface as the poet approaches that mysterious center where the very heart of poetry beats. But images are not all. There are passages from one image to the other that must also be poetry. As for analysis of poetry, people have said that it is anti-poetic, and this is true if it is an analysis understood only by logicians. But there are things submerged in dream that can reveal themselves without leaving the realm of poetry.

Thus the poet can aspire to coherence, to the plausibility of the whole poem whose surface can be limp while mystery takes refuge in the depths. I count on my poem to direct the images and make them sing true. As the poem bathes in me in an inner dream, I'm not afraid to make it sometimes take the form of a narrative. The logic of the storyteller superintends the rambling reverie of the poet. The cohesion of the whole poem, far from destroying its magic, consolidates its foundations. And when I say that the storyteller superintends the poet in me I'm not losing sight, of course, of the differences among the literary genres. The story goes directly from one point to the other while the poem, as I generally conceive of it, advances in concentric circles.

I come from a family of small watchmakers who have worked all their lives with a magnifying glass screwed to their eyes. Therefore the least little springs must be in place if one wants the whole poem to set itself in motion under our eyes.

I don't wait for inspiration to write and I go out to meet it more than halfway along the road. The poet cannot count on the very rare moments when he writes as though under dictation. And it seems to me that he should imitate the man of science who doesn't wait for inspiration to start working. Science is an excellent school of modesty, if not the opposite, since it has confidence in the constant value of man and not only at some privileged moments. How often we think we have nothing to say while a poem is waiting in us behind a thin curtain of mist and it is enough to silence the noise of everyday life for the poem to unveil itself to us.

Stendhal had faith only in persistence in the writer. I think he was also thinking of the involuntary persistence which is the fruit of a long obsession. Sometimes what people call inspiration comes from the poet's benefitting from an unconscious and ancient persistence that ends up bearing fruit. It permits us to see in ourselves as though through a skylight that is invisible at ordinary times.

I don't like a too eccentric originality (apart from some shining exceptions such as Lautréamont or Michaux in France). I prefer a less self-conscious originality as in our classics.

Despite the marvelous examples of some poets who transform words into precious objects, I often write without

thinking of the words; I even strive to forget their existence in order to more and more tightly enclose my thought or rather that intermediate state between thought and dream that gives birth to the poem. It's not actually a question, properly speaking, of thinking in poetry but in some way giving its equivalent or nostalgia for it. I have tried to convey the feeling of creation, at least as I have experienced it, in the following passage, replying to an inquiry by Jean Paulhan in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. (But it is a state of lyrical intoxication that I have rarely felt in its fullness, and one can see in the preceding pages that I do not wait for a state of trance in order to write.) "Inspiration generally manifests itself in me by the feeling that I am everywhere at once, in space as well as in the diverse regions of the heart and mind. The state of poetry comes to me, therefore, from a kind of magical confusion where the ideas and images begin to live and abandon their lines of intersection, either to make advances to other images—in this nearby domain nothing is really distant—or to undergo profound metamorphoses that render them unrecognizable. However, for the mind confused with dreams, opposites no longer exist; affirmation and negation become the same thing, as do past and future, despair and hope, death and life. The inner song rises, it chooses the words that suit it. I give myself the illusion of assisting obscurity in its effort toward light while the moving images rise to the surface of the paper, calling out in the depths. After that I know a little better where I am with myself; I have created dangerous forces and I have exorcised them; I have made out of them allies of my innermost reason."

Paulhan told me that my statement was really a prose poem. This is because most of the time I move forward in my thought only by means of images. If the image, even when it is precise, is more imprecise than the concept, it radiates more and goes farther into the unconscious. It is embodied in the poem whereas the concept, more or less formulated, is there only for intelligibility and to permit the poem to attain another image, which emerges little by little from the depths.

If there is some humanity in my poetry it is perhaps because I cultivate my poor soil with a well-tested fertilizer, suffering. And it is perhaps this dull continual anxiety which often prevents my poetry from being more brilliant. To suffer in one's body or in one's ideas is to think of oneself, to turn against oneself. To think of oneself, in spite of oneself, is to be impoverished and destitute of ornament. I have always more or less dreaded attacking the monsters I sense in me. I prefer to tame them with everyday words, which are the most reassuring of all. (Aren't they the very ones that quieted us during our great childish terrors?) I count on their wisdom and their friendship, tested many a time, to neutralize the venom of the strange, often the forerunner of panic. And perhaps I owe the best of my wisdom to the fact that I have often had to subdue a bit of madness.

