

CLASS ONE, Fri, Sept 25:

Please **read** and **print** this handout if you can before class. We will use it for our discussion.

For the first class we will discuss the ancient forms of the **Abecedarian** and the **Acrostic**. With respect to the latter, we will pay particular attention to the ***Golden Shovel***, a contemporary form of acrostic. Both the abecedarian and the acrostic can be identified by reading down the left and/or right margins of the poem. Abecedarians tend to reveal themselves to us more obviously, while acrostics tend to conceal. The Golden Shovel is a special case: if we know what to look for, we'll find it, and the poet usually gives us clues.

The first three poems in this handout are abecedarians. Can you figure out the guiding pattern?

The fourth poem is a famous acrostic by Lewis Carroll. Acrostics normally spell out a name or a word in one or both margins. I've included a footnote to assist in case Carroll's acrostic eludes you which, it most likely will, unless you're already familiar with the poem.

The fifth poem "We Real Cool" is by the renowned African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks (1913-2000). I've copied it for you since it will be your main clue in understanding the sixth poem "The Golden Shovel" by celebrated contemporary African American poet Terrance Hayes (b.1971). He coined the acrostic form **The Golden Shovel** to honor Gwendolyn Brooks. Two more golden shovel poems follow, one by Kevin Simmonds and one by yours truly (moi!). As you'll see, each of these honors or is inspired by a poet other than Brooks.

Exercise: In preparation for our first meeting, I invite you to write an *acrostic* using your first name, or some version of it, like a nickname. For each letter of your name, come up with a word that either describes you or that you aspire towards or that you simply like the sound or meaning of, or some combination of these. This is just an exercise. It isn't meant to be a work of art.

Here is mine, using Kate (instead of Katherine which is so long and formal).

Let Me Be

Kinetic
approachable
tonally
essential.

Enjoy! See you soon on Zoom!

A Poem for S. -- Jessica Greenbaum

Because you used to leaf through the dictionary,
Casually, as someone might in a barber shop, and
Devotedly, as someone might in a sanctuary,
Each letter would still have your attention if not
For the responsibilities life has tightly fit, like
Gears around the cog of you, like so many petals
Hinged on a daisy. That's why I'll just use your
Initial. Do you know that in one treasured story, a
Jewish ancestor, horseback in the woods at Yom
Kippur, and stranded without a prayer book,
Looked into the darkness and realized he had
Merely to name the alphabet to ask forgiveness—
No congregation of figures needed, he could speak
One letter at a time because all of creation
Proceeded from those. He fed his horse, and then
Quietly, because it was from his heart, he
Recited them slowly, from *aleph* to *tav*. Within those
Sounds, all others were born, all manner of
Trials, actions, emotions, everything needed to
Understand who he was, had been, how flaws
Venerate the human being, how aspirations return
Without spite. Now for you, may your wife's
X-ray return with good news, may we raise our
Zarfs to both your names in the Great Book of Life.

--*Poetry* (July/August 2012)

Siblings -- Patricia Smith

Arlene learned to dance backwards in heels that were too high.
 Bret prayed for a shaggy mustache made of mud and hair.
 Cindy just couldn't keep her windy legs together.
 Dennis never learned to swim.
 Emily whispered her gusts into a thousand skins.
 Franklin, farsighted and anxious, bumbled villages.
 Gert spat her matronly name against a city's flat face.
 Harvey hurled a wailing child high.
 Irene, the baby girl, threw pounding tantrums.
 José liked the whip sound of slapping.
 Lee just craved the whip.
 Maria's thunder skirts flew high when she danced.
 Nate was mannered and practical. He stormed precisely.
 Ophelia nibbled weirdly on the tips of depressions.
 Philippe slept too late, flailing on a wronged ocean.
 Rita was a vicious flirt. She woke Philippe with rumors.
 Stan was born business, a gobbler of steel.
 Tammy crooned country, getting the words all wrong.
 Vince died before anyone could remember his name.
 Wilma opened her maw wide, flashing rot.

None of them talked about Katrina.
 She was their odd sister,
 the blood dazzler.

--from *Blood Dazzler*, Coffee House Press, 2008

(*Blood Dazzler* is a book comprised of poems about Hurricane Katrina)

ABECEDARY -- Tom Disch (from *Poetry*, 1978)

A is an Apple, as everyone knows.
 But B is a What do you suppose?
 A Bible? A Barber? A Banquet? A Bank?
 No, B is this Boat, the night that it sank.
 C is its Captain, and D is its Dory,
 While E – But first let me tell you a story.
 There once was an Eagle exceedingly proud
 Who thought it would fly, in the Form of a cloud —
 Yes, E is for Eagle, and F is for Form,
 And G is the Grass that got wet in the storm
 When the cloud that the Eagle unwisely became
 Sprinkled our hero and all of his fame
 Over ten acres of upland plateau.
 So much for that story. Now H. Do you know?
 H is the Hay that was made from the Grass,
 And I's the Idea of going to Mass,
 Which is something that only a Catholic would do.
 Jews go to Synagogue. J is a Jew.
 K is for Kitchen as well as for Kiss,
 While L is for all of the black Licorice
 You can eat in an hour without feeling ill.
 M is for Millipede, Millet, and Mill.
 The first is an insect, the second a grain,
 The third grinds the second: it's hard to explain
 Such a process to children who never have seen it —
 So let's go to the country right now! Yes, I mean it.
 We're leaving already, and N is the Night
 We race through to reach it, while P is the Plight
 Of the people (Remember?) who sailed in that Boat
 That is still, by a miracle, somehow afloat!
 (Oh dear, I've just noticed I've overlooked O:
 O's an Omission and really should go
 In that hole – do you see it? – between N and P.
 No? It's not there now? Dear O, pardon me.)
 Q is the Question of how far away
 A person can travel in one single day,
 And whether it's worth it, or might it be better
 To just stay at home and write someone a letter?
 R's are Relations, a regular swarm.
 Now get out of the car – we've arrived at their farm!
 S is the Sight of a Thanksgiving feast,
 And T is the Turkey, which must weigh at least
 Thirty pounds. U is Utopia. V ...
 V simply Vanishes – where, we can't see –
 While W Waves from its Westernmost isle
 And X lies exhausted, attempting to smile.
 There are no letters left now but Y and then Z.
 Y is for You, dear, and Z is for me.

