

POETIC FORM

AN INTRODUCTION

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Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

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AN EXERCISE IN THE MUSICAL FORMS

These forms remind us that poetry need not express ideas and depict events thought to be "in good taste." Instead write a ballad based on an article in a tabloid such as the *National Enquirer* or the *Star*. Stick strictly to a ballad stanza, presenting in detail the story that the article presents. You may take liberties with the story, but you cannot editorialize. Tell the story without interjecting your view of it.



SONNETS AND THE RONDEAU

Before George Herbert turned seventeen, he sent his mother an intriguing sonnet:

My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee,
Wherewith whole shoals of Martyrs once did burn,

Besides their other flames? Doth poetry

Wear Venus' livery? only serve her turn?

Why are not sonnets made of thee? and lays

Upon thine altar burnt? Cannot thy love

Heighten a spirit to sound out Thy praise

As well as any she? Cannot thy Dove

Oustrip their Cupid easily in flight?

Or, since thy ways are deep, and still the same,

Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?

Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might

Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose

Then that which, one day, worms may chance refuse.

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As if from a high pulpit, the schoolboy poet sermonizes against poets who direct their attention to women, not God. Represented by pagan figures

such as Cupid and Venus, this earthly love remains inferior to the love of the divine. In the poem's most playful image, Herbert asserts that the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, flies faster than Cupid, the Roman god of erotic love.

It was an odd moment for Herbert to criticize secular love. Right around the time he shared the poem with her, Magdalen Herbert, a widow, married Sir John Danvers, a man only a few years older than Herbert and half her age. Addressing "my dear mother," Herbert explained in a letter that the poem testified to his "resolution to be, that my poor abilities in poetry shall be all and ever consecrated to God's glory." As in the poem, it is hard to know why Herbert chose this particular moment to declare his single-minded devotion to God: whether his words express piety or adolescent p̄nulance disguised in religious garb.

Background and Structure of the Sonnet

What Herbert meant by "sonnets" also remains a little ambiguous. "Some think," George Gascoigne observed in 1575, "that all Poems (being short) may be called Sonets." Sonnet derives from the Italian for little song or sound; it wasn't until the late Renaissance that the word's definition narrowed to define a more particular form, although writers occasionally evoked the older sense of the word as recently as the early nineteenth century.

Despite Herbert's protests, from its start in thirteenth-century Italy the sonnet has mixed earthly and divine love. Early masters such as Petrarch and Dante praised their "angelic" beloved in mystical terms. They addressed their lovers as if they were deities, mixing the erotic and the spiritual. Petrarch's widely influential poems to Laura established a vocabulary for imagining love, in which the poet extravagantly praises a virtuously unattainable lady. The poems chart the experience of endless frustration, love's "icy-fire," as the poet burns for what he cannot have.

Employing the resources of a language rich in rhyme, the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet opens with eight lines, also called the octave, which rhyme according to this pattern:

a
b
b
a

a
b
b
a

The next six lines, the sestet, rhyme according to several patterns, the most common of which are:

c c c c
d d d d
d e e e
c d c d
d c c e
e e d d

The sonnet entered English in the mid-sixteenth century, after Thomas Wyatt encountered the form while on a diplomatic mission abroad. Wyatt and his fellow courtier Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey translated Petrarch's poetry then composed original verses in the form. In 1557, 15 years after Wyatt's death and ten years after Surrey's, the printer Richard Tottell published an anthology titled *Songs and Sonnets written by the Right Honorable Lord Henry Howard late Earl of Surrey*. More commonly called *Tottell's Miscellany*, the book introduced the sonnet to an English readership. The printer also regularized Wyatt's rough meter, producing smoother but less compelling versions.

When Wyatt translated Petrarch's Rime 140, he wrote:

The long love that in my thought doth harbor,
And in my heart doth keep his residence,
Into my face presseth with bold pretence
And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
She that me learns to love and suffer
And wills that my trust and lust's negligence
Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence
With his hardiness taketh displeasure.
Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,
Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
And there him hideth, and not appeareth.
What may I do when my master feareth,

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But in the field with him to live and die?
For good is the life ending faithfully.

Surrey translated the same poem as:

Love, that doth reign and live within my thought,
And built his seat within my captive breast,
Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.
But she that taught me love and suffer pain,
My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire
With shamefast look to shadow and refrain,
Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.
And coward Love, then, to the heart apace
Taketeth his flight, where he doth lurk and plain,
His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.
For my lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pain,
Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove:
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.

