**Poetry Unit**

**English 10H**

Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful. – Rita Dove

Poetry is an act of peace. – Pablo Neruda

The poet is the priest of the invisible. — Wallace Stevens

If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. ― Emily Dickinson

Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toe nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own. ― Dylan Thomas

Poetry can be dangerous, especially beautiful poetry, because it gives the illusion of having had the experience without actually going through it. ― Rumi

Poetry is truth in its Sunday clothes. ― Joseph Roux

Poetry is often like hearing a conversation through the door – you may not hear all the words, but you get a sense of the tone of the conversation by listening to the meter – ups, downs, volume, intensity – of the conversation. --- Robert Frost

Poets are soldiers that liberate words from the steadfast possession of definition – Eli Khamarov

**How To Explicate a Poem**

Explications:

* Should be rich with textual evidence. A typical paragraph in an explication will include 3-5 direct quotations. Use both snippets and complete phrases, and take advantage of your lead ins to provide contextual information. If you are writing about one poem, you do not need to use parenthetical citations. If you are writing about more than one poem, make sure that your lead ins and analysis makes it clear which poem you are discussing.
* Should be formal in tone and not include any first person language.
* Should have a specific focus within each paragraph.
* Do not need to address in detail every element of the poem but should open with a carefully worded statement (an abbreviated version of the three sentence summary) that introduces the author, title, general topic, and style. For example*: In William Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18,” he considers the transitory nature of youth and the importance of art.*

Consider the following questions as you write your explications.

1. What is the **literal** sense of the poem?

* Can it be broken down into sentences?
* Can you find meaning in individual sentences?
* What information is being conveyed through the poem? What does the poet want you to learn or think about?

1. What is the **diction** of the poem?

* What sort of language does the poet use? Is it formal or colloquial? Is it abstract or concrete? Is it vivid or vague? Does it contain obsolete words? Does it contain modern slang?
* Do any words have other **connotations**, or associations beyond the standard **denotation** (definition)?
* Does the poem use **anaphora**? For what purpose?

1. What is the **tone** of the poem?

* What sort of attitude, mood, or emotion does it convey?
* Is it happy, sad, humorous, angry, nostalgic, serious, frivolous, sarcastic, ecstatic, or grotesque?
* Is there irony conveyed through a tone of voice or contradiction between words and the matter at hand?

1. What is the contextof the poem?

* Is someone speaking? To whom? On what occasion? For what purpose?
* Where is the poem set?
* Is the focus of the poem a particular object? An experience? A memory?

1. Does the poem use figurative language (hyperbole, metaphor, simile, personification)?
2. What kind of imagery does the poem use?

* What mental pictures does it create?
* What do you see, hear, taste, smell, or touch, in your imagination, through the words of the poem?
* Does the poem use **symbolism**?

1. How does sound contribute to the effect of the poem?

* Does it have **rhyme**, including **slant rhymes**?
* Does it have **assonance:** the repetition of a vowel sound in a line or a passage?
* Does it use repetition of sounds, words, lines, or refrains?
* Does it contain **onomatopoeia?**
* Is the effect of these devices **cacophony** or **euphony**?

1. How is the poem structured?

* Does it have a standard form, as, for example, of a **sonnet, ode, or ekphrastic poem**?
* Does it have **stanzas**, or is it written in **free verse**?
* Does it have a **rhyme scheme**?
* How is it organized on the page? Did the poet make intentional choices about layout? Does the poem include **eye rhymes**?

**Terms**

*Kinds of Poems*

**Ballad**: A form of verse to be sung or recited and characterized by its presentation of a dramatic or exciting EPISODE in simple narrative form.

**Ekphrastic poem**: A verbal representation of a visual representation and is one of the most ancient forms of poetry.

**Haiku**: A form of Japanese poetry which states in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables a clear picture designed to arouse a distinct emotion and suggest a specific spiritual insight.

**Limerick**: The limerick is generally bawdy and obnoxious.  It consists of five anapestic lines with the rhyme scheme aabba. The first, second, and fifth lines are trimeter, while the third and fourth are dimeter.

**Ode**: The word “ode” comes from the Greek aeidein, meaning to sing or chant, and belongs to the long and varied tradition of lyric poetry. The ode addresses and often celebrates a person, place, thing, or idea. The first known odes were written by the Greek poet Pindar (circa 552–442 B.C.E.) to celebrate athletic victories.

