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Titles, Beginnings, Turns, and Endings
a workshop offered by the Orange County Library in Hillsborough, NC

TITLES

Perhaps the first job of any title is to be interesting. Whether the title tells us what the poem is about or doesn't give us the least hint, the title that catches someone's eye as she scans the table of contents in a book or journal becomes the poem mostly likely to be read. Remember that if you treat your titles as unimportant, readers might, too.

"Taboo Against the Word *Beauty*, Brief Version Full of Grace" (Allen Braden)

"Co-Evolution: Seduction" (Pattiann Rogers)

"Application for Release from the Dream" (Tony Hoagland)

"All of a Sudden, I See, and My Heart Sinks" (Sharon Olds)

"Tree, Salt, Sea" (Rebecca Baggett)

"June/July—Eleven Black Notebooks at the Desert Queen Motel" (Frank Gaspar)

"First Thoughts About God After Spying a Speckled Trout Eat a Green Drake" (Todd Davis)

Titles Can:

1) Titles can deliver information that then isn't needed in the poem, perhaps one or more of the 4 W's of journalism: who, what, where, when. Notice which of the titles below pique your curiosity, startle you, draw you in, and which seem just serviceable. Ellen Bass says the poet's first job is to "be interesting." A 4W title doesn't have to be factual and grounded in reality—it can be fanciful, bizarre, metaphorical. And of course poems are not journalistic in nature. While they may tell a story, they can also explore other questions like why and how.

"Bakersfield, 1969" (Dorianne Laux)--where, when

"The Satanist Next Door" (Stephanie Brown)--who, where

"Lucky" (Tony Hoagland)--what

"Relax" (Ellen Bass)--what

"Don't Say Love Just Signal" (Tyree Daye)--what

“Pluto Shits on the Universe” (Fatimah Asghar)—who, what, where

“The Russian Greatcoat” (Theodore Deppe)--what

“The Wooden Overcoat” (Rick Barot)--what

“Hanging the Wash at Midnight” (Rebecca Baggett)--what, when

“Ode to the Tampon” (Sharon Olds)--what and what

“Searching for Pittsburgh” (Jack Gilbert)--what, where

“To Roanoke with Johnny Cash” (Bob Hicok)--where, who

“The Ex” (Gray Jacobik)--who

“Your Life As Found in a Toolbox” (Allen Braden)--what, where

“Working the Red Eye, Pittsburgh to Vegas” (Lori Jakiela)--what, where

“Back When I Was Younger and Could Still Fly” (Ran Diego Russell)--when, what

“How to Cook a Wolf” (Adrian Blevins)--what

“I Promise I’m More Bewildered than the Bats” (Brett Hanley)--who, what

“At the End of Our Marriage, in the Backyard” (Maggie Smith)--when, who, where

“Tomato Warnings and Other Things I’m Thankful For” (Jennifer Stewart Miller)--what, who

“First Thoughts About God After Spying a Speckled Trout Eat a Green Drake” (Todd Davis)--what, when

Ask yourself which of these titles you’d be most likely to read first:

“The Girl” or “The Red-Headed Girl in the Green Shirt”

“In the Forest” or “Dancing Naked Under the Oaks”

Just as in the body of a poem, specificity in a title can create more interest.

2) They can raise questions in readers’ minds that we want to see resolved. Though it’s not necessarily the poem’s job to resolve every question, the title can serve as a lure to draw us in:

“Those Winter Sundays” (Robert Hayden)

“Telling My Mother” (Sharon Olds)

“This Sort of Thing Happens All the Time” (Maggie Smith)

“Mostly Mick Jagger” (Catie Rosemurgy)

3) They can be intriguing without giving us a clear idea what the poem’s about:

“Holy Heathen Rhapsody” (Pattiann Rogers)

“Earth-Night Errors” (Pattiann Rogers)

“Late Rapturous” (Frank Gaspar)

“Hammond B-3 Organ Cistern” (Gabrielle Calvocoressi)

“You did not Sell - the Blueing -” (Sharon Olds)

“Ballad of EIGHMIWAY” (Sharon Olds)

“Wife for Scale” (Maggie Smith)

“Litany Ending with a Taste of Nectar” (Allen Braden)

4) They can surprise or confound by stepping out of the expected:

“How to Cook a Wolf” (Adrian Blevins)

“Cause of Death: Fox News” (Tony Hoagland)

“Priest Turned Therapist Treats Fear of God” (Tony Hoagland)

“My Head and My Mother’s Breast in Quarantine Together” (Sharon Olds)

5) Titles can contain a story that then isn’t told (or told in full) in the poem:

“When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving” (Reginald Dwayne Betts)--The story of Tamir Rice’s murder by a Chicago policeman is well known, so Betts is able to reflect on it without giving a news report first.

