

## **Poetry and the Art of Survival**

### **Warming Up**

*Something you want to learn*

*Something you want to teach*

*A time you really wanted to fix something*

*A word or sign in your own love language*

*Something you want to better understand about the world*

*A place you know and love with all five senses*

*Anything else visible in an x-ray of your heart today.*

## Lyrical Genres: Ode and Elegy

The art of the **ode** is to *praise what's beautiful*.

An ode is a lyrical celebration. Poets find different ways to recognize what matters, what has value, and what deserves recognition for bringing beauty into the world.

Traditionally, an ode is a poem or song that celebrates an experience, person, accomplishment, or object. An ode can be about many things: a heroic figure, who is larger than life, or a small experience that helps people get through the day. Whether an ode is about a world-historical leader or a favorite pair of shoes, an ode offers pleasure and admiration. Odes help people endure by showing that the world, even with its terrible problems, holds something good worth protecting and sharing.

An ode can be about anything: neighborhood friends, a chance encounter with a stranger on the street, a labor union (as in our examples) – or anything else. This week, I challenge you to write an ode to something in response to our lyrical artists. What do you think should be recognized as adding something strong and beautiful to the world? What form of value has been overlooked, and how can you help people look at it? What do we need to wake up our sense of admiration for this beautiful presence among us?

1: List some possible subjects for your ode – a person, object, place, or activity that deserves positive recognition. You can write an ode about anything you like, love, or appreciate.

2: Choose something or someone from your own list above. Write a few sentences about your choice. What do you like about this subject? What do people overlook or miss, that you think deserves to be valued? What makes the person or thing you selected unique, valuable, good, beautiful, or worthwhile? In other words: why would the world be poorer without this person or thing?

Step 3: Describe this person or thing in sensory language, in whatever way makes sense: sight, smell, sound, touch, taste. Describe what it feels like to be in the same room. Describe what makes this person or thing impactful or memorable. Give A LOT of descriptive language.

Step 4: Describe this person or thing in some surprising poetic language, that is not literal or simply descriptive. Invent weirder images, including metaphors. In these non-literal images, you can capture the essence of this thing or person, as you perceive it. What is a poetic description of this subject?

Step 5: Write the poem.

## Elegy

Elegy is an ancient lyric tradition for speaking to, about, and on behalf of the dead. Elegies are eloquent in their complex mix of feelings—grief, gratitude, anger, hope, confusion, love, and others. An elegy is a strong way to make sense of death, and sometimes to refuse to make sense of it. Elegies are important because they can make grief less lonely. Elegiac art can serve a community in pain.

In these fundamental tasks for making human worlds across generations, elegy is uniquely charged with desire and ethical power. Elegy marks the limits of poetic imagining, where mortuary practices enter the complexity of language and art. Over two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Catullus addressed his dead brother in these lines (recently translated by Anne Carson):

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed --  
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials  
so I could give you the last gift owed to death  
and talk (why?) with mute ash.

Elegy is this urgent journey bearing uncertain offerings to address absence. A reckoning with human mortality, elegy is the art of working through grief and constructing memory. It explores our capacity to know absent presences, gather remains, and inhabit spaces with the dead. Some people think elegy is the degree zero of poetry, an origin-point of human song and origin-song of the human.

Contemporary artists use the ancient tradition of elegy in many innovative ways. Every modern generation must re-invent its relations to the dead; elegy is the practice of this ongoing renewal: “dear air where you used to be, dear empty Chucks / by front door, dear whatever you are now, dear son” (Danez Smith, “summer, somewhere,” 2017). Elegy, a letter to the other side, moves between love poem, prayer, therapy, and other kinds of writing.

In this packet, you will find elegies by Joy Harjo, Mark Strand, and Jane Kenyon. Aracelis Girmay’s amazing poem might be an elegy, but I’m not sure – it also seems like a call to celebrate all the living left to live. I’ll be curious what you think about it. If you’d like to try to write an elegy, you can share whatever you’re working on in class or for instructor feedback.

# STREETLIGHT SUTRA

Simone John

I walked toward  
the train, body wrapped  
in red wine warmth.  
He headed towards me  
with a swagger all his own  
courtesy of some substance.

Our paths cross under a spill  
of lamplight. We each maintain  
sloppy gaits without pause.  
His voice splits the silence  
*Stay black and stay blessed*  
Words crackle like they crossed  
radio waves to reach me.

The Oakland air swept away  
the slurs of his s's. I heard  
wisdom underneath. Nodded  
and kept nodding after  
he passed. Rolled the phrase  
across my tongue. *Stay black  
and stay blessed.* Hummed it  
into a hymn.