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In addition to suggesting the poets' different styles and preoccupations, the translations show how Wyatt and Surrey adapted the sonnet form to the English language, which lacks the Italian's density of rhymes. Wyatt's version stays closest to the rhyme scheme that Petrarch employs, making only one change. Wyatt's final line rhymes with the penultimate and tenth lines, while Petrarch's final line rhymes with the ninth, eleventh, and twelfth lines. Wyatt would have followed the original rhyme scheme had he rhymed the last line with "pain," not "remove." Wyatt instead introduces the terminal couplet that would characterize many sonnets in English, a technique that has been praised and criticized for the epigrammatic sense of closure it adds, an element I will discuss shortly.

Surrey also ends his translation with a couplet, but he adds an alternative rhyme scheme. Except for the rhyme on "pain," which snakes from the octave to the sestet, his poem anticipates the sonnet structure that would dominate the language: the English or Shakespearean sonnet, marked by a terminal couplet and an alternative rhyme. If literary history had been kinder to Surrey, we would say that Shakespeare uses the Surrey sonnet:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her though I know she lies,

That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.

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Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue

On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.

But wherefore says she not she is unjust?

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And wherefore say not I that I am old?

O love's best habit is in seeming trust,

And age in love loves not to have years told.

Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,

And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

"Therefore," the couplet begins as if ending a logical syllogism. As in this kind of philosophical argument, Shakespeare's sonnets often move toward a structurally neat conclusion, which comments on, analyzes, or summarizes the depicted experience. Some readers have criticized Shakespeare's couplets as offering trite aphorisms, although in this sonnet the more proverbial, impersonal lines occur in lines eleven and twelve. The poem's neatness, though, barely disguises the anguish that underpins it, as the speaker's self-justifications seem hopelessly implausible. The great sense of closure that the poem achieves barely disguises the fact that little has been resolved, that the speaker turns to formulas and casuistry for solace.

Poets subsequently invented many variations of these two types. Through the late nineteenth century, the Petrarchan form was considered the "legitimate sonnet" and the Shakespearean sonnet viewed as a departure from this standard model. When Keats tried (in his own words) "to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have," he did so because both models dissatisfied him. "The legitimate," he wrote, "does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes—the other kind appears too elegiac—and the couplet at the end has seldom a pleasing effect." Keats disliked the Petrarchan sonnet because the first eight lines feature rhymes in quick succession, leading to a "pouncing effect." The Shakespearean model displeased him because it resembled the elegiac stanzas (four-line stanzas that rhyme a b a b) and because the couplet offered a neat resolution.

We no longer call the Petrarchan sonnet "the legitimate" at least partly because the poets have developed countless alternatives and variations, with various rhyme schemes and meters (and some without any

meters or rhymes at all). The sonnet is not only English's major form; its influence extends nearly worldwide. During the last decade alone, it has attracted the attention of international poets as different as Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Pablo Neruda, and poets have written sonnets in a great number of languages, including French, Italian, Croatian, and Chinese.

Many observers have puzzled over why this form has achieved such prominence. The sonnet seems rather puny, especially when compared to the form that antiquity placed at the top of its hierarchy, the epic. Some scholars have speculated that the sonnet's proportions echo architectural or philosophical ideals; they have drawn parallels to the symmetries that exist within nature or human physiology. Coleridge, who defined the sonnet as "a small poem, in which some lonely feeling is developed," argued that custom largely dictated the form, although he noted that length places the sonnet between the epigram and the elegy. My view is that the sonnet has gained such popularity because it offers a form attuned to the problem that has obsessed poetry for the last four centuries: how self-consciousness operates, especially when it faces the sharpest and most painful dilemmas.

Background and Structure of the Rondeau

A comparison with a similar form clarifies the sonnet's advantages. *Tottel's Miscellany* introduced the rondeau to English. Almost precisely sonnet-length, the thirteen-line form includes several prominent repetitions. The first phrase repeats as a refrain in the other two stanzas. Not counting the refrain, the poem consists of three stanzas of five, three, and five lines, which rhyme a b b a, a b, and a b a. Wyatt wrote a half-dozen rondeaus that survive, including the following poem, which some editors represents as a single stanza:

Help me to seek, for I lost it there,
 And if that ye have found it, ye that be here,
 And seek to convey it secretly,
 Handle it soft and treat it tenderly,
 Or else it will plain and then appear:
 But rather restore it mannerly,
 Since that I do ask it thus honestly:

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For to lose it, it sitteth me too near.
 Help me to seek.

Alas, and is there no remedy?
 But have I thus lost it wilfully?
 I wis it was a thing all too dear
 To be bestowed and wist not where—
 It was my heart, I pray you heartily,
 Help me to seek.