I don't like in poetry (in mine, at least) a very apparent richness. I prefer richness to be muted and somewhat dimmed in its luster, if it has any. If it must reproduce itself, let the miracle move forward stealthily and withdraw the same way after having done its deed. I like to force—to the point of denuding them—the most entangled sentiments and the strangest sensations that crowd within us. I also believe a great deal in the virtue of having some phrases in prose at the heart of a poem. (But they must be well accented and

lifted by the rhythm.) By their great naturalness at a tragic moment they can bring an extraordinary pathos to the poem. When Victor Hugo hears "les noirs chevaux de la mort"³ coming he adds these two lines that are pure prose (but divinely accented and rhythmized):

Je suis comme celui qui s'étant trop haté
Attend sur le chemin que la voiture passe.⁴

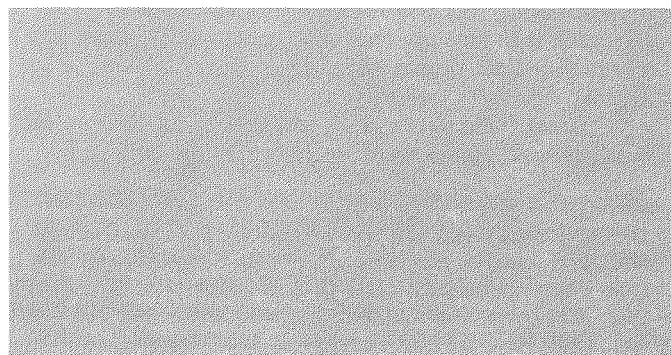
I use many different poetic forms: regular verse (or almost), blank verse that rhymes when it comes to me, free verse, versicles that approach a rhythmic prose. Loving above all the natural, I never say to myself beforehand that I shall use this or that form. I let my poem itself make the choice. This is not scorn but suppleness of technique. Or, if you prefer, an adaptable technique that fixes on each poem whose song it marries. A technique that permits a great variety of inspiration.

Poetic art is for each poet the more or less indiscreet praise of the poetry in which he excels. Thus Verlaine recommends to us "vers impairs,"⁵ Valéry regular verse in a classic and Mallarméan form, Claudel the versicle. You must excuse me if I have stated my preferences with much more naiveté than my illustrious predecessors and with a nonchalance that is paired with reverie. I like to write without too much self-consciousness and preferably in a garden where nature seems to be doing all the work. Certainly the open air and spaces without walls impede concentration somewhat, but if the garden is enclosed they favor a directed distraction, friend of poetry, shade and freshness.

Each poet has his secrets. I have tried to tell you some of mine by unveiling this double of ourselves who watches us in the dark, approves us or makes us tear up the paper on which we have just written. But I have told you practically nothing of our most important secret, the mystery that inhabits the poet and from which he can never completely separate himself in order to judge it from the outside. I hope it has found a refuge in my poems.

NOTES

1. *Drinking at the Wellspring*, subtitled *Confidences of Memory and Landscape*, Correa, Paris, 1933 and Gallimard, Paris, 1951. A prose memoir.
2. "Poems of a Melancholy Humor," a group of six poems collected in *Poèmes*, Eugene Figuière, Paris, 1919 and in *L'Escalier (The Stairway)*, Gallimard, Paris, 1956.
3. "The black horses of death."
4. "I'm like the one who having hurried too much Waits on the road for the carriage to come."
5. Irregular verse.



The Kiss of Poetry

by David Romtvedt

THE VISITING POET COMES INTO THE CLASSROOM. The dark-eyed teacher smiles at him, smiles at the class, smiles at her own dark hands and feet. The poet smiles back at her dark everything. The class smiles into its desks. Smiles so tight that teeth begin to crack.

The poet says, "Imagine a boy in the corner." The class does. "The boy's hands are in his pockets. Now he pulls them out and his fingers flutter, tiny green leaves."

The leaves float around the room. The teacher smiles. The leaves remind her of spring and lovemaking high above a river canyon in a dry meadow. Some students grab for the boy's leaves. Some are stupefied.

"Now imagine the boy wears a hat."

"Fine," everyone says.

"It's a hat made of feathers. Feathers of all colors, violet, chartreuse, blue, pink. Change the colors like a wheel in motion, a wheel rolling down a hill; turn and turn the feathers in the hat."