Look at these dozen boys—  
stoned purple/juked  
out of shoes the slow  
shameless quake of their body's reggae  
thirteen colors or more poised  
against the chain-links of your uncut outfields  
gravel lots and b-ball courts  
See the cee-lo player's  
fist: the fractured  
rattle of dice like  
polished bone Tonight  
they'll stagger outside town  
from bar to burger joint  
run by the sons of men who once spoke  
the secret slur of Mediterranean thieves

Where are your ecstatic babblers  
in their smocks Where  
are the women eloquent  
without feet Where are your pedestrians  
crawling amok There's a darkness  
jammed down your throat  
Where are your ghosts  
your fiends your voracious  
lovers How awkward  
how small a town  
for Elks Where is the terrible  
crack of a man straining  
out of his range to sing  
*I ain't got no woman*  
*I ain't got no Amen*

Edison you are not Loisaída or Princeton/  
Tampa or Tripoli/Paris or Santiago  
You are the land of strip  
malls and Tastee Subshop: here  
are the makers of heroes You  
are bastards and cruel  
and you are blessed  
and some day you will know this

# YOU CLUBHOUSE BOYS

Patrick Rosal

You Clubhouse Boys who  
dance on the third knuckle  
from the sun

my heels burn  
from the hell we help build  
How many of us

slit our hands  
happy in the knife-glint scuffle  
How many of us taste  
the raw red rock

in our chests  
How many sing  
the *hilot's* song  
spilled into New Brunswick streets  
drunk with a borrowed liquor  
we call time

In this world  
there is no act of contrition  
and there is only  
this world  
So I raise a glass to broken heads  
and dead ones

and new ones  
born with fists  
to the murderers  
and the murderers' grief  
I raise a glass to blacktop drag  
steeltoe thumb-toke

I raise a glass  
to side-sway

I raise a glass



to the gun

I raise a glass  
to the metallic tang of blood  
in the cheek

I raise a glass  
to the pipes and blacked-out windows  
to back walls tagged up  
torn down

to pulse-code bass  
nightflash and deepthump ether  
we sleep under like  
crashing waves

I raise my glass to you:  
who stumble this far  
smoke scarred  
fire stoked stoneblast

I raise a glass and count  
how many  
with dropped scabbed hands  
are still left standing

*for CHP*

# IT WAS SUMMER NOW AND THE COLORED PEOPLE CAME OUT INTO THE SUNSHINE

Morgan Parker

They descend from the boat two by two. The gap in  
Angela Davis's teeth speaks to the gap in James Baldwin's  
teeth. The gap in James Baldwin's teeth speaks to the  
gap in Malcolm X's Teeth. The gap in Malcolm X's teeth  
speaks to the gap in Malcolm X's teeth. The gap in  
Condoleezza Rice's teeth doesn't speak. Martin Luther  
King Jr. Boulevard kisses the Band-Aid on Nelly's cheek.  
Frederick Douglass's side part kisses Nikki Giovanni's  
*Thug Life* tattoo. The choir is led by Whoopi Goldberg's  
eyebrows. The choir is led by Will Smith's flat top.  
The choir loses its way. The choir never returns home.  
The choir sings funeral instead of wedding, sings funeral  
instead of allegedly, sings funeral instead of help, sings  
Black instead of grace, sings Black as knucklebone,  
mercy, junebug, sea air. It is time for war.



POETRY FOUNDATION

## Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100

BY MARTÍN ESPADA

*for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center*

*Alabanza.* Praise the cook with a shaven head  
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,  
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,  
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.  
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle  
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

*Alabanza.* Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap  
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane  
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,  
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.

*Alabanza.* Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked  
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish  
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza.*

Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,  
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.  
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen  
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:  
*Ecuador, México, Republica Dominicana,*

*Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.*

*Alabanza.* Praise the kitchen in the morning,  
where the gas burned blue on every stove  
and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers,  
hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs  
or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.

*Alabanza.* Praise the busboy's music, the *chime-chime*  
of his dishes and silverware in the tub.

*Alabanza.* Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher  
who worked that morning because another dishwasher  
could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime  
to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family  
floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs.

*Alabanza.* Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen  
and sang to herself about a man gone. *Alabanza.*

After the thunder wilder than thunder,  
after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows,  
after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs,  
after night burst the dam of day and flooded the kitchen,  
for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,  
like a cook's soul. Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us  
about the bristles of God's beard because God has no face,  
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations  
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.

*Alabanza* I say, even if God has no face.

*Alabanza.* When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul  
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,  
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:

*Teach me to dance. We have no music here.*

And the other said with a Spanish tongue:  
*I will teach you. Music is all we have.*

Martín Espada, "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" from *New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 2003 by Martín Espada. Reprinted with the permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. This selection may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

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Joy Harjo, from In Mad Love and War

## Death Is a Woman

I walk these night hours between the dead and the living, and see you  
two-step with Death as if nothing ever ended.

We buried you in Okmulgee, on a day when leaves already buried  
the earth in scarlet and crisp ochre.