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When Tottel published Wyatt's poems, he revised three rondeaus, expanding the initial refrain to a full line and cutting the concluding refrain. Showing how little separated the forms, he changed the rondeaus into sonnets. Yet the two work very differently. A rondeau embodies steadfastness; it begins and ends with the same phrase. Unlike a ballad, narrative development does not complicate the refrain. The form inspires assertive displays of tenacity, whether patriotic (as in John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields") or racial (Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask"), poems of impressive immobility.

The sonnet demands movement. It might be called the most lyric of the major lyric forms, focused inward, packed with tension and intensity, and inhospitable to asides and extended explanation. A form such as the heroic couplet licenses explication, elaboration, and digression. In theory a poet can go on for however long he or she wants. The sonnet in contrast demands a self-questioning brevity, as a poem contests the idea it just introduced. It excels at representing ambivalent self-reflection.

When addressing the grandest of themes—love, god, and politics—the sonnet requires great compression, a readjustment of scale in which seemingly trivial events grow in stature while great events are reduced to small moments. Ben Jonson "cursed Petrarch for redacting Verses to Sonnets," comparing the sonnet form to a tyrant's bed, in which "some who were too short were racked, others too long cut short." At its most effective, though, the sonnet's brevity inspires a passionate intensity, in which the lover lingers over nearly everything that the beloved does and does not do. As in life, moments of great fervor reconfigure time and distance: an absent lover feels wholly present while a brief meeting inspires decades of longing. While many of the sonnet's well-worn poses seem artificial and hackneyed, the form's defenders protest that its conventions capture the dynamics of passionate love, in particular the bittersweet emotions that desire arouses. "The sense contained in this Sonnet will

seem strange," a Renaissance sonneteer explained, "to such as never been acquainted themselves with Love and his Laws, because of the contrarieties mentioned therein. But to such, as Love at any time hath under his banner, all and every part of it will appear to be a familiar truth."

Bursting with such "contrarities," sonnets express strong emotions; reading a sequence straight through recalls the sensation of drinking shot after shot of espresso. A structural imbalance helps poems to achieve this dizzying effect. Rarely do poets split the fourteen lines into two, seven-line halves. Instead, sonnets typically feature a *volta* or turn at the start of the ninth line, where it shifts its tone or argument. Because sonnets generally turn against themselves, they excel at representing the self in conflict.

William Wordsworth's "Surprised by Joy" offers a good example:

Surprized by joy—impatient as the Wind
I wished to share the transport—Oh! with whom
But Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love, faithful love recalled thee to my mind—
But how could I forget thee?—Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss?—That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

The opening lines seem willfully averse to my analysis of how sonnets work; how can anyone be ambivalent about unexpected pleasure? Yet, as we have seen, sonnets turn against themselves. As in many other sonnets, the speaker is eager to narrate, "to share the transport." (Love sonnets in particular exploit a certain fact: that affairs demand to be recounted, which is why its participants endlessly describe them to anyone who will listen, especially themselves.) Before the speaker can describe his happiness, a greater absence overwhelms him, as he recalls that the person he addresses has passed away. Evoking the absent daughter with language familiar to the Petrarchan tradition, the poem quickly turns self-accusatory, "But how could I forget thee?" then sorrowfully

guilt ridden, contemplating "the worst pang that sorrow ever bore." The final rhyme—"no more" and "restore"—addresses the poem's dilemma; no poem can raise the dead. At most it can atone for the speaker's rather understandable mistake, one perhaps necessary for his emotional health: he has momentarily forgotten his child's early death.

A master of the form, Claude McKay exploits the sonnet's doubleness in surprising ways. Like many other sonnets, "To the White Fiends" opens with a series of questions:

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?
Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match—out-match: am I not Afric's son,
Black of that black land where black deeds are done?
But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,
Thy dusky face I set among the white
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!

First published in September 1919, the sonnet describes the tense atmosphere that followed a long summer of race riots, when McKay carried a gun for self-defense. The poem's form enacts the anger the octave expresses and the lofty status the sestet claims. Along with the hard monosyllabic rhymes, the heavy stresses spit out lines as challenges:

Black of that black land where black deeds are done?

The octave threatens a modern violence, using a gun to kill ten whites for every one black killed by fire. The octave responds with archaic language that presents the speaker as divinely chosen. McKay did not employ the sonnet haphazardly. Like the other major poets of the Harlem Renaissance (except Hughes), he preferred it to more controversial forms such as the blues and jazz. By skillfully handling a well-established form, he asserted a cultured superiority, recasting the white racist as the "savage."