**Sonnet**: Derived from the Italian, meaning “a little song.” Traditionally, a lyric poem of fourteen lines, following one or another of several set rhyme-schemes. The two characteristic sonnet types are the Italian (Petrarchan) and the English (Shakespearean).

*Sounds, Ideas, and Organizational Structures Within Poems*

**Alliteration**: A repetition of consonant sounds, particularly initial consonants, either within or between lines.

**Anaphora:** the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses

**Assonance**: Resemblance or similarity in sound between vowels followed by different consonants in two or more stressed syllables. Assonance differs from RHYME in that RHYME is a similarity of vowel and consonant. "Lake" and "fake" demonstrate RHYME; "lake" and "fate" demonstrate assonance.

**Cacophony / Euphony**: cacophony – harsh or discordant sounds; euphony – pleasing, harmonizing sounds.

**Cadence**: The rhythmic flow of poetry or prose.

**Connotation / Denotation**: connotation – the associated or secondary meaning of a word; denotation – the explicit or direct meaning of a word.

**Couplet**: Two lines of VERSE with similar END-RHYMES.

**Diction**: The attitude of the poet or speaker toward the subject matter conveyed through word choice and tone.

**Eye Rhyme:** a similarity between words in spelling but not in pronunciation

**Foot**: A measurable, patterned unit of poetic rhythm.

- one-foot line: monometer

- two-foot line: dimeter

- three-foot line: trimeter

- four-foot line: tetrameter

- five-foot line: pentameter

**Figurative Language**: The creative use of language to express an idea.

* Hyperbole: exaggeration
* Metaphor: comparison of two things without “like” or “as”
* Simile: comparison of two things using “like” or “as”
* Personification: giving human characteristics or qualities to abstract or inanimate objects

**Free Verse**: Poetry that is based on the irregular rhythmic CADENCE or the recurrence, with variations, of phrases, images, and syntactical patterns rather than the conventional use of METER. RHYME may or may not be present in free verse, but when it is, it is used with great freedom.

**Irony**: The contrast between what appears to be and what really is.

* Dramatic irony: the audience or readers know facts that the characters do not
* Situational irony: an outcome that is the opposite of the expected
* Verbal irony: words or names whose literal meanings are the opposite of what is conveyed; sarcasm

**Meter and Rhythm**: English poetry employs five basic rhythms of varying stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables. The meters are iambs, trochees, spondees, anapests and dactyls. In this document the stressed syllables are marked in boldface type rather than the tradition al "/" and "x." Each unit of rhythm is called a "foot" of poetry.

**Onomatopoeia**: The formation of a word by imitation of a sound made by or associated with the word it is referencing; for example, “honk” or “meow.”

**Rhyme Scheme**: The pattern of end rhymes between lines in a poem or song. It is generally described with letters that indicate which lines rhyme with each other.

**Scansion**: The process of dividing a line into its metrical feet and each foot into its individual parts.

**Slant Rhyme:** Half rhymes, near rhymes, or imperfect rhymes

**Symbolism**: An object that has meaning beyond what it literally represents; something that represents something else by association or resemblance.

**Stresses**: The division of syllables in a “foot” into stressed and unstressed syllables to reveal the overall rhythmic pattern. See “meter and rhythm” for specific examples.

**Tone**: The author’s attitude toward the work and the audience.

**Odes**

The word “ode” comes from the Greek *aeidein*, meaning to sing or chant, and belongs to the long and varied tradition of lyric poetry. The ode addresses and often celebrates a person, place, thing, or idea. The first known odes were written by the Greek poet Pindar to celebrate athletic victories.

**Ode to Aphrodite**  
Sappho (c. 630-570 B.C.)

Deathless Aphrodite, throned in flowers,

Daughter of Zeus, O terrible enchantress,  
With this sorrow, with this anguish, break my spirit  
Lady, not longer!

Hear anew the voice! O hear and listen!

Come, as in that island dawn thou camest,  
Billowing in thy yoked car to Sappho  
Forth from thy father's

Golden house in pity! ... I remember:

Fleet and fair thy sparrows drew thee, beating  
Fast their wings above the dusky harvests,  
Down the pale heavens,

Lightning anon! And thou, O blest and brightest,

Smiling with immortal eyelids, asked me:  
"Maiden, what betideth thee? Or wherefore  
Callest upon me?

"What is here the longing more than other,

Here in this mad heart? And who the lovely  
One beloved that wouldst lure to loving?  
Sappho, who wrongs thee?

"See, if now she flies, she soon must follow;

Yes, if spurning gifts, she soon must offer;  
Yes, if loving not, she soon must love thee,  
Howso unwilling..."

