



## *Writing Exercises*

*from Mark Jarman,*

*author of **Bone Fires: New and Selected Poems***

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**1** Take a poem you wish you had written—a poem you love and marvel at—and go ahead and try to write your version of it. This occurs in poetry more often than you might think. “Sailing to Byzantium” is W. B. Yeats’s version of John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” for example, and “The Windhover” is clearly Gerard Manley Hopkins’ version of the Keats poem. I had long admired and marveled at “Home Burial” by Robert Frost. But it was not until I began to write “Questions for Ecclesiastes” that I was able to recognize that it was my version of Frost’s great poem. This might seem like a tall order and much more than an exercise. But it’s worth it, even if it takes you a lifetime.

**2** For a more modest and doable exercise, write a sonnet, then cut it in half. Throw one half away and see if you can make the remaining seven lines work on their own. Or save both halves and make them into separate short poems.

## *Author Interview*

**What is the role of history in your poetry?**

I like to situate my poems in a historical moment, but to focus on insignificant lives, like the lives of my own family, as they encounter experiences which to them have great resonance in their own history—even as larger events are taking place, usually elsewhere and out of the picture. I think most of us regard our lives in this way, despite the insistent updates of the news.

**Is your family an important source and subject for your poetry?**

My family, grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, my wife and children are my most important source and subject for my poetry. I think of my poetry as a way of recording and preserving their lives, even when the preserving records are the most minor and incomplete fragments of those lives, all precious to me.

**You seem to have two principal settings for your poems, California and Scotland. Is that true?**

My childhood was divided between the two contrasting places, one a linoleum factory town on the North Sea, the other a rather seedy beach town on Santa Monica Bay. My father, a minister, served churches in both places. So they have meaning for me as places where memorable things occurred, which keep returning in memory, and which I understand a little more or a little differently every time they return. I have also written a lot about the mid-South where I have lived now for 30 years. But my first places are these two insignificant locations, Redondo Beach, California, and Kirkcaldy, Scotland—though very significant to me.

**You have been associated with the New Formalism, yet looking through this collection, I see work in traditional forms, like the sonnet, only becoming prominent in your fifth book, published almost 20 years after your first book. Could you explain?**

I served my apprenticeship to poetry, when I was in high school and college, imitating the masters of form like W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, and Richard Wilbur. But when I set about to write seriously, I thought I had to put away this apprenticeship. I engaged form in earnest when writing the poems for *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, particularly the Unholy Sonnets. I was finally taking a good hard look at the nature of my religious faith, after years of being a lapsed Christian. In order to write about that, to challenge myself, and, as paradoxical as it may seem, to avoid sentimentality and bad faith, I turned to strict traditional form. The sonnet seemed to be the most demanding, because it would not allow you to hide and its 14-line, dialectical form, with rhyme scheme and iambic meter, carried a great weight of tradition, of excellence that had to be met. The sonnet is actually wide open. Anyone can see whether what you have to say is fake or for real. You're naked in a sonnet.

**How does narrative poetry, with which you are also associated, fit in here?**

I agree with Dylan Thomas that all poems are essentially narrative, if for no other reason than that the syntax of the English sentence is essentially narrative. There was a period when I believed that narrative had the same formal properties as, say, a traditional form like the sonnet. For example, I think the sonnet is a paradigm not only of the short lyric, the little song, but of a kind of thinking. If you could write a narrative poem of any length, you would discover some secret of the language and of experience. Why are we attracted to the form of the story in so many ways? We may enjoy seeing a narrative disrupted and subverted, but only as long as we can still recognize it. The poems I wrote for *The Black Riviera* and some of those for *Questions for Ecclesiastes* were deliberate experiments in narration. But the fact is that my poetry has always been autobiographical in nature and essentially narrative. I have always been fascinated by the stories of my family I heard while growing up and the events I saw happening in my family, especially those which I recognized had narrative shape when I was older. This now has extended to my wife and daughters who are the subjects of many of my poems, for reasons I hope are obvious. For several years now I have recognized that poetry exists for that lyric impulse, that desire to sing. Narrative is one of the modes of poetry, but not the only one or the essential one. Still I believe a poem is the story of a feeling. A story can be told without narration.

**What role has the Bible and its stories played in your poetry?**

I can't remember a time when I was not aware of the Bible and the words of scripture. Learning to memorize scripture was a discipline at my house, and I was taught my grandfather's method (my grandfather like my father was a preacher) of physical activity, like walking, while committing scripture to memory. My second book, *The Rote Walker*, takes its title from that exercise. An early memory of mine is of the entrance hall of the manse in Scotland where we lived, with its floral carpet runner underfoot, as I added stanzas of a Psalm – the Scottish Psalms were translated into common measure – walking up and down until I had the text fully in memory. In Redondo Beach, where we lived in California after returning from Scotland, I could memorize a Gospel passage as I walked to Sunday school in the morning. All my life I have had an ongoing, ever changing relationship with the words and events, stories and poetry of the Bible. And at different times in my life, particularly my writing life, scripture has moved me into a state that I think of as an anteroom of wonder and thoughtfulness which sometimes leads to poetry. Reading and listening to scripture for me is like being in the presence of any oracular source. Though I have poems in which I am deliberately engaging a book from the Bible, like the title poem of *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, or the letters of the New Testament, like the poems in *Epistles*, scripture and its influence are present in all of my poetry, if you know where to look and what to listen for.