"How is the boy?"

"He's in the corner."

"But how is he? Is he fine?"

"This is a fine boy," says the teacher.

The feathers begin to droop. The boy puts his hands in his pockets. Feathers cover his face. Only now does anyone notice his dress. Feathers drift down past his shoulders along his small body. They rise from the floor, great mounds of feathers. They climb the body until the boy is buried.

"Where are the boy's clothes?"

"He's naked, he's naked," some say.

At this point the poet speaks directly to the boy: "Hold up one leg." A leg appears through the feathers. Some students hold their breath as the boy sways in the breeze.

"Now lift the other leg," the poet goes on. Out comes that other leg and the boy's head turns on his neck, eyes open.

One student says, "What?"

"Go inside the feathers," the teacher says, and the student does. He's gone. One by one each student disappears into the feather mound under the boy in the corner. One by one they disappear.

"Good," the poet says and looks at the teacher, her dark hair like a flame. "Have the boy lie down. Have him roll across the floor. Have him release flowers—yellow and blue flowers." The boy rolls out the students, each lying flat, each with face up, eyes shut, mouth slack. Each arm is a branch and the fingers silver green leaves quaking in the breeze.

"Good," the poet repeats and goes to the teacher. He puts one hand on her waist, one hand on the back of her

neck. He opens his mouth and asks the boy in the corner to sing. The boy sings. The poet and the dark-eyed teacher kiss. The students breathe evenly. Feathers fill the room.

FOR SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS THE TEACHER organized a unit on family life. "Something about your parents," she said. One student turned in a poem called "Coal Kiss":

Coal Kiss

The fire reached out
and kissed Mother on the cheek.
She rushed to the mirror
and there on the cheek
was a black coal mark.
Shaped as lips branded.
Father walked into the house
covered head to toe with coal dust.
He put a black kiss on Mother's
other cheek. The white powder
on her black face began to fade.

When the teacher asked about this poem the student said, "It's not what I meant. I don't know where it came from."

At sixteen the student has no family. She lives alone in an apartment near school. When she finishes classes for the day she works in a restaurant until midnight. On Saturdays she works from one to six. She doesn't do much homework. She wears too much make-up and tight pink pants with shiny silver high heels. When she smiles she is beautiful.

One winter day the student and teacher leave school at the same time. "May I come to your apartment?" the teacher asks.

"Well," the student says, unsure what the teacher wants, "okay, sure." So they go. The teacher sits in an overstuffed chair that's got a blue bedspread pinned over it. The student sits on the couch. It's missing one leg. The Social Studies text replaces the missing leg. The student jokes and tries to make this life seem fine.

"Did you come to talk about school? I know I don't do all . . ."

"No, no," the teacher says.

So the student tells about waitressing—the funny or crazy things that happen. Like the time a fat lady in a lavender sack dress whacked the bottom of the ketchup jar and ketchup shot all over her lap. Or the time a man ordered a full dinner plate of parsley and half a lemon and ate them separately, then left. The student smiles.

The teacher is silent. Then she looks down and begins to cry. At first the student is angry because she thinks the teacher pities her and is crying at her hard sad life. But the teacher talks through the tears and it becomes obvious she is crying for herself. Feeling strange and a little silly, the student moves onto the couch, sits close to the teacher and begins to stroke her hair. It's brown and coarse and here and there are bits of gray.

DAVID ROMTVEDT is a poet who has worked extensively in poets-in-the-schools programs. His *Free & Compulsory for All*, from which these selections are taken, was published by Graywolf Press. Copies are available from Graywolf Press, P.O. Box 75006, Saint Paul, MN 55175 for \$7, which includes shipping.

The Teachers

by Nicanor Parra

Our teachers drove us nuts
with their irrelevant questions:
how do you add compound numbers
are there or are there not spiders on the moon
how did the family of the czar die
can one sing with one's mouth shut
who painted the mustache on the Mona Lisa
what are the inhabitants of Jerusalem called
is there or is there not oxygen in the air
how many apostles did Christ have
what is the meaning of "consubstantial"
what were the words Christ spoke on the cross
who is the author of *Madame Bovary*
where did Cervantes write *Don Quixote*
how did David kill Goliath
the etymology of the word philosophy
what is the capital of Venezuela
when did the Spanish arrive in Chile?