Come again to me! O now! Release me!

End the great pang! And all my heart desireth  
Now of fulfillment, fulfill! O Aphrodite,  
Fight by my shoulder!

**Ode To My Socks**

Pablo Neruda, translated by Robert Bly (1956)

Mara Mori brought me  
a pair of socks  
which she knitted herself  
with her sheepherder's hands,  
two socks as soft as rabbits.  
I slipped my feet into them  
as if they were two cases  
knitted with threads of twilight and goatskin,  
Violent socks,  
my feet were two fish made of wool,  
two long sharks  
sea blue, shot through  
by one golden thread,  
two immense blackbirds,  
two cannons,  
my feet were honored in this way  
by these heavenly socks.  
They were so handsome for the first time  
my feet seemed to me unacceptable  
like two decrepit firemen,  
firemen unworthy of that woven fire,  
of those glowing socks.  
  
Nevertheless, I resisted the sharp temptation  
to save them somewhere as schoolboys  
keep fireflies,  
as learned men collect  
sacred texts,  
I resisted the mad impulse to put them  
in a golden cage and each day give them  
birdseed and pieces of pink melon.  
Like explorers in the jungle  
who hand over the very rare green deer  
to the spit and eat it with remorse,  
I stretched out my feet and pulled on  
the magnificent socks and then my shoes.

The moral of my ode is this:  
beauty is twice beauty  
and what is good is doubly good  
when it is a matter of two socks  
made of wool in winter.

**Today**

Frank O’Hara (1950)

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!

You really are beautiful! Pearls,

harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all

the stuff they've always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!

These things are with us every day

even on beachheads and biers. They

do have meaning. They're strong as rocks.

**They loved these things too**

Lisa Jarnot (1967-)

The sun the moon the stars the polar ice caps

and the ice cream cones the city streets the

side streets and the small tv the curve of

flesh around the food the road maps and

November and the tiny birds and also certain

people and they loved the special chairs and

also stuffed things and the carnival and big

rings and the o rings and they loved the

oranges in bags and florida and texas and the

hotel room and they loved the chili on the

highway that they loved as if they loved the

onramp and the way that people called and

the natural forces of destruction and the sea

they loved the sea and also boats and sailing

ships and whales they loved and sea birds in

varieties and then they loved the choice of

drinks to drink and also beer they loved

the times that others liked them that they loved

and also they loved things all shaped like

tapirs and they loved the zoo.

Assignments and Exercises

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **assignment** | **due?** | **where/format?** | **completed?** |
| Two paragraph explication of one of the Odes |  |  |  |
| Write your own Ode inspired by one of the Odes  in the packet – probably the one you already wrote  about. |  |  |  |
| One paragraph explication of your poem and one paragraph analysis of the relationship between your poem and the poem that inspired it |  |  |  |

**Sonnets**

“Sonnet” is derived from the Italian, meaning “a little song.”  You’ve undoubtedly encountered this form, which is perhaps the most widely known of all poetic structures.  A sonnet employs figurative language and meditates on a single subject.  A sonnet has fourteen lines, and is traditionally written in iambic pentameter, with a standard rhyme scheme.  There are two traditional types of sonnets written in English, the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet and the Shakespearian sonnet.

The Petrarchan sonnet has an octave (eight lines) of the rhyme scheme *abbaabba*, followed by a sestet (six lines) of the rhyme scheme *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*.  The Petrarchan sonnet makes the clearest use of a key structural element, the *volta* or “turn” of thought that divides the poem.  The “turn” happens after the octave, and signals a shift in emphasis or focus.  Here’s an example of a Petrarchan sonnet, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why”:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,

I have forgotten, and what arms have lain

Under my head till morning; but the rain

Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh

Upon the glass and listen for reply,

And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain

For unremembered lads that not again

Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in winter stands the lonely tree,

Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,

Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:

I cannot say what loves have come and gone,

I only know that summer sang in me

A little while, that in me sings no more.

Another Petrachan sonnet, William Wordsworth’s (1770-1850) “The World Is Too Much With Us”:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

The winds that will be howling at all hours,

And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

It moves us not. Great God! I’d rather be

A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,

Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;

Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

The Shakespearian sonnet also contains a dividing of thought, but with an emphasis on the closing couplet to provide this shift.  The Shakespearian sonnet has the following rhyme scheme: *ababcdcdefefgg*.  Here’s a sonnet by Shakespeare:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damasked, red and white,

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak; yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound:

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

Contemporary poets have often abandoned the traditional rhyme scheme and metrical regularity of the sonnet, while still preserving its shape and argumentative structure.  Other poets have found inventive ways to preserve a sense of formal intricacy, as with Seamus Heaney’s (1939-2013) sonnet, “Strange Fruit”:

Here is the girl’s head like an exhumed gourd.

Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth.

They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair

And made an exhibition of its coil,

Let the air at her leathery beauty.

Pash of tallow, perishable treasure:

Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod,

Her eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings.

Diodorus Sicilus confessed

His gradual ease among the likes of this:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible

Beheaded girl, outstaring axe

And beatification, outstaring

What had begun to feel like reverence.

Assignments and Exercises

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **assignment** | **due?** | **where/format?** | **completed?** |
| Two paragraph explication of a Sonnet. If you select a sonnet that is not included in this packet, include a copy of the poem. |  |  |  |
| Write your own Petrarchan Sonnet. |  |  |  |
| Write a one paragraph explication of your poem and one paragraph analysis of the relationship between your poem and the poem that inspired it |  |  |  |

**Ekphrastic Poems**

*Ekphrasis*, derived from the Greek preposition *ek*, ‘out of,’ and *phrazein*, ‘to speak,’ indicates a verbal representation of visual representation and is one of the most ancient forms of poetry. The idea that there is a natural relation between painting and poetry goes back at least as far as Simonides of Keos, to whom Plutarch attributes the famous quotation, “Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens”: “The poem is a speaking picture, and the picture is a silent poem.” Horace’s later dictum “Ut pictora poesis” (“as is painting, so is poetry”) has led poetry and painting to be seen as “sister arts,” engaged at times in fierce rivalry.

For this this section of our poetry unit, I want you each to write a poem that addresses a painting of your choice. Take notes as you observe the work, considering how your impressions of it change through time, how it makes you feel, what other people say about it, anything. Consider what differentiates the world you live in from the one portrayed in the painting, both in terms of content but also in material terms—the two-dimensionality of the canvas, the particular framing, and so on. I would also like for you to study the painting closely, learning as much as you can about its history, composition, and reception.

Your poem will be in *at least* three parts, and each part of your poem should be written from a different approach. If you’d like, you might choose to use the painting as a point of return, as does Ashbery, or you might borrow your mode of composition from the painting, as does Hass. Among the perspectives you might take are the following:

* External Description
  + What is happening in the painting? How is it constructed?
* Embedded Description
  + Imagine yourself inside the painting. What is your worldview? You might also imagine the painting through multiple internal perspectives.
* Historical Description
  + You might research the historical conditions of the time the painting was made, or the details of art production in that time.
* Metaphoric Description
  + You might use the painting as a vehicle for thinking about some philosophical concept, as Auden does, or you might narrate some personal situation by obliquely referencing the painting or poems that have referred to it, as Bang does.

Assignments and Exercises

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **assignment** | **due?** | **where/format?** | **completed?** |
| Two paragraph explication of an Ekphrastic Poem. If you select a poem that is not included in this packet, include a copy of the poem. |  |  |  |
| Write your own Ekphrastic Poem. See above for specific details. |  |  |  |
| Write a one paragraph explication of your poem and one paragraph analysis of the relationship between your poem and the painting that inspired it |  |  |  |

**ODE ON A GRECIAN URN**

by [John Keats](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-keats) (1795-1821)

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,

       Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

       A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape

       Of deities or mortals, or of both,

               In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

       What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

               What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

       Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,

       Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

       Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

               Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;

       She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

               For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

         Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,

         For ever piping songs for ever new;

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

         For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,

                For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,

         That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,

                A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

         To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

         And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore,

         Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

                Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

         Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

                Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

         Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

         Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

         When old age shall this generation waste,

                Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,

         “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

                Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

**TIME AND MATERIALS**

by Robert Hass (1941-)

*Gerhard Richter: Abstrakte Bilder*

1

To make layers,

As if they were a steadiness of days:

It snowed; I did errands at a desk;

A white flurry out the window thickening; my tongue

Tasted of the glue on envelopes.

On this day sunlight on red brick, bare trees,

Nothing stirring in the icy air.

On this day a blur of color moving at the gym

Where the heat from bodies

Meets the watery, cold surface of the glass.

Made love, made curry, talked on the phone

To friends, the one whose brother died

Was crying and thinking alternately,

Like someone falling down and getting up

And running and falling and getting up.

2

The object of this poem is not to annihila

To not annih

The object of this poem is to report a theft,

In progress, of everything

That is not these words

And their disposition on the page.