6) Titles can can riff on or give a nod to something known in the culture, though the poet may or may not explain the reference in the body of the poem:

“Blueberries for Cal” (Brenda Shaughnessey)--“Blueberries for Sal” is a well-known children’s book, though you don’t need to know that to enjoy and to “get” Shaughnessey’s poem. She does not reference “Blueberries for Sal” in her poem.

“I’d rather be influenced” (Patrick Ramsay) refers to internet influencers. Without mentioning them any further, they appear in the poem by way of the list of things the speaker says he would rather be influenced to choose or do.

7) Titles can convey an atmosphere or mood: humor, darkness, cheer, mystery, dread, delight, etc.

“Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude” (Ross Gay)

“Ode on Melancholy” (John Keats)

“Field of Skulls” (Mary Karr)

8) They can convey an emotion: happiness, sadness, grief, fear, joy, calm, etc.

“Happiness” (Jane Kenyon)

“River of Anguish” (Catherine Carter)

“All day I have been pining for the past” (Rebecca Baggett)

“Talking to Grief” (Denise Levertov)

“Joy” (Pam Baggett)

“Hope” (Tony Hoagland)

“Possum. Coyote. Grief.” (Pam Baggett)

“Days of Grief and Rage” (Craig McLaughlin)

9) They can be honest, fearless, sexy, sassy, etc.

“Emmett Till’s name still catches in my throat” (Marilyn Nelson)

“Woman, 41, with a History of Alzheimer’s on Both Sides of Her Family” (Maggie Smith)

“Why the Marriage Failed” (Adrian Blevins)

“First Sex After Divorce” (January Gill O’Neil)

“Ms. Turbation” (Sharon Olds)

“Unable to Amend My Life I Began Another Book” (Frank Gaspar)

“After the Operation, I Find I Like Sleeping Alone” (Barbara Crooker)

“Waiting to Hear If a Friend’s Wife Has Cancer” (Todd Davis)

[I aborted two daughters] (Diane Seuss)--technically untitled, her sonnets are listed by the first words of the first line in the table of contents of her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, “frank: sonnets.” When listed this way, the opening words are bracketed.

10) Titles can issue an instruction or command. Sometimes these are used for instructional poems, but not always. Nor are instructional titles necessarily tied to an instructional style in the body of the poem.

“Relax” (Ellen Bass)

“Don’t Say Love Just Signal” (Tyree Daye)

“Listen” (W.S. Merwin)

“How to Write a Love Letter to Your Brother” (Chris Abani)

“Try to Praise the Mutilated World” (Adam Zagajewski / Translated by Clare Cavanagh)

11) A title can reflect the intention of the poem:

“In Gratitude” (Abigail Carroll)

“A Poem in which I Try to Express My Glee at the Music My Friend Has Given Me” (Ross Gay)

12) Or it can mislead, point in a direction away from or even opposite of where the poem goes. The title can misdirect in a way that creates intrigue, mystery, drama, or tension that the reader wants to see resolved. It can create an expectation that is either reversed immediately in the opening line(s) or further along as the poem develops.

“Thankful” (Patricia Smith from *Blood Dazzler*)

“What Did I Love” (Ellen Bass)

“Hammond B-3 Organ Cistern” (Gabrielle Calvocoressi)

“A Love Poem for My Muse” (Pam Baggett)

Why are you such a tight-lipped she-hag, anyway?
Why do you only speak when I’m doing something else,
no pen in sight? I burned my toast this morning
scrambling around for paper, ate cold eggs, scribbling...

13) Titles can be shocking, provocative, transgressive of social boundaries regarding politeness or things we normally don't talk about:

“Ode to the Tampon” (Sharon Olds)

“Ice Jesus” (John Hoppenthaler)

“Crazy Motherfucker Weather” (Tony Hoagland)

“Petrified Fetus Found In Sixty-Year-Old Argentine Widow” (Susan Elizabeth Howe)

“I Long to Hold the Poetry Editor's Penis in My Hand” (Francesca Bell)

14) They can add weight, gravitas, an additional layer of complexity:

“A Brief for the Defense” (Jack Gilbert) rather than just “A Defense of Delight” (which is what Gilbert is defending in the poem)

“The Estate of Solemnity” (Pattiann Rogers)

In the poem, Rogers beautifully describes various solemn things in nature, like Spanish moss, stalagmites, the moon.

15) Titles can take advantage of the fact that as humans we're curious (even nosy) about one another:

“Lies I Told My Third Child” (Rebecca Faust)

“won't you celebrate with me” (Lucille Clifton)

“What I Believe” (Kimberly Blaeser)

16) Titles can lead straight into the poem, i.e. the title is the first line of the poem:

“Not everything is a poem” (Maggie Smith)

Jeanne Wagner

My mother was like the bees

because she needed a lavish taste
on her tongue,
a daily tippie of amber and gold
to waft her into the sky,
a soluble heat trickling down her throat...

