

Or, Lessons from the Audible Poem, Day Two: Variance of Voice

The goal: To read a poem with another person so that the audience can hear two voices working in the poem, and so that the drama of the poem is emphasized.

A method toward a dazzling reading: Teams choose poems from a selection, none of which may be written by a person in the classroom. I prefer to let students choose a partner rather than to assign them, and to have them prepare the poems for a few minutes during class time, but mostly out of class. (If an odd number of students, three can read together.) Working together, the team determines how to split up the lines, who says what, and how to manage the pacing.

Partners should divvy up the poem any way that emphasizes some essential meaning of the poem or that opens up interpretation with an unexpected twist. Sharing of language can vary by sentence, phrase, line, and word; it need not be contained to conventional breaks, although it may.

Readings and critiques follow the same method as single performances.

Some strategies for division:

- one emotional voice, one matter-of-fact
- one angry voice, one apologetic
- one certain voice, one quavery
- one drunk, one sober
- 2 voices that clearly disagree but come together by end
- 2 voices that echo each other, perhaps eerily
- voices that go beyond trading off stanzas
- voices that build on clues offered by the poem

Advantages of doubled reading:

- stronger performers will urge more from their partners
- contrast between readers instructs audience on what works
- demands that students find logical patterning in poetry
- is lots of fun

Poems for the Second or Third Day

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Desert Places

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it – it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs,
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), Hands

Inside a cave in a narrow canyon near Tassajara
The vault of rock is painted with hands,
A multitude of hands in the twilights, a cloud of men's
palms,
no more,
No other picture. There's no one to say
Whether the brown shy quiet people who are dead intended
Religion or magic, or made their tracings
In the idleness of art; but over the division of years these
careful
Signs-manual are now like a sealed message
Saying: "Look: we also were human; we had hands, not
paws.
All hail
You people with the cleverer hands, our supplanters
In the beautiful country; enjoy her a season, her beauty,
and come down
And be supplanted; for you also are human."

Elizabeth Bishop

One Art

1976

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent to be
lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
Of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

The practice losing farther, losing faster:
Places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! My last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
Some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

--Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Philip Larkin

Talking in Bed

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying there together goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At the unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

A man sees a tiny couple in the distance, and thinks they might be his mother and father.

But when he gets to them they're still little.

You're still little, he says, don't you remember?

Who said you were supposed to be here? says the little husband. You're supposed to be in your own distance; you're still in your own foreground, you spendthrift.

No no, says the man, you're to blame.

No no, says the little man, you're out of proportion. When you go into the distance you're supposed to get smaller. You mustn't think that we can shrink and swell all the time to suit everybody coming out of the distance.

But you have it wrong, cries the man, we're the same size, it's you who are refusing to be optically correct.

It's you, says the little husband, you just can't go blundering into the distance without some prior warning.

This has never happened before, says the man, and I've been in the distance many times.

You ought to go back to where you started and try it again, says the man, you might even have disappeared by then.

We never change our size, we concentrate at all times; it's you who is the absentminded one. You are the one out of proportion, and it's you throwing everything out of scale; so get going; cries the little husband.

Out of proportion ... ? says the man.

Totally, without any optical intelligence, no consideration for scale, says the little husband.

Don't you recognize me? says the man.

No no, our son lives in the distance, says the little husband.

Nancy Willard

A Hardware Store as Proof of the Existence of God (1989)

I praise the brightness of hammers pointing east
like the steel woodpeckers of the future,
and dozens of hinges opening brass wings,
and six new rakes shyly fanning their toes,
and bins of hooks glittering into bees,

and a rack of wrenches like the long bones of horses,
and mailboxes sowing rows of silver chapels,
and a company of plungers waiting for God
to claim their thin legs in their big shoes
and put them on and walk away laughing.

In a world not perfect but not bad either
let there be glue, glaze, gum, and grabs,
caulk also, and hooks, shackles, cables, and slips,
and signs so spare a child may read them,
Men, Women, In, Out, No Parking, Beware the Dog

In the right hands, they can work wonders.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Two sonnets

Not in a silver casket cool with pearls
Or rich with red corundum or with blue,
[ruby]
Locked, and the key withheld, as other girls
Have given their loves, I give my love to you;
Not in a lovers'-knot, not in a ring
Worked in such fashion, and the legend plain -
Semper fidelis, where a secret spring
Kennels a drop of mischief for the brain:
Love in the open hand, no thing but that,
Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,
As one should bring you cowslips in a hat
Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,
I bring you, calling out as children do:
"Look what I have!-And these are all for you."

