

round head;
 the ribbon coming loose in the real
 apple-peel she allows to dangle
 from her lifted hand; the table
 on which a basket of red

apples
 waits to be turned into more
 white-fleshed apples in a water-
 filled pail on the floor;
 her apron that fills and falls

empty,
 a lapful of apples piling on
 like the apron itself, the napkin,
 the hems of her skirts—each a skin
 layered over her heart, just as he

who has
 painted her at her knife
 paints the brush that gives life
 to her, apple of his eye: if
 there's anything on earth but this

unbroken
 concentration, this spiral
 of making while unmaking while
 the world goes round, neither the girl
 nor he has yet looked up, or spoken.

SONIA SANCHEZ

FORM AND RESPONSIBILITY

I am a poet who has from the very beginning written in free verse, but there have been times in my life when I have retreated to form. When I have had to deal with formal pain, I have written in the sonnet. When I have thought I had very little time to put some of my thoughts on paper, I've retreated to haiku and tanka and felt a world of form that allowed me to live and breathe out my pain and joy. When I have been expansive and sassy and wanted to flaunt it and to come off the edge of the paper, I have dealt with the blues, sung the blues, lived the blues, tasted the blues—I have made the blues, I've been the blues.

I first started to study form at N.Y.U. with Louise Bogan, who taught us forms like the sonnet and villanelle. I wrote the "Father and Daughter" poems as sonnets because talking about that formal pain, talking about this very formal man, required a form. The poems began with a line I had left over in a journal from the sonnet-exercise in Louise Bogan's course. I started writing haiku on my own, after I stumbled across a collection of haiku. Haiku gave me room to say what I needed to say in fewer words, and there was a satisfaction from that. At a time when I was very sick and didn't have time to write longer poems, I zeroed in on the haiku. I thought it would be clichéd if I wrote nature haiku, so I delved into it in the sense of making it modern. I had done ballads in the Bogan class, played a lot of blues, listened to a lot of blues, and so I drifted into the blues form also. I like the blues because it has

the history of African-American people in it, and it always has sexual undertones that you can play with a great deal.

To this day, I teach form to my undergraduates—haiku and tanka to blues and ballads, etc. Students come into my class and they say, “your politics are so hip and then we get in here and you throw this form at us”; they say, “let’s get out of here.” I have to explain to them that if you were a runner and I wanted to get you in under four minutes, I’d have to work with you, work on your skills and habits, and with writing it’s the same thing; you have to deal with form. I tell them, we all write free verse mostly, but all free verse has form, there is a form there. We assume a line can go anywhere, but once you truly know form, free verse becomes familiar and you understand free verse better.

Young people tend to overwrite; that’s why I start with haiku. “That’s an easy form,” they say. Then they come back the next week and they look at you and say, “That was not as simple as it seemed.” They write tanka and cinquains and then they make up their own syllabic verse form (the way I made up my own syllabic verse form, the songku), and then they write free verse. After three weeks of compressed forms, they think they will be able to spread out in free verse. Then they say, “I know why you gave us the forms, because now when I write free verse I look at each word—I examine it, I ask, what is this word doing here.” Then I make them write forms for three weeks more before they write free verse again. We study iambic pentameter, and I make them understand that they speak in iambic pentameter.

I began an elegy for my brother in rhyme royal because I was teaching Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Anniad.” I thought it would be maybe fifteen stanzas. I thought we were always in control, but this piece disproved that; the stanzas kept coming. It kept coming. Then I said, oh, this is not just rhyme royal; I realized it’s what I call a neo-slave narrative, about a young African-American man who moves from the south to the north, is alienated in the north, moves towards education, thinking that will free him.... You can use form and you can make it do what you want. In this day and age, people are listening to rhyme more, but the form lets rhyme come out in a different way. By using it, I was trying to make the poem ancient and archaic, in a sense, so you understand that this form means giving honor to him.