**So, are you happy to be identified as a Christian poet?**

Yes, of course. The poems I wrote for *Questions for Ecclesiastes* not only put me in touch again with the faith I thought I had put aside, if not lost, but they led me back to the church. My poems do not exclusively deal with religious matters, as I have tried to suggest already. But seeing the ways in which God may intersect with a Godless world never ceases to amaze me. And thinking

of the ways in which so much about religious faith—any religious faith—goes on in subconscious ways, or the way prayer springs up unbidden at times of great joy or great distress, the way prayer is always available, waiting as I believe God waits for us. All this also amazes me. “Called or not called, God is present” wrote Carl Jung over the lintel of his door. St. Augustine was also compelled by this insight. I think it was Elaine Pagels who speculated that one of the great staying powers of Christianity is the belief of Christians that Christ is present in everyday life, always at hand, and understands what it is to live our lives. I think about these things, but also I have to admit my thinking is imbued with doubt. The religious poetry I most value is a struggle with doubt.

**Could you say a little something about each of the books selected from for this volume and about the section of new poems?**

North Sea, my first book, mainly deals with poems about my childhood in Scotland, especially with the experience of being foreign, something I have not forgotten. My second book, *The Rote Walker*, I think of as “Memoirs of a Protestant Boyhood,” after the Mary McCarthy book, *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*. Readers who would like to characterize me early in my career as a religious poet tend to miss the cultural focus in that book. There is nothing devotional about its poems. *Far and Away* was my next book, and it is a frankly nostalgic record of growing up in what was called the South Bay, in Southern California. And yet I knew I wasn’t the only poet who had a strong memory of a former place and its people. That’s why I could imagine one poem as “Cavafy in Redondo.” Redondo was my little Alexandria. As always, minor and insignificant in comparison with that ancient Byzantine relic, C. P. Cavafy’s city. *The Black Riviera* collected my experiments in narrative and was dedicated to my friend and colleague Robert McDowell. In the 1980’s we edited *The Reaper* together, and dedicated the magazine to narrative poetry. Both of us did a lot of work with narrative in that time. That book was followed by a book length poem called *Iris*. I haven’t included anything from *Iris* here. It would have been impossible. *Iris* is a narrative poem based on my maternal grandmother’s life and also the lives of several young women students I taught in western Kentucky. My character reads the poetry of Robinson Jeffers and imagines how he would have written one of his long narratives about someone like her. In fact, *Iris* is the poem Jeffers might have written about my character Iris. After *Iris* came *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, with its religious emphasis, and after that, *Unholy Sonnets*, an extension of the series of 20 sonnets in *Questions for Ecclesiastes*. I called my series “Unholy Sonnets” to distinguish them from John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” which served as models for a few of them. I wanted to avoid any sense of piety and to offer an invitation to readers who might not believe as I did. My first Sarabande Press book followed, and it was *To the Green Man*. This book expresses a kind of universalism in terms of religious faith. The green man is a pre-Christian seasonal god, a wild man on the fringes of society, and discovering him while I lived in England one year with my wife and children led me to recognize the many forms of religious faith that exist in human society, and also more specifically the way Christianity successfully adapted itself to the seasonal religions of Europe. The book collects poems that recognize the universal aspiration of human faith. And my most recent collection is *Epistles*, a group of prose poems loosely based on the letters of the New Testament, particularly though not exclusively those of St. Paul. Whereas St. Paul and his fellow letter writers meant their epistles to be read by the small, incipient communities of Christians growing up around the Mediterranean in the first 100 years of the Common Era, my epistles are meant to be read by anyone who wants to think with me about mortality, identity, community and selfhood, eternity and death, and really all sorts of things, including trees, birds, clouds, waves, and life on the street.

**And what about your new poems?**

The new poems which begin *Bone Fires* are, in every instance, announcements of subjects and themes to come in the rest of the book. In form they recall poems from every collection of mine, and yet I like to think they have a novel and yet mature sense of lyricism. I hope, to steal a phrase from James Wright, a poet I love, that they are the poems of a grown man. The title poem itself tries to take a long view of historical and religious practices and remind readers of how often in history the tragic and horrific is commemorated with celebration. I suppose one of my hopes as a poet is to delve into some custom or historical assumption or conventional feeling and remind the reader of its original impulse or source, of its beginning, bloody, banal, or unpoetic as it may be.

## So what is next for you in your poetry?

For years I had a project for each book or at least a sense that the poems I was writing over a given period would find some formal or thematic kinship among themselves and show me eventually how they went together. Lately I have been following where the spirit listeth without any particular project. The same things continue to lead me to the threshold of a poem, but lately the shape of that poem has been different. Shorter lyric poems, toying with the epigrammatic, seeking the epiphanic. I don't know. I keep hoping to surprise myself.

## Suggested Reading

"Holy Sonnets," John Donne  
*Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning  
"The Terrible Sonnets," Gerard Manley Hopkins  
*North of Boston*, Robert Frost  
*The Collected Poems*, Theodore Roethke  
*Life Studies*, Robert Lowell  
"Eleven Addresses to the Lord," John Berryman  
*The Complete Poems*, Elizabeth Bishop  
*1933*, Philip Levine  
*Two Citizens*, James Wright

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