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Heavy Heart, Empty Heart

Remembering the poet John Berryman in his centennial year.

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In 1963, back when it was still acceptable for poets to be openly, ferociously competitive, and Frank Lloyd Wright’s whorled Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan was still new and aesthetically suspect, the greatest poet of his day mounted the

stage under Wright's spiral ramp and inaugurated a reading series sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. Robert Lowell, a tall, elegant man of letters from an old New England family, read his own work to the crowd and then introduced a friend, "an underground poet still digging." On cue, a stooped, heavily bearded, intoxicated man approached the lectern, and, in a peculiar, strangled voice, explained why it was proper for a trick-or-treating tot to use an expletive to curse the chairman of the First National Bank who'd dropped a polished apple into his sack and broke his cookie.

The crowd laughed nervously. Berryman's description of the way that different levels of diction could modulate poetry would serve as the prologue to the first public performance of a new cycle of poems the poet was calling "Dream Songs." The words came out quaking with a voracious carnality:

> Filling her compact & delicious body
> with chicken páprika, she glanced at me
> twice.
> Fainting with interest, I hungered back
> and only the fact of her husband & four other people
> kept me from springing on her

("Dream Song 4")

Carnal lust was one element of these strange semi-sonnets. A self-pitying sorrow was another:

> There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
> só heavy, if he had a hundred years
> & more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
> Henry could not make good.
> Starts again always in Henry's ears
> the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

("Dream Song 29")

Here was a sorrow so profound that the narrator could only console himself with the thought that at least he had never actually killed anyone:

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing.

("Dream Song 29")

The drunken, bearded author was John Berryman '36CC. Born in McAlester, Oklahoma, in 1914, Berryman had become, by the age of forty-nine, a world-class Shakespeare scholar. But he was primarily a poet, one who fancied himself on par with Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, even if readers had yet to catch on.

The Dream Songs would change that. This "Henry" was an impish creation, like a Shakespearean fool or a truth-telling country yokel. At a reading at the University of Iowa in 1968, Berryman said of Henry: "He is a white, middle-aged man who has suffered an irreversible loss, and who is also spoken to in a Negro dialect by a white friend wearing blackface who calls him at times 'Mr. Bones.'"

"Henry is accused of being me and I am accused of being Henry and I deny it and nobody believes me," Berryman told the *Paris Review* in an interview published in 1972. He got the name from his second wife, Elizabeth Ann — they'd asked each other what names they most despised. He said, "Mabel." She said, "Henry."

To complicate this matter of names, Berryman wasn't born Berryman. He was John Allyn Smith Jr. until John Allyn Smith Sr., a banker, died of a gunshot to the heart by the steps of the family apartment in Tampa, Florida, in 1926. It was written up as a suicide, although Berryman's classmate, the publisher Robert Giroux '36CC, would later speculate that Berryman's mother, Martha, may have murdered him.

Paul Mariani, in his 1990 biography of Berryman, *Dream Song*, notes that the characteristic powder burn of a self-inflicted wound was missing from Smith Sr.'s shirt. Moreover, Martha had motive: she wanted to divorce Smith and marry their landlord, John Berryman, and Smith was making things difficult. But the Tampa police department barely looked at the case. Florida was in the middle of a real estate bust in 1926, and many ruined businessmen were killing themselves.

Such personal themes as loss, infatuations, and hangovers, which occur throughout *The Dream Songs*, typify what is known as the confessional style, though this was a label Berryman rejected (he rejected all labels, wanting simply to be known as a great poet).Up until the early twentieth century, poetry — at least poetry written in English — was supposed to be about lofty themes like love and war and nature and religion and beauty; writing about familiar, intimate things like shoes and boredom and money and anxiety was taboo. As Columbia poetry professor William Wadsworth points out, Theodore Roethke's 1942 poem "My Papa's Waltz" was the first to focus wholly on a poet's parents.

For Berryman, "papa" is at the center of things. Alan Gilbert, a poet and critic who teaches a seminar at Columbia called Postwar American Poetry: The 1950s and 1960s, says his favorite lines of Berryman are in "Dream Song 241":

> Father being the loneliest word in the one language
> and a word only, a fraction of sun & guns

"Dream Song 384" refers to his father's suicide more directly:

> I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave
> who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn

Like all the confessionalists, "Berryman sought to disturb the intricately wrought, self-contained poem that was the dominant mode of the 1950s," Gilbert says. "This kind of poetry eschewed overtly biographical, social, and historical references." It could also be dry and academic, more concerned with crafting intricately wrought allusions than delivering an emotional punch.

But Berryman's poems were a little more intense than the usual lyrical confessional poem. Here was a man — a scholar deeply embedded within the literary establishment — who shambled onstage wearing rubby glasses and a wild beard, sodden with drink, inhabiting a character so obviously based on himself and his horrendous family life, speaking strangled sentences so emotionally painful that his voice was little more than a croak. Where had he found Henry's squealing, slurring voice? How had he tapped this nerve?