No one can say that our teachers
were walking encyclopedias
quite the contrary
they were modest grade-school
or secondary-school teachers I've forgotten which—
equipped with canes and frock coats
since we were at the start of the century—
why did they go to such trouble
to trouble us like that
except for reasons they would never own up to:
an overpowering pedagogical mania
and the darkest, emptiest cruelty!
The dental structure of the tiger
the scientific name of the swallow
a solemn mass has how many parts
what is the formula for sulfur trioxide
how to add fractions of different denominators
the stomachs of ruminants
the family tree of Philip II
the Meistersingers of Nuremberg
the Gospel according to Saint Matthew
name five Finnish poets
the etymology of the word etymology.

The universal law of gravity
to what family does the cow belong
what are the wings of insects called
to what family does the duckbilled platypus belong
the least common multiple between two and three

NICANOR PARRA is perhaps the greatest living Latin American poet. "The Teachers" is from his *Antipoems: New and Selected* (New Directions), edited by David Unger, a poet and translator who works in the T&W program.

does light have dark patches or not
the origin of the solar system
the respiratory system of amphibians
the organs exclusive to fishes
the periodic system of the elements
the author of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*
explain the phenomenon known as mi-rage
how long would it take a train to reach the moon
what is the French for blackboard
underline the words ending in consonants.

The real truth of the matter
is that we could have cared less
who would bother with such questions anyway,
at the worst they scarcely made us tremble
only gave us headaches
we were men of action
in our eyes the world was reduced
to the size of a soccer ball
and to kick it was our passion
our adolescent reason for being
we had championship games lasting until nightfall
I can still see myself chasing
the invisible ball in the dark
one had to be an owl or a bat
not to run into the adobe walls
that was our world
our teachers' questions
went gloriously in one ear and out the other
like water off a duck's back
without disturbing the calm of the universe:

The component parts of a flower
to what family does the weasel belong
the method of preparing ozone
the political testament of Balmaceda
the ambush of Cancha Rayada
where did the liberating army enter
insects harmful to agriculture
how does the *Poem of the Cid* begin
draw a differential pulley
and determine its state of equilibrium.

My kind reader can understand
that they asked more than was fair,
more than was strictly necessary:
how to determine the altitude of a cloud
how to calculate the volume of a pyramid
show that the root of two is an irrational number
learn by heart the couplets of Jorge Manrique
stop all this nonsense
today we have a championship game
but still the written tests kept coming
followed by orals

(the cleverest among us got screwed on some)
with the same morbid regularity
with which the bandurria announces a stormy passage:

The electromagnetic theory of light
how does a troubadour differ from a minstrel
do we say "a number *is*" or "a number *are*"
what is an artesian well
classify the birds of Chile
the assassination of Manuel Rodriguez
the independence of French Guyana
Simón Bolívar hero or antihero
O'Higgins' abdication speech
you're failing faster than sand in an hourglass.

Our teachers were right:
of course of course
our brains came out through our noses
you should have seen our teeth chatter—
to what do we owe the colors of the rainbow
the hemispheres of Magdeburg
the scientific name of the swallow
the metamorphosis of the frog
what did Kant mean by his Categorical Imperative
how to convert Chilean pesos into pounds sterling
who introduced the hummingbird to Chile
why doesn't the Tower of Pisa fall over
why didn't the Hanging Gardens of Babylon come down
why doesn't the moon fall to earth
the department of Ñuble province
how to trisect a right angle
what are regular polyhedrons and how many are there
this fellow hasn't the slightest idea of anything.

I'd rather have had the earth swallow me up
than answer those wild questions
especially after the moralizing lectures
to which we were subjected day after day:
Do you know how much each Chilean
citizen costs the state
from the moment he enters first grade
to the moment he graduates from the university?
One million six-penny pesos!

One million six-penny pesos
and they kept on pointing their fingers at us:
how do you explain the hydrostatic paradox
how do ferns reproduce
list the volcanos of Chile
what is the longest river in the world
what is the most powerful battleship in the world
how do elephants reproduce
who invented the sewing machine
who invented the balloon
you're failing faster than sand in an hourglass
you'll have to go home
and bring your parents
and speak with the Principal of this Institution.

And in the meantime World War I
and in the meantime World War II
adolescence deep in the schoolyard
youth under the table
maturity never to be
old age

with its insect wings.

—Translated from the Spanish by William Jay Smith

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