17) A title can be one word, which means the poem may need to gather force quickly (i.e. be interesting) to hook readers in the opening lines:

“Lucky” (Tony Hoagland)

“Shoulders” (Naomi Shehab Nye)

“Indigo” (Ellen Bass)

“Besaydoo” (Yalie Saweda Kamara)

18) One-word titles that have more than one meaning in the poem:

“Foundations” (Pam Baggett)

19) Titles can be long, even super-long, for effect:

“A Lesson in Mercy from My Wife, on the Last Day of May” (Todd Davis)

“So Says Cleopatra, Reincarnated as a Hippy Chick, Circa 1968” (Barbara Hamby)

“This Is Why People Burning Down Fast Food Joints and Whatnot” (Jacqueline Allen Trimble)

“A Poem in which I Try to Express My Glee at the Music My Friend Has Given Me” (Ross Gay)

“A Collection of Dangerous Things Interspersed with Things Occasionally Fine or Good” (Margaret Ray)

“Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation” (Natalie Diaz) (Note: Rezervation is spelled like this in the title.)

“Ode to Diagramming Sentences in Eighth-Grade English Class with Moonlight, Drugs, and Stars” (Barbara Hamby)

“Ode to Anglo Saxon, Film Noir, and the Hundred Thousand Anxieties that Plague Me like Demons in a Medieval Christian Allegory” (Barbara Hamby)

“While Desdemona Waits for the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act to Move to the Senate, She Addresses the Man Outside” (Tara Ballard)

20) The title can work as a refrain:

Jane Kenyon
Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon

shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come...

The phrase "Let evening come" appears four times in the body of the poem, and the phrase "let it come" appears once.

21) The title can be a word or phrase from the poem:

Li-Young Lee
From Blossoms

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted *Peaches*. ...

Ellen Bass
Indigo

As I'm walking on West Cliff Drive, a man runs
toward me pushing one of those jogging strollers
with shock absorbers so the baby can keep sleeping,
which this baby is. I can just get a glimpse
of its almost translucent eyelids. The father is young,
a jungle of indigo and carnelian tattooed
from knuckle to jaw, leafy vines and blossoms...

Wendell Berry
The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Frank X Gaspar
Late Rapturous

Well, the cold iron wind and the Hudson River from whence it blew, thirteen degrees on all the instruments and water in my eyes, but there was a fire someplace, it made my ears burn and sting, and me buffoonish in my old dirty down parka that I used to sleep in up in the Sierras with my little tent in the snow — I'd go in on skis by myself and write haiku in the candlelight because I believed such things would improve my inner being. But now I was leaning sideways walking up to 54th street to finally have a look at the de Kooning. I don't know what I expected, I don't know what I was looking for exactly, except that I'd seen too many prints, too many cramped photos, and I wanted the full brunt of it, that late rapturous style, that sexual...

22) Sometimes a poem doesn't get much power from its title. Sometimes what you have is the best you can do, in which case we do two things: Remember that perfect is the enemy of good enough, and take the advice of William Stafford, who said (a rough quote), "When the work isn't going well, lower your standards." By which he meant, keep writing. :)

"June" vs "Late June" (Pam Baggett)

The title didn't stop "Late June" from being published in *Poetry East* :)

23) Leaving a Poem Untitled

You can, but maybe have a reason for missing the opportunities a title offers. Traditionally, sonnets were untitled, and some people still follow that convention.

24) Using the Same Title or a Variation on a Title Repeatedly, possibly for a book:

Bastards of the Reagan Era (Reginald Dwayne Betts)

Late Rapturous (Frank Gaspar)

A Wreath of Down and Drops of Blood (Allen Braden)

Balladz (Sharon Olds)

25) Questions to ask yourself about your titles (or to use when critiquing other people's poems):

--Generally, does the title do what you want it to do?

--Is the title intriguing? Will it draw readers in? Or is it just a serviceable title, a cart, not a chariot? If so, does that work for the poem? Do your opening lines then do the work of getting readers intrigued by your poem?

--Is it possible to get your title to do more work?

--If not, is it good enough (remembering that perfection is unattainable and the enemy of good enough)?

--If the title suggests sentimentality, i.e. "Remembering Grandma and Granddaddy," what work have you done in the body of the poem to leaven that effect?

--Are the title and last line working together? Does the last line lead back to the title in a way that's meaningful and makes readers want to read the poem again? Is that important to you?

--Does the title limit the poem? Is that serving you, or does it keep you from fully exploring what the poem wants to be?

--Does the title fit the poem after the poem has been revised?

--Is there a line in the body of the poem that would make a great title? (If so, do you still want it in the body of the poem? Both yes or no are valid answers.)

--Would the last line work as a title?