The object o   f this poem is to report a theft,

            In progre   ss of everything that exists

That is not th   ese words

            And their d   isposition on the page.

The object     of his poe is t     repor a theft

           In rogres f ever hing at xists

Th is no ese w rds

           And their disp sit on o the pag

3

To score, to scar, to smear, to streak,

To smudge, to blur, to gouge, to scrape.

“Action painting,” i.e.,

The painter gets to behave like time.

4

The typo would be “paining.”

(To abrade.)

5

Or to render time and stand outside

The horizontal rush of it, for a moment

To have the sensation of standing outside

The greenish rush of it.

6

Some vertical gesture then, the way that anger

Or desire can rip a life apart,

Some wound of color.

**LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS**

by [Mary Jo Bang](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/mary_jo_bang/search?contributorName=mary%20jo%20bang) (1946-)

* How could I have failed you like this?

The narrator asks

The object. The object is a box

Of ashes. How could I not have saved you,

A boy made of bone and blood. A boy

Made of a mind. Of years. A hand

And paint on canvas. A marble carving.

How can I not reach where you are

And pull you back. How can I be

And you not. You’re forever on the platform

Seeing the pattern of the train door closing.

Then the silver streak of me leaving.

What train was it? The number six.

What day was it? Wednesday.

We had both admired the miniature mosaics

Stuck on the wall of the Met.

That car should be forever sealed in amber.

That dolorous day should be forever

Embedded in amber.

In garnet. In amber. In opal. In order

To keep going on. And how can it be

That this means nothing to anyone but me now.

**MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS**

by W.H. Auden (1907-1973)

About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position; how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting

For the miraculous birth, there must always be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood;

They never forgot

That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

**Poems Without Categories**

**BLACKBERRYING**

**Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)**

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,

Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,

A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea

Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries

Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes

Ebon in the hedges, fat

With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.

I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.

They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.

Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—

Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.

Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting.

I do not think the sea will appear at all.

The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.

I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,

Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.

The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.

One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.

From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,

Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.

These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.

I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me

To the hills’ northern face, and the face is orange rock

That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space

Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths

Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

From *Citizen*

By Claudia Rankine (2014)

/

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  and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

/

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  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.

/

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.

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**Phone Booth**

Brenda Hillman (2007)

There should be more nouns  
For objects put to sleep  
Against their will  
The “booth” for instance  
With coiled hidden wires  
Lidded chrome drawers  
Tipping up like lizards’ eyes  
We looked out into rhymed rain  
We heard varying vowels  
Rimbaud’s vowels with colors  
Orange or blue beeps  
Types of ancient punctuation  
The interpunct between words  
A call became twenty-five cents  
Times in a marriage we went there  
To complain or flirt  
A few decades and we wised up  
Got used to the shadow  
The phone booth as reliquary  
An arm could rest  
On the triangular shelf  
A briefcase between the feet  
A pen poked into acoustic holes  
While we gathered our actions/wits  
For magic and pain  
The destiny twins  
Some of us scratched pale glyphs  
Onto the glass door while talking  
One day we started to race past  
And others started racing  
Holding phones to their ears  
Holding a personal string  
To their lips  
If there are overages  
There might be nouns for  
The clotting of numbers in the sky  
So thick the stars can’t shine through  
A word for backing away  
From those who shout to their strings  
In the airport while eating  
We loved the half-booths  
Could cup one hand on the mouthpiece  
Lean two-thirds out to talk to a friend  
Sitting in the lobby  
The universe grows  
We are dizzy as mercury  
We are solitudes aided by awe  
Let us mourn secrets told to  
Fake wood and the trapezoidal seat  
Perfume in the mouthpiece  
Like a little Grecian sash  
Why did we live so fast  
The booth hid our ankles  
We twisted the rigid cord  
As we spoke  
It made a kind of whorl

Assignments and Exercises

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **assignment** | **due?** | **where/format?** | **completed?** |
| Two paragraph explication of poem that is written in blank verse. If you select a poem that is not included in this packet, include a copy of the poem. |  |  |  |
| Write your own blank verse poem that is inspired by one of the poems that you read. |  |  |  |
| Write a one paragraph explication of your poem and a one paragraph analysis of the relationship between your poem and the poem that inspired it. If you selected a poem that is not in the packet, include a copy of the poem. |  |  |  |

**Sources:**

Jessica Fisher, William College

The Poetry Foundation ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org))

Poetry.org ([www.poetry.org](http://www.poetry.org))