Four years isn't long on this spiral of tangential stories.

I can already see my own death trying on my shoes  
as clearly as I saw your young demise in the early fifties  
as she tripped the street before you in high heels.

I smelled her sweet perfume like a carnival in my childhood  
and knew even then you would never be satisfied  
until you had her.

Tonight I see the tracks the sun makes at the fold of unreason,  
a space where geese disappear like teeth behind the lips  
of night.

I am ready to run.

Instead I'll make up another story about who I think you really were  
with the words left in the mouth of a cardinal  
who startled us your last summer.

Six months later you flew from the sour trailer that dissolved  
from metal to salt air, into her arms.

I see you dip and sway on the mythical dance floor  
just the other side of this room of whirling atoms, my father  
of Tiger people, who drank whiskey thrown back with bleached women  
all of them blonde except for my Cherokee mother and the Pottawatamie  
who once when you were dying gambled your money as you drove yourself  
spitting blood to the hospital.

I have a photograph of you with my mother, from before  
or after I was born.

Here you sit in Cain's Ballroom, reeking of Lucky Strikes  
your hair slick and black as a beaver's, feeling better  
than you could ever believe.

And my mother on the same side as your heart  
looking past the camera, into her imagined future without you,  
fiercely into the brutal eyes of the woman who seduced you  
and won.

**You are dancing with Death now, you were dancing with her then.  
And there is nothing I could ever do about it.**

**Not then, or now.**

**I have nothing to prove your fierce life, except paper  
that turns back to dust.**

**Except this song that plays over and over  
that you keep dancing to.**

MARK STRAND

**A Piece of the Storm**

*for Sharon Horvath*

From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,  
A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your room  
And made its way to the arm of the chair where you, looking up  
From your book, saw it the moment it landed. That's all  
There was to it. No more than a solemn waking  
To brevity, to the lifting and falling away of attention, swiftly,  
A time between times, a flowerless funeral. No more than that  
Except for the feeling that this piece of the storm,  
Which turned into nothing before your eyes, would come back,  
That someone years hence, sitting as you are now, might say:  
"It's time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening."



JANE KENYON

**What Came to Me**

I took the last  
dusty piece of china  
out of the barrel.  
It was your gravy boat,  
with a hard, brown  
drop of gravy still  
on the porcelain lip.  
I grieved for you then  
as I never had before.

# LITANY

Aracelis Girmay

when we are old & our hearts have beat within us, let  
us go back, & when we have buried our loves, & shed  
our bodies piece by piece, & when we have danced  
& broken our shoes, & danced, let us go back,  
when we have gone mad, & when we have shut  
the doors, dismantled our eyes & rifles, let us go back,  
when we have drunk the wine & licked our lips  
& put our tongues to the inside of the green glass bottle  
& laid down our bodies old as trees, streets, let us go back,  
when we have told our stories & forgotten our stories,  
& set the tables & made the beds, let us go back,  
& received other bodies into our bodies, let us go,  
when we have entered, & opened,  
& opened our mouths, let us go back,  
& when we have crossed rivers on the back of a horse,  
& read the palms & burned the candles,  
& touched the cactus, & eaten the fruit, let us go back,  
when we have tasted the salt, & our knees have touched  
the ground, let us go back, when we have painted  
our hands, let us go back, & when our hands  
have touched the backs of other hands, let us go back,  
& when we are old & nearly crossed over,  
& all of our bones have walked within us,  
& when we have planted flowers  
& talked into the ears of our dogs, let us go back,  
& when we have lost our mothers,  
& sent our brothers away  
& heard no news,  
& when we have watched the rain from trains,  
let us go back,  
& when we have been moved by this & by that,  
& sung the songs & disobeyed, & when we have turned  
& turned & turned & turned, let us go back,

when we have boiled the tea, & tasted the bread,  
& washed our right hands & walked through mountains,  
when we have learned the children's names, let us go back,  
& seen our reflections in the hyena's eye,  
& walked under the ladders, & lit the frankincense,  
& when we have seen the wars, let us go back,  
& when we have given our fathers & gotten them back,  
& when we have given our fathers & not gotten them back,  
& when we have studied the maps & learned the languages,  
& prayed over the food, let us go back,  
when we have whispered the secrets, let us go back,  
& when we have walked & calloused our heels,  
let us go back, when we have braided the heads  
& set the peppers out to dry, & laughed  
& laughed & laughed & laughed, let us go back,  
& when we have watched the stars & seen  
the black-lined eyes of pirates selling beads,  
let us go back, when we have tasted sweetnesses,  
let us go back, when we have sewed the dresses  
& licked the thread, let us go,  
& when we have wanted water, let us go back,  
when the poem has been sung,  
when the strings & tambourines,  
when all the birds have gathered at the window, let us go,  
let us go back there, let us go back