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!
give back my book and take my kiss instead.
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,
"What a big book for such a little head!"
Come, I will show you now my newest hat,
And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!
Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that.
I never again shall tell you what I think.
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;
You will not catch me reading anymore:
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;
And some day when you knock and push the door,
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.

Elizabeth Bishop

Insomnia

The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she's a daytime sleeper.

By the Universe deserted,
she'd tell it to go to hell,
and she'd find a body of water,
or a mirror, on which to dwell.
So wrap up care in a cobweb
and drop it down the well

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.

H. D.

Heat

O wind, rent open the heat,
Cut apart the heat,
Rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
Through this thick air --
Fruit cannot fall into heat
That presses up and blunts
The points of pears
And rounds of grapes.

Cut the heat --
Plough through it,
Turning it on either side
Of your path.

W. H. Auden (1907-1973)

Musee des Beaux Arts

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 always must be
Children who did not especially 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 dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel'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.

Robert Frost

Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same (1942)

He would declare and could himself believe
That the birds there in all the garden round
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
Had added to their own an oversound,
Her tone of meaning but without the words.
Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as may be, she was in their song
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds' song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.

Leon Stokesbury

**Semi-Sentimental Thank You Note Sent Over
Long Distance**

Let me tell you, I'm
still trying to cope with
the disappointment. All I
wanted for Christmas was
a scratch-and-sniff photo
of you amongst some
clover. Instead, this book
of the fifty worst
movies ever made. And
a box of pink erasers?
Maybe I'm slow but I
don't get it. Oh yes, I
know we are separated by
that enormously faded
and dirty spread-out
serape, that distinctive
state of mind, Oklahoma.
But down here I am
left mostly to my own
devices. Here, like Jackie
Gleason's red satin bowling
shirt, I lack subtlety
and stand too much out
in the crowd. So what I
am getting at, what I am
trying to say, my
little lotus blossom, my
little dove of Canaan, my
little garbanzo bean, is
thanks a lot, but I
really must ask you
to get up off that
divine rotundity, your
ass, and send that clever
clover photo right on down
the line right now. There
exists a definite need!
Like Jackie Gleason's bowling
shirt, sooner or later, I'm
headed your way, and when
I get back to Arkansas,
either to pick you up
or stay, let's both plan on
working hard at, O ho,
seeing, ah, eye to eye, et
al, and I might add, toe to
toe, et al, nose to
nose, O, thigh to thigh,
et al, ah, O, well, yes, O.

Wallace Stevens

The Emperor of Ice-Cream

1923

Call the roller of big cigars,
 The muscular one, and bid him whip
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys
 Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
 Let be be finale of seem.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
 On which she embroidered fantails once
 And spread it so as to cover her face.
 If her horny feet protrude, they come
 To show how cold she is, and dumb.
 Let the lamp afix its beam.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

God's Grandeur

1877

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; [gold leaf]
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reek his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod:
 And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Fantail pigeons
 *literary terms for the three parts of the Pindaric Ode.

Theodore Roethke

I Knew A Woman

1958

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
 When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them
 Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one
 The shapes a bright container can contain!
 Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
 Or English poets who grew up on Greek
 (I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
 She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;*
 She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
 I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
 She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
 Coming behind her for her pretty sake
 (But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
 Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
 She played it quick, she played it light and loose,
 My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
 Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
 Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose
 (She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
 I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
 What freedom for? To know eternity.
 I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
 But who would count eternity in days?
 These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
 (I measure time by how a body sways).

e.e. cummings

37

1958

now that,more nearest even than your fate

and mine(or any truth beyond perceive)
quivers this miracle of summer night

her trillion secrets touchably alive

-- while and all mysteries which i or you
(blinded by merely things believable)
could only fancy we should never know

are unimaginably ours to feel --

how should some world(we marvel)doubt,for just
sweet terrifying the particular
moment it takes one very falling most
(there:did you see it?)star to disappear,

that hugest whole creation may be less
incalculable than a single kiss

William Carlos Williams

To a Poor Old Woman

1934

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

Rachel Loden

We Are Sorry to Say 1999

that the decision has gone against
these poems. It just up and went

against them, like an enormous rearing
horse, a careening locomotive, and we

tried to get out of the way. We still
wake up screaming. Frankly

the decision scares us
more than a little. We think it wears

a muscle shirt and is named Bluto,
but who really knows? All we want

is peace and quiet, maybe a cottage
in the Hamptons, some sort of tonic

for our splintered nerves. That's what
we want, but there are sparrows

on the roof. And white roiling seas
of manuscripts that curse

and shriek, and tender envelopes
that bleed hysterically when opened.