

A Form for What Haunts You: Using Fixed Forms to Write About Trauma

Event Description:

Many poets feel compelled to write about painful experiences, but we may approach such material with a mixture of urgency and hesitancy. Finding the right language to convey trauma can be liberatory, but the process is often painful. A fixed form—whether that be a villanelle, a golden shovel, or a grocery list—can provide a strong container for writing about trauma and, more generally, memories that haunt. This panel features five poets discussing their usage of fixed forms to approach trauma.

Category: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Moderator:

Melissa Crowe is the author of the poetry collection *Dear Terror, Dear Splendor* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019). She's coordinator of the MFA program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where she teaches poetry and publishing.

Event Organizer:

Stevie Edwards holds an MFA from Cornell University, and a PhD from University of North Texas. She is a Lecturer at Clemson University and Poetry Editor of *South Carolina Review*. Her third book, *Self-Portrait as Medusa*, is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press in 2023.

Event Participants:

Meg Day is the 2015-2016 recipient of the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, a 2013 recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, and the author of *Last Psalm at Sea Level*. Day is Assistant Professor of English & Creative Writing at Franklin & Marshall College.

Rachel McKibbens is the author of three full-length books of poetry, *blud*, *Into the Dark & Emptying Field*, and *Pink Elephant*, as well as the chapbook *Mammoth*. She is a two-time New York Foundation for the Arts poetry fellow and founder of the Pink Door Writing Retreat.

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon is the author of *Open Interval*, a finalist for the National Book Award and the *LA Times* Book Prize, and *Black Swan*, winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize. She has been awarded fellowships from Cave Canem, the Lannan Foundation, and Civitella Ranieri.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Moderator / Melissa Crowe:

Welcome to **A Form for What Haunts You: Using Fixed Forms to Write About Trauma**. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, (identify moderator), know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities

Moderator will introduce panelists.

Participant Initial Remarks

Melissa Crowe (Moderator)

I will discuss my tendency to turn to form as a revision strategy when I find myself struggling to discover the scope and shape of a poem-in-progress, especially when the poem's content is highly personal and painful. I have found received forms useful for experimenting with both expanding and delimiting a difficult piece. Choosing the form that will help me reckon and wrangle is a matter of what tools I seem to require. Do I need the sonnet's small container and its air of technical achievability to help me reign in an unwieldy thing? Or do I need the obsessive repetition and exacting requirements of the villanelle to make me utter that which I have so far been reluctant to hear myself say? I imagine calling upon the work and wisdom of poets like Elizabeth Bishop, Marilyn Hacker, Patricia Smith, and Katie Ford, and I'll read from my own work about loving a brother who lives with addiction.

Stevie Edwards (Organizer)

I will talk about how inherited forms, particularly inherited forms with repetitive structures (such as the villanelle and pantoum) can help give shape to traumatic experience, which is often both repetitive and volatile in the ways that it reasserts itself in daily life. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth talks about trauma as “the wound that cries out.” It is a wound that wound speaks “not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way its violence has not yet been fully known.” Caruth states that this wound is formed by part of the traumatic experience that is “unassimilated” and “returns to haunt the survivor later on.” In my own experience with PTSD, which stretches back to a series of sexual assaults during my teenage years, nearly twenty years later I am still often bewildered by the things that wound has to say and the seeming randomness of the triggers that rouse it: a stranger wearing a New York Yankees cap, the scent of menthol shaving cream, the stale stench of party cups half-filled with Bud Light, air mattresses, being in a party setting where I am one of the only women in the room—it's a seemingly endless and unavoidable

list that is hard to shape into a narrative because it is a spiral of narratives that intersect, repeat, and mutate. I want to talk about a few specific examples of poems that use forms rooted in repetition, such as [“My Brother at 3 AM” by Natalie Diaz](#) (a pantoum) and [“Letter to My Black Out”](#) by Maria Hummel (a villanelle) to give shape to experiences that clearly haunt the speakers, experiences that linger, repeat, and reinvent themselves, much like the repeated lines of these poetic forms. I also would like to end by sharing a villanelle from my forthcoming collection.

Meg Day

I plan to discuss the way inherited form allows me to renegotiate the non-consensual nature of trauma via the consensual constraint of form. I find the fixed, but flexible, qualities of received form to be in conversation with Cvetkovich's framing of passive & active reception; if we unsettle assumptions about penetration to understand receiving as active & not only passive, what becomes available, by extension, in how we understand the puncturing qualities of trauma? I'll speak on the pursuit of mastery & pleasure, & the disruption of power in choosing the ways in which our poems are constrained & also, therefore, liberated.

Rachel McKibbens

Rachel McKibbens will discuss the intersection of received form and traumatic content in her work.

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon will discuss the intersection of received form and traumatic content in her work.

Moderator Questions (Melissa Crowe):

1. For lots of writers, received form is a complicated inheritance. (I've heard some poets say, for example, that the sonnet is an inherently patriarchal form.) How do you reckon with those complexities, and how does your brand of reckoning show itself on the page?
2. I think there can be a chicken-or-egg approach to writing in received form, particularly when it comes to painful subject matter. That is, a poet can start with the form in mind-- "I'm going to write a sonnet about..." or they can come to the form after struggling with a challenging poem for a while. (I'm thinking here, I guess, of form as a revision strategy.) Are you a chicken or an egg when comes to your own use of received form? Or would you characterize your process in some other way?
3. Of which vital/important aspects of poetic form--or elements of the history of writing in form--do you think poets and readers of poetry remain relatively unaware? What are we overlooking? What part of our inheritance is still being withheld? What are you excited about that you'd like to share with others?
4. I think we often assume that the poet's choice is between received form or formlessness/some generic brand of free verse, when of course poets invent forms constantly. I'd love to hear you speak to the difference between writing in received form--the sonnet, the villanelle, the ballad, the duplex--and developing a form as you write, particularly, perhaps, as you write about the hard stuff. When do you tend to reach for what's been handed down, and when do you need to make a custom shape for what comes?