MORE WORKS IN THE SONNET

The sonnet has inspired many variations in English. The most familiar types are the Shakespearean, which rhymes a b a b c d c d e f e f g g (represented by Shakespeare's "Two loves . . ."), and the Petrarchan, which has two main rhyme schemes: a b a b a b and either c d e c d e or c d c d c d. Milton's "On His Blindness" uses the first kind of Petrarchan sonnet. The most common meter is iambic pentameter, though many sonnets use either other meters or unmetrical lines.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right faire;
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell my female evil
Temp'th my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turned fiend
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell.
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

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a
b
c
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c
d
e
f
e
f
g
g

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JOHN MILTON

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best

a
b
b
a
a
b
b
a
c
d

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Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o're land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

e
c
d
e

GEORGE HERBERT

Prayer, the church's banquet, angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-day's world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The Milky Way, the bird of Paradise,
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

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JOHN DONNE

From *Holy Sonnets*

Barter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

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Let him but learn of love to read in thee,
 Stella, whose fair lines, which true goodness show.
 There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
 Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
 Of reason, from whose light those night birds fly;
 That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
 And not content to be Perfection's heir
 Thyself, dost strive all minds that way to move
 Who mark in thee what is in thee most fair.
 So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
 As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good:
 "But ah," desire still cries, "give me some food."

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
From *Astrophil and Stella*

With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies!
 How silently, and with how wan a face!
 What! may it be that even in heavenly place
 That busy archer his sharp arrows tries?
 Sure, if that long-with-love-acquainted eyes
 Can judge of love, thou feel'st a lover's case;
 I read it in thy looks,—thy languished grace
 To me, that feel the like, thy state describes.
 Then, even of fellowship, O moon, tell me,
 Is constant love deemed there but want of wit?
 Are beauties there as proud as here they be?
 Do they above love to be loved, and yet
 Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?
 Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
From *Astrophil and Stella*

Leave me, O love which reachest but to dust;
 And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things;
 Grow rich in that which never taketh rust,
 Whatever fades but fading pleasure brings.
 Draw in thy beams, and humble all thy might
 To that sweet yoke where lasting freedoms be;

CHARLOTTE SMITH
From *Elegiac Sonnets*, SONNET I

The partial Muse has from my earliest hours
 Smiled on the rugged path I'm doomed to tread,
 And still with sportive hand has snatch'd wild flowers,
 To weave fantastic garlands for my head:
 But far, far happier is the lot of those
 Who never learn'd her dear delusive art;
 Which, while it decks the head with many a rose,
 Reserves the thorn, to fester in the heart.
 For still she bids soft Pity's melting eye
 Stream o'er the hills she knows not to remove,
 Points every pang, and deepens every sigh
 Of mourning friendship, or unhappy love.
 Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favours cost,
 If those paint sorrow best—*who feel it most!*

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
From *Astrophil and Stella*

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
 That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,
 Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
 Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
 Oft turning others' leaves to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burned brain.
 But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
 Invention, nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,
 And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
 Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
 Fool, said my muse to me, look in thy heart and write.

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
From *Astrophil and Stella*

Who will in fairest book of Nature know,
 How Virtue may best lodged in beauty be,

Which breaks the clouds and opens forth the light,
 That doth both shine and give us sight to see.
 O take fast hold; let that light be thy guide
 In this small course which birth draws out to death,
 And think how evil becometh him to slide,
 Who seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath.
 Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see;
 Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
 I all alone bewep my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,
 And look upon myself and curse my fate,
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least—
 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate.
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red.
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks.
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
 I grant I never saw a goddess go,

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My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by Heaven, I think my loves as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

JOHN MILTON

On the Late Massacre in Piedmont

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
 Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;
 Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old,
 When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,
 Forget not: in thy book record their groans
 Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold
 Slain by the bloody Piedmontese, that rolled
 Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
 The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
 To heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
 O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway
 The triple Tyrant; that from these may grow
 A hundred fold, who, having learnt thy way,
 Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

MARILYN NELSON WANIEK

Chopin

It's Sunday evening. Pomp holds the receipts
 of all the colored families on the Hill
 in his wide lap, and shows which white store cheats
 these patrons, who can't read a weekly bill.
 His parlor's full of men holding their hats
 and women who admire his girls' good hair.
 Pomp warns them not to vote for Democrats,
 controlling half of Hickman from his chair.
 The varying degrees of cheating seen,
 he nods toward the piano. Slender, tall,
 a Fisk girl passing-white, almost nineteen,
 his Blanche folds the piano's paisley shawl
 and plays Chopin. And blessed are the meek
 who have to buy in white men's stores next week.

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