As a college student, Berryman had mentors who pushed him toward the study of literature, a pursuit that was just compelling enough to distract him from the memories of his father and his father's cuckolder, "Uncle Jack" Berryman, and the

relentless monologues of his increasingly mad mother, who changed her name from Martha Smith to Jill Angel Berryman. Berryman often asked his mother to tell him about the day his father died, but she always obfuscated and poured new poisons on his father's memory.

Despite getting carried away with drink at Columbia (his antics, Mariani writes, included crashing a faculty dance with three friends, then escaping a security guard by sliding down a banister) and almost flunking his junior year (his scholarship was rescinded and he was asked to take a semester off), Berryman rebounded. With the help of professor Mark Van Doren '21GSAS, '60HON, Berryman not only graduated, plowing through and annotating sixteen books of eighteenth-century literature in five days, but had the energy to play a "nursemaid and belle" in the 1936 Varsity Show, publish two poems in the *Columbia Review* (thanks to Giroux, the journal's editor),and win a Euretta J. Kellett Fellowship to sail to England and read literature at Clare College, Cambridge.

Berryman lived most of his life as a transient academic, drifting from contract to contract. At Princeton, where he taught for ten years beginning in 1943, he became friends with Lowell and Saul Bellow, and although he published books of poems in 1942 and1948, he wasn't nearly as recognized as his contemporaries. For decades he was better known as a Shakespeare scholar. He received a Rockefeller fellowship during the Second World War to work on *King Lear*, and spent years editing and standardizing the varied original quartos and folios. This close attention to the mechanical workings of Shakespeare's poetry shaped his work as a poet.

"The Dream Songs were his version of a Shakespeare sonnet," Wadsworth says. "Berryman took Elizabethan syntax and applied it to modern English," resulting in a "wrenched syntax" — the attempt to join modern English with the rules of early-modern verse. Berryman had a vast vocabulary and used multiple layers of diction to create his "songs."

As a teacher, Berryman nurtured many poets, including Pulitzer Prize winner Philip Levine, who wrote about his experience studying with Berryman at Iowa in an essay called "Mine Own John Berryman." Even though Berryman had once sneaked up behind him and whacked him with a Scotch bottle (Levine had dared to ask him to stop running his hand up his wife's skirt), Levine recalls his experience as Berryman's student fondly, saying Berryman "took his class with a seriousness I'd never seen before. Here was this brilliant man preparing for each of our classes and

letting us know that what we were doing is immensely important.”



The Dream Songs, written over a period from 1955 to 1969 while he was teaching at the University of Minnesota, made Berryman famous, but he kept innovating, his later work becoming more prose-like. Unfortunately, his drinking continued. Alice Quinn, who is the executive director of the Poetry Society of America and an adjunct professor at the School of the Arts, describes how a friend of hers spotted Berryman before a reading at Bard College, drinking with others at a local bar, and was “so ashamed because no one was attempting to curb him in any way.” During the reading he was devastated with drink.

In 1971, Berryman, motivated in part by the birth of his third child and the threats of his third wife, Kate, to leave him, managed to quit drinking for eleven months. But quitting was torture, flooding him with physical and spiritual pain. He was trying to write a novel called *Recovery*, but it wasn't coming through.

Mariani reports that Berryman's boss at Minnesota, Ralph Ross, saw him that summer, and, in a letter to their friend Allen Tate, noted Berryman's lack of warmth, concluding, "the only John one could love was a John with 2 or 3 drinks in him, no more & no less, & such a John could not exist."

On January 5, 1972, Berryman relapsed. After writing a note to his wife that read, "I am a nuisance," he strolled out onto the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis, which overlooked a chunk of rock. In what would be a dress rehearsal, he climbed over the railing, clutching the knife with which he planned, as Mariani describes it, to "slash his throat so that he would feel faint and have to pitch forward." He even wrote a sonnet beforehand describing how he would do it, "unless my wife wouldn't let me out of the house, /unless the cops noticed me crossing the campus up to the bridge /& clappt me in for observation, costing my job —" The next day, he walked out on the bridge to complete the act, but a friend spotted him and they talked books for a few minutes and he lost his nerve. The day after, he walked three-quarters of the way across the bridge, climbed the rails again, and tipped over the railing, not needing the knife. He battered himself against the rock, rolled down a small slope, and was swept away into the icy flow of the Mississippi.

In October 2014, Bob Giroux's old publishing house, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, republished Berryman's work with new introductions, including reissues of *Berryman's Sonnets, 77 Dream Songs,* and the complete *Dream Songs,* as well as *Poets in Their Youth,* a memoir by Eileen Simpson, Berryman's first wife. At Columbia, Wadsworth is helping to organize a Berryman program this winter in conjunction with the Heyman Center for the Humanities and the Poetry Society of America.

Not that Berryman has ever left Columbia. Lucie Brock-Broido'82SOA, the director of the poetry program at the School of the Arts, reads aloud one of Berryman's last poems, "He Resigns," for each of her classes, hoping that none of her poets will have to experience what he did.

Age, and the deaths, and the ghosts.
Her having gone away
in spirit from me. Hosts
of regrets come & find me empty.

I don’t feel this will change.
I don’t want any thing
or person, familiar or strange.
I don’t think I will sing

any more just now;
ever. I must start
to sit with a blind brow
above an empty heart.

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