

“Trapped in my rib-cage something throes and aches”:  
John Berryman at 100

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“At twenty-five a man is on his way,” John Berryman writes in an early poem, “A Point of Age.” True enough—but on his way to what, exactly? Success, or failure? Life, or death? Take a long enough view, and the answer to the latter question is the same for everyone: predictable, depressing. The former, more difficult to answer, is, for a person of ambition, a source of tremendous anxiety: no one has really succeeded or decisively failed by the age of twenty-five. Those who toil in silence throughout their early careers may blaze like comets late in life, while those who catch fire early—like Delmore Schwartz, who was for Berryman both close friend and cautionary example, and whose death is one of the many mourned in his late career-defining magnum opus, *The Dream Songs*—may slide into obscurity, believing themselves, at the end, to have failed.

“Early fame is very dangerous indeed,” Berryman told the *Paris Review* in 1970, adding that to have been neglected and ignored for decades, “which was so painful to me for many years, was really in a way beneficial.” It was, perhaps, an easy thing for him to say at a time when he had collected all the major poetry awards, been the subject of a multi-page photo spread in *Life Magazine*, and achieved a level of fame well beyond what most poets hope for, let alone achieve. But nothing, for Berryman, was ever easy, really, and if his early afflictions—obscurity, neglect, and frustrated ambition—had by then been vanquished, it was simply to be replaced by other forms of suffering: alcoholism, depression, a tendency toward flamboyant self-destruction. On January 7, 1972 a mere eighteen months after the *Paris Review* interview, Berryman walked out onto the Washington Avenue Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, and jumped off. Five years had passed since the *Life Magazine* feature, less than seven since the first volume of *Dream Songs* won the Pulitzer. Early fame is very dangerous indeed. Is late fame any less so?

“A Point of Age” appeared in *Poems*, Berryman’s slim first book—Berryman referred to it in a letter as “my damned pamphlet”—which appeared in 1942, when he was twenty-eight. The book did not establish him as a major poet. Nor did his first full-length collection, *The Dispossessed*, released in 1948. He had another three decades of life ahead of him, decades of struggle and turmoil during which he developed one of the most distinctive literary voices of the twentieth century. In his mid- to late-twenties he could have known none of this for certain, though he knew himself well enough to crave, anticipate, and hope for much of what turned out to be his future, and to dread much of the rest.

October 25, 2014, was John Berryman's 100th birthday. His publisher, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, commemorated the occasion by republishing three of his books—*The Dream Songs*, *77 Dream Songs*, and *Berryman's Sonnets*—alongside a new selection titled *The Heart Is Strange: New Selected Poems*. Daniel Swift, of London's New College of the Humanities, chose the poems for *The Heart Is Strange* and provides a stimulating and insightful introduction. The other volumes are introduced by provocative and enthusiastic new essays by contemporary poets: Michael Hoffman, Henri Cole, and April Bernard. *The Dream Songs*, Berryman's major work, has never gone out of print. Still, the appearance of the new edition is heartening. For reasons that are somewhat obscure, Berryman's reputation has fluctuated over the years. It would be nice to think that the appearance of these four volumes might help bring about what is to my mind a long-overdue revival.



Since they are being published separately, neither Berryman's sonnets nor his *Dream Songs* are represented in *The Heart Is Strange*. This means that the book delves more deeply into the lesser-known Berryman poems than previous single volume selections have, and there is something to be said for this. Still, the absence

of Dream Songs in particular means that while the book contains some very interesting and at times striking poems, it does not present any of his best work. The early works of his apprenticeship—the poems originally included in *Poems and The Dispossessed*—tend to be formalistic and prim, dominated by the constraining influence of Auden and Yeats. The best and most Berrymanesque of the early pieces are the nine “Nervous Songs” contained in *The Dispossessed*, of which Swift gives us five. (I wish he had included all nine.)

Among the more successful, and more haunting, poems from *The Dispossessed* is “The Ball Poem,” which begins with a boy “who has lost his ball”, and who “stands rigid, trembling, staring down/ All his young days into the harbour where / His ball went.” The poem concludes:

A whistle blows, the ball is out of sight,  
Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark  
Floor of the harbor ... I am everywhere,  
I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move  
With all that move me, under the water  
Or whistling, I am not a little boy. (THIS, 9)

There are many elements here that will recur: the close-quarters comparison of childhood with adult life, the spectral shadow of an almost wistfully anticipated suicide, and Berryman’s perpetual keen awareness of the various forms suffering can take, as if his main poetic project were to present a comprehensive phenomenology of human pain. Berryman, who was twelve when his father killed himself and who seems to have dreamed for much of his life of the time when he himself would get to “explore the deep and dark / Floor of the harbor,” was indeed not a little boy. (Though he could and did act like one, particularly when he was disappointed, felt neglected, or was enamored of some particular woman or other). The driving force of “The Ball Poem” is the palpable, almost delicious envy the poet feels for this miserable child who has been crushed by the loss of his toy; but is it the innocent purity of the misery that is envied, or the fact that, when compared with later-life sufferings, it is bound to seem—from the adult’s perspective, of course—vastly more manageable?

The work of the late Forties and Fifties, during which time Berryman published the long poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and wrote—but did not publish until years later—Berryman’s *Sonnets*, finds him reaching further back, particularly to Shakespeare, who was and would remain his primary scholarly interest. (Swift’s introduction to *The Heart is Strange* spends a good deal of time on Shakespeare’s influence, and rightly so.) The syntax in these poems grows complex and entertainingly convoluted, while the diction becomes more adventurous and, on the

whole, more playful. This is particularly so in the sonnets, whose author was liberated by the fact that, given their highly personal subject matter (they concerned the married Berryman's affair with a married woman), he had no intention of publishing them. Freed from the threat of a readership, Berryman tossed and mixed Modernist, pop, personal, and Elizabethan elements with reckless glee. When, in 1967, Berryman allowed the sonnets to be published, he replaced his lover's name with the pseudonym "Lise," and included an opening poem, in the Dream Song form, in which he debates himself as to whether suppress or release these "SONGS / FOR AN EXCELLENT LADY," before finally deciding, ah, well, screw it: "SO FREE THEM TO THE WINDS THAT PLAY, / LET BOYS & GIRLS WITH THESE OLD SONGS HAVE HOLIDAY / IF THEY FEEL LIKE IT." And the sonnets do, indeed, feel rather like a holiday:

Also I fox 'heart', striking a modern breast  
Hollow as a drum, and 'beauty' I taboo;  
I want a verse fresh as a bubble breaks,  
As little false... Blood of my sweet unrest  
Runs all the same—I am in love with you—  
Trapped in my rib-cage something throes and aches! (Sonnet 23)

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, like the sonnets, plays with syntax, but here the play does not feel so playful; it's Damn Serious Business, a work the poet David Wojahn once called "Berryman's submission to the Big Modernist Long Poem sweepstakes." Homage is, quite properly, included in its entirety in *The Heart is Strange*. It's a substantial achievement; and it's also a bit of a slog. Much more than in the earlier poems one sees on display here the linguistic and imagistic resources that would eventually allow Berryman to write the Dream Songs. But to get there he needed to learn to stop worrying about making a grand statement, to relax his grip on the poetry and, at the same time, to push it harder, to let the poems leap, dance, dare and scare without trying to coerce them into adding up to something orderly, coherent, and magisterial. And, of course, he needed to figure out how to make them funny. The breakthrough, the two books that comprise "The Dream Songs," occurs alongside an increasingly serious sequence of personal breakdowns, as if Berryman could manage to throw off these gorgeously flashing and frequently wounding shards of verse only by letting himself spin ever more wildly out of control.

77 Dream Songs appeared in 1964. (Like Darwin, Berryman published his great book when he was fifty, after years of hesitations and false starts). The poems chart the adventures of a protagonist, Henry, with whom the author had quite a number of things—fears, character traits, grievances, injuries—in common:

All the world like a woolen lover  
once did seem on Henry's side.  
Then came a departure.  
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought. (DS 1)

This is from the very first Dream Song and, while it does not capture the jubilant pandemonium that will soon dominate the sequence, it establishes a counterpoint undercurrent of melancholy that pervades "The Dream Songs," while at the same time harkening back to works like "The Ball Poem" in its attempt to invoke the prelapsarian state of childhood that, in the wake of his father's suicide, haunted the poet.

77 Dream Songs won the Pulitzer and put Berryman at the head of the poetry pack. His *Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, which followed in 1968, swelled the poem to massive proportions in the act of completing it; it contained three hundred and eight more Dream Songs. Some of the work here, happily, was on a par with the astonishing poems of the first volume, but the later sections were composed largely in a furious rush, under the increasingly disruptive influences of alcohol, mania, and success; a good number of the new poems felt flaccid and disappointing. None of this stopped the book from winning both the National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize. (It's hard for those of us who think that 77 Dream Songs should have swept these awards to feel too bad about this. Besides, as Berryman asks in his book on Stephen Crane, "when did countries or men get what they deserve?")

Finished with the Dream Songs (if only he had decided to be finished a bit sooner!) Berryman found a new mode. His subject had always been himself, but in *The Dream Songs* he had seemed to follow Emily Dickinson's advice to "tell it slant"; now he turned to memories rather than dreams, relating them in a decidedly non-slanted, plainspoken voice that abjured the syntactical complexity, conceptual density, and disorienting weirdness of the Dream Songs. Sometimes restive, sometimes wistful, the new poems were reportorial, nostalgic, chatty. *Love and Fame* was published in 1970; *Delusions Etc.* was put together in 1971 but not published until after Berryman's death in early 1972. Like the later sections of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, these books feel as if they were written quickly and without a good deal of revision; the only real surprise was that each contained a substantial religious sequence: "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," in *Love and Fame*, and "Opus Dei," in *Delusions, Etc.*

The poems that appeared after his death—mostly in *Henry's Fate and Other Poems*, a volume of remnants published in 1976—continue the trend. *Henry's Fate* is not, on the whole, a strong volume, but it is not an embarrassment, as many posthumous collections are, and it contains a couple of quite exquisite lyrics.

Particularly affecting is “Henry’s Understanding,” a gently shattering poem built on an image that goes all the way back to “The Ball Poem” (THIS, 152):

... it occurred to me  
that one night, instead of warm pajamas,  
I’d take off all my clothes  
& cross the damp cold lawn & down the bluff  
into the terrible water & walk forever  
under it out toward the island.

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Berryman, Louise Glück once wrote, had a “meticulous need to offend everyone, to be certain that in no mind was he even briefly associated with anything even slightly conservative, mannerly, acceptable...” This seems precisely right: one of Berryman’s most persistent desires seemed to be that those with whom he shared the world recognize what a rough undomesticated creature he was, that no one mistake him for a gentleman, or mistake his interest in poetics and Shakespeare for a desire to be prissy and respectable. When, in *Dream Song 4*, Henry finds himself lusting ferociously after the attractive nearby married woman who is “filling her compact & delicious body / with chicken paprika,” Berryman means us to understand that he is Henry, and that he/Henry is desperate, somewhat pathetic, and gleefully determined to tear down the wall that he, as a civilized person, has been obliged to build between his outer self and the rage-driven, rampaging animal within. When he goes on to ask “What wonders is / she sitting on, over there?” he means both to shock us and, simultaneously, to invite us into a kind of complicity. We, too, conceal snarling lascivious beasts beneath our finely decorated skins, and we too know the costs of keeping them hidden. And a great deal of the pleasure of reading Berryman is the relief of having this revealed to the world—in someone else’s person, if not one’s own—just as it is relief to read the first line of the famous *Dream Song 14* and think to oneself “Yes, life really is boring, dreadfully, at times unbelievably boring—and how wonderful to hear someone say it!”

Of course he also insisted, from time to time, that he was not Henry, claiming in the prefatory remark to *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* that “The poem, then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age, sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss...” Still, he muddied the waters considerably and often, referring to himself as Henry in letters, in conversation, in interviews, and whatever distance once separated Berryman from Henry seemed to



have shrunken considerably by the end of *His Toy*. Reading, in the penultimate Dream Song, number 384, of Henry's visit to his father's final resting place, his spitting "upon this dreadful banker's grave / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn," and his mad desire to break open the casket and take an ax to his father's corpse, it is impossible not to think that this is Berryman, that Berryman, in the midst of the wild and raging rush of composition, has simply forgotten to don his mask. Indeed the poems, and the Dream Songs in particular, are far less often concerned with disguise than with what is revealed when disguise fails or is abandoned. As he writes in Dream Song 248, "Dream on of a private life but you won't make it / Your fated life is public".

Still he did insist, at times, on the distance between life and art, and the inability of the former truly to capture the latter. "I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends", he cautions us in "Message", a late poem from *Love and Fame*, a book that reads for all the world like an autobiography in verse. These poems, he tells us, offer recitations of historical fact; they are not life:

Impressions, structures, tales, from Columbia in the Thirties  
& the Michaelmas term at Cambridge in '36,  
followed by some later. It's not my life.  
That's occluded & lost.

That consisted of lectures on St Paul,  
scrimmages with women, singular moments  
of getting certain things absolutely right.

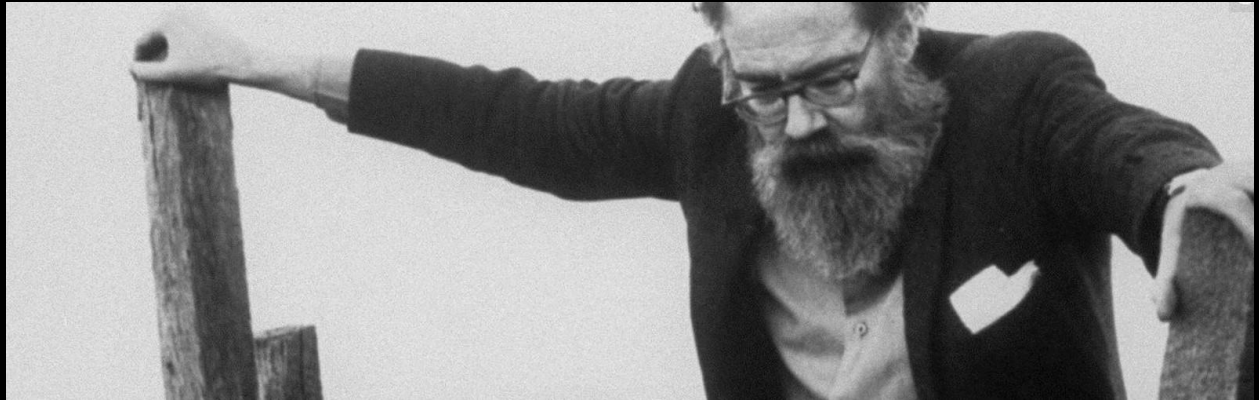
Laziness, liquor, bad dreams.

("Message," THIS p. 107)

It is maddeningly difficult, of course, to get laziness, liquor, and bad dreams into poems, let alone those moments, assuming they come at all, in which one "gets certain things absolutely right." For once, though, Berryman fails to give himself enough credit: the Dream Songs are in fact full of life, his life, "real" life: more real, and more lively, than the poems of nearly any of his contemporaries.

If, at twenty-five, a man is on his way, what is he at a hundred? "Turning it over, considering, like a madman, / Henry put forth a book", he writes in Dream Song 75. "No harm resulted from this." Knowing what we know of Henry's fate, we might take some issue with that last bit. But this is not to say that either we or Berryman would wish that book away, whatever it might have cost. The question the young Berryman would have asked, had he had the chance to peer into the future at the dimly imagined far-off year of 2014, was surely not *Will I still be alive?*, but rather, *Will I still be in print?* It would have mattered to him, and it does matter, that the

answer is yes. Let us keep him with us as long as we can. We are wildly lucky to have had, for a while, in our midst, this wild unlucky man.



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