

Form & Freedom!

Gretchen Primack, the cruelest month 2015

1) Exercise for freedom of *language* (and the sharp pleasure of mesmerizing flow):

Write ten lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter (blank verse).

Iambic: a “foot” made up of an unstressed then stressed syllable, like this: daDUM, daDUM

i HEARD a FLY buzz— WHEN i DIED—
the STILLness IN the ROOM
Was LIKE the STILLness IN the AIR—
beTWEEN the HEAVES of STORM— (Emily Dickinson)

Pentameter: five iambs per line (daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM)

Examples:

When I have FEARS that I may CEASE to BE (John Keats)

do NOT go GENTly Into THAT good NIGHT (Dylan Thomas)

you HAVE no WORD for SOLDiers TO enjoy
the FEEL of, AS an APple, AND to CHEW (Gwendolyn Brooks)

Poem example of iambic pentameter par excellence. Note the aberrations and think about why she broke the rules where she did:

Auld Lang Syne

Emily Moore

Here’s to the rock star with the crooked teeth,
the cellist, banker, mezzo bearing gifts,
the teacher with the flask inside her jeans—
those girls who made us sweat and lick our lips.

To the *jeune fille* who broke my heart in France,
the tramp who warmed your lap and licked your ear,
the one who bought me shots at 2 A.M.
that night I tied your pink tie at the bar.

Who smoked. Who locked you out. Who kissed my eyes
then pulled my hair and left me for a boy.
The girl who bit my upper, inner thigh.
My raspy laugh when I first heard your voice

toasting through broken kisses sloppy drunk:
To women! To abundance! To enough!

2) Exercise for freedom of *subject*:

Choose five words from this poem. Write a poem that uses those five words.

From “A Wreath for Emmett Till”

Marilyn Nelson

III

Pierced by the screams of a shortened childhood,
my heartwood has been scarred for fifty years
by what I heard, with hundreds of green ears.
That jackal laughter. Two hundred years I stood
listening to small struggles to find food,
to the songs of creature life, which disappears
and comes again, to the music of the spheres.
Two hundred years of deaths I understood.
Then slaughter axed one quiet summer night,
shivering the deep silence of the stars.
A running boy, five men in close pursuit.
One dark, five pale faces in the moonlight.
Noise, silence, back-slaps. One match, five cigars.
Emmett Till’s name still catches in the throat.

NOTES:

- 1) There are so many more fantastic forms to open you up. Consider investing in *The Teachers and Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, edited by Ron Padgett—we can get it for you at the Golden Notebook, of course!
- 2) Don’t forget about line length as a way to free up your writing. Many poets tend to use a mid-length or slightly-shorter-than-midlength line as a matter of course. Try writing a poem that looks like Chile, then one that looks like you’d spent the evening getting drunk with someone from “Jersey Shore.” (For examples, see Neruda’s “Ode to the Tomato” for the former and almost anything by Whitman for the latter.)
- 3) If you liked the inspiration you got from springboarding from an existing poem, as per Exercise 2 above, try variations of that. You could try a poem that begins with lines from other poets; you could try using ten words, or two words, instead of five.