Form makes you understand that you are responsible for the words you write. I don’t feel concerned about any political implications of form. I’m a poet, and the form is not going to form me. I will take the form and say what I want to say; the form will not deform me. Most of all, what I’ve learned from form is that my free verse has form also. It has taught me that poetry is form and that poetry demands form and discipline, even if we call some of it free verse.

HAIKU

(for paul robeson)

your voice unwrapping
itself from the congo
contagious as shrines.

HAIKU

Was it yesterday
love we shifted the air and
made it blossom Black?

SONG NO. 3

(for 2nd & 3rd grade sisters)

cain't nobody tell me any different
i'm ugly and you know it too
you just smiling to make me feel better
but i see how you stare when nobody's watching you.

i know i'm short black and skinny
and my nose stopped growin fo it wuz' posed to
i know my hairs short, legs and face ashy
and my clothes have holes that run right through to you.

so i sit all day long just by myself
so i jump the sidewalk cracks knowin i cain't fall
cuz who would want to catch someone who looks like me
who ain't even cute or just a little tall.

cain't nobody tell be any different
i'm ugly anybody with sense can see.
but. one day i hope somebody will stop me and say
looka here. a pretty little black girl lookin' just like me.

SONG NO. 2

i say. all you young girls waiting to live
i say. all you young girls taking yo pill
i say. all you sisters tired of standing still
i say. all you sisters thinkin you won't, but you will.

don't let them kill you with their stare
don't let them closet you with no air
don't let them feed you sex piece-meal
don't let them offer you any old deal.

i say. step back sisters. we're rising from the dead
i say. step back johnnies. we're dancing on our heads
i say. step back man. no mo hangin by a thread
i say. step back world. can't let it all go unsaid.

i say. all you young girls molested at ten
i say. all you young girls giving it up again & again
i say. all you sisters hanging out in every den
i say. all you sisters needing your own oxygen.

don't let them trap you with your coke
don't let them treat you like one fat joke
don't let them bleed you till you broke
don't let them blind you in masculine smoke.

i say. step back sisters. we're rising from the dead
i say. step back johnnies. we're dancing on our heads
i say. step back man. no mo hanging by a thread.
i say. step back world. can't let it go unsaid.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

we talk of light things you and I in this
small house. no winds stir here among
flame orange drapes that drape our genesis
And snow melts into rivers. The young
grandchild reviews her impudence that
makes you laugh and clap for more allure.
Ah, how she twirls the emerald lariat.
When evening comes your eyes transfer
to space you have not known and taste the blood
breath of a final flower. Past equal birth,

the smell of salt begins another flood:
 your land is in the ashes of the South.
 perhaps the color of our losses:
 perhaps the memory that dreams nurse:
 old man, we do not speak of crosses.

MAY SARTON WHERE THE GREATEST MYSTERY LIES

I have said that form is earned. What I mean by that is that the music of a poem does not show itself unless one's whole being is at a high pitch of concentration. The experience base of the poem must have been revelatory. The trouble with free verse is that very rarely (D. H. Lawrence comes to mind as an exception) does the intensity seem great enough; the danger is the diffuse, self-indulgent, not closely enough examined content.

If the pressure base of the poem is great enough, then I find almost always that among those rough chaotic notes I jot down in the moment of inspiration, there is one line that suggests meter, and sometimes I can sense the whole first stanza. It is here in the music of the poem that the greatest mystery lies. I suppose that a practising poet has inside him the rumor of many sounds, the patterns of poems by others which he has totally absorbed. He doesn't say—ever—that he is going to write a sonnet; he has a sonnet idea; a sonnet hums inside this idea, and the form is inevitable if it is to be valid. We do not impose form on the poem; form is organic. But just as with the image, the poet in a state of inspiration may go wrong unless he is extremely self-critical. The enemies of creation are and have always been facility, cleverness, self-indulgence, and above all a misunderstanding about what inspiration is. I know that I am inspired when I become a fury of self-criticism to dig out what I really mean from a lot of irrelevancies that have poured down on the page in the first excitement of the start.