--Would the first line work as the title? Is this the best choice? Or are you choosing this because you've given up on finding a better title? In which case, should you try again? Or is it a case of enough's enough, life is short, and I'm done beating my head over this title? :)

Example:

Ada Limon
What I Didn't Know Before

was how horses simply give birth to other
horses. Not a baby by any means, not...

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BEGINNINGS

1) Narrative:

Natasha Trethewey
History Lesson

I am four in this photograph, standing
on a wide strip of Mississippi beach,
my hands on the flowered hips

of a bright bikini. My toes dig in,
curl around wet sand. The sun cuts
the rippling Gulf in flashes with each
tidal rush. Minnows dart at my feet...

Danusha Lameris
Bonfire Opera

In those days, there was a woman in our circle
who was known, not only for her beauty,
but for taking off all her clothes and singing opera.
And sure enough, as the night wore on and the stars
emerged to stare at their reflections on the sea,
and everyone had drunk a little wine,
she began to disrobe, loose her great bosom,
and the tender belly, pale in the moonlight, ...

Danusha Lameris
Omens

Out here, we read everything as a sign.
The coyote in its scuffed coat,
bending to eat a broken persimmon on the ground.
The mess of crows that fills the apple tree,

makes a racket, lifts off.
In between, quiet.

High Dangerous
Catherine Pierce

is what my sons call the flowers—
purple, white, electric blue—

pom-pomming bushes all along
the beach town streets.

I can't correct them into
hydrangeas, or I won't. ...

Reginald Dwayne Betts
When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving

in the backseat of my car are my own sons,
still not yet Tamir's age, already having heard
me warn them against playing with toy pistols,
though my rhetoric is always about what I don't
like, not what I fear, because sometimes
I think of Tamir Rice & shed tears...

Joy Harjo
Bird

The moon plays horn, leaning on the shoulder of the dark universe
to the infinite glitter of chance. Tonight I watched Bird kill himself,

larger than real life. I've always had a theory that some of us
are born with nerve endings longer than our bodies. Out to here,

farther than his convoluted scales could reach. Those nights he
played did he climb the stairway of forgetfulness, with his horn, ...

Pattiann Rogers
The hummingbird: a seduction

If I were a female hummingbird perched still
And quiet on an upper myrtle branch
In the spring afternoon and if you were a male
Alone in the whole heavens before me, having parted
Yourself, for me, from cedar top and honeysuckle stem
And earth down, your body hovering in midair
Far away from jewelweed, thistle and bee balm;
And if I watched how you fell, plummeting before me,
And how you rose again and fell, with such mastery
That I believed for a moment *you* were the sky...

The poem goes on for nine more lines before it turns to:

Then when you came down to me, I would call you
My own spinning bloom of ruby sage, my funneling
Storm of sunlit sperm and pollen, my only breathless
Piece of scarlet sky, and I would bless the base
Of each of your feathers and touch the tine...

To shorten it:

If I were a female hummingbird perched still
And quiet on an upper myrtle branch...

Then when you came down to me, I would call you
My own spinning bloom of ruby sage, my funneling...

2) Narrative Conversational Openings:

A Stand of Cottonwood
Carl Dennis

I'm glad to be here, amid these cottonwood trees,
Feeling the wind from the lake on my face,
Sniffing the marsh smells and lake smells
As I listen to the calls of unseen shorebirds.
And I'm glad as well to acknowledge my civic coordinates:
To be standing fifty yards from the Coast Guard Station
Barely half a mile from downtown Buffalo, ...

Rebecca Baggett
Testimony
(for my daughters)

I want to tell you
that the world is still beautiful.
I tell you that despite
children raped on city streets,
shot down in school rooms,
despite the slow poisons seeping
from old and hidden sins
into our air, soil, water...

Naomi Shehab Nye
For Mohammed Zeid of Gaza, Age 15

There is no stray bullet, sirs.
No bullet like a worried cat
crouching under a bush,
no half-hairless puppy bullet
dodging midnight streets.
The bullet could not be a pecan
plunking the tin roof,
not hardly, no fluff of pollen
on October's breath,
no humble pebble at our feet...

Cecily Parks
Vessel

Little canoe, you
predict paddling, rapids and pockets
of still water. The river bends

for you—along swallow-
perforated sandstone, past the cow skull flush
with lupine. Trembling, ...

Conversation
Tom Sleigh

When David asks, "Where does the saying 'She still has
her marbles' come from?" I'd been talking about my ma,

who's 94, same as David, though David said,
"I'm 94 and four months, so she's still a child."...

3) Lyric Conversational:

Kimberly Blaeser
What I Believe

after Michael Blumenthal

I believe the weave of cotton
will support my father's knees,
but no indulgences will change hands.

I believe nothing folds easily,
but that time will crease—
retrain the mind.

I believe in the arrowheads of words
and I believe in silence. ...

From the Academy of American