Acrostic* - Lewis Carroll

Little maidens, when you look
On this little story-book,
Reading with attentive eye
Its enticing history,
Never think that hours of play
Are your only HOLIDAY,
And that in a HOUSE of joy
Lessons serve but to annoy:
If in any HOUSE you find
Children of a gentle mind,
Each the others pleasing ever—
Each the others vexing never—
Daily work and pastime daily
In their order taking gaily—
Then be very sure that they
Have a life of HOLIDAY.

*Lewis Carroll presented this poem to "the three Misses Liddell" tucked into a copy of Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* for Christmas, 1861. The acrostic spells out their names: Lorina, Alice, and Edith.

We Real Cool -- Gwendolyn Brooks

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

--first published in *Poetry* (1959)

The Golden Shovel -- Terrance Hayes
after Gwendolyn Brooks

I. 1981

When I am so small Da's sock covers my arm, we
cruise at twilight until we find the place the real

men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we

drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left
in them but approachlessness. This is a school

I do not know yet. But the cue sticks mean we
are rubbed by light, smooth as wood, the lurk

of smoke thinned to song. We won't be out late.
Standing in the middle of the street last night we

watched the moonlit lawns and a neighbor strike
his son in the face. A shadow knocked straight

Da promised to leave me everything: the shovel we
used to bury the dog, the words he loved to sing

his rusted pistol, his squeaky Bible, his sin.
The boy's sneakers were light on the road. We

watched him run to us looking wounded and thin.
He'd been caught lying or drinking his father's gin.

cont.

He'd been defending his ma, trying to be a man. We
stood in the road, and my father talked about jazz,

how sometimes a tune is born of outrage. By June
the boy would be locked upstate. That night we

got down on our knees in my room. *If I should die
before I wake.* Da said to me, *it will be too soon.*

II. 1991

Into the tented city we go, we-
akened by the fire's ethereal

afterglow. Born lost and cool-
er than heartache. What we

know is what we know. The left
hand severed and school-

ed by cleverness. A plate of we-
ekdays cooking. The hour lurk-

ing in the afterglow. A late-
night chant. Into the city we

go. Close your eyes and strike
a blow. Light can be straight-

ened by its shadow. What we
break is what we hold. A sing-

ular blue note. An outcry sin-
ged exiting the throat. We

push until we thin, thin-
king we won't creep back again.

While God licks his kin, we
sing until our blood is jazz,

we swing from June to June.
We sweat to keep from we-

eping. Groomed on a die-
t of hunger, we end too soon.

--from *Lighthouse*, Penguin Books, 2010

Social Security -- Kevin Simmonds

But the iron thing they carried, I will not carry
 --Mary Oliver "Flare"

Soon momma's eligible but
 it's too much too late for boomers, the
 long-uninsured with low iron,
 bad gums, that diabetic thing
 lodged long ago in the blood they
 say is her own black fault, carried
 from the womb since birthing me. I
 can care for momma but what will
 happen to those whose treasure's not
 a child, only blood they carry?

--from *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*, U of Arkansas Press, 2019

Pastel With Feathers -- Kate Sontag

"Hope" for flight. Under her microscopic eye
 is a black sky, interior shafts tethered by
 the flaming fringes. Each quill a hollowed
 thing stores lightning, quivers. Quick
 with blood, aquamarine, lavender
 feathers, lime green and beach blue,
 that angle, spill, and fountain, every barb
 perches precisely drawn. Bird and birder
 in her own aviary, our mother claims
 the storm patterns in layers, magnifies her
 soul to gale pitch. In unabashed rains of color
 and strangest release little by little, she
 sings for crumbs. If only we could hold
 the chilled wings, hear her voice soar out of
 tune another morning, make her milky tea
 that warms and perfumes. This huntress
 never expected to see her daughters so linked,
 stops mid-strike, in extremity. Receding targets
 at a standstill, we're snared by her trajectory,
 all our thunder stolen, awed by such arrows.

from *That Fire Was*, 2016

(This poem is from a series of poems I wrote about my mother's enormous abstract pastel drawings which my sister and I discovered after her death. Each poem uses an Emily Dickinson poem in some way, this one #314 which many of you will be familiar with. I can show you the actual drawing on Zoom if you like. I wrote these poems before knowing about The Golden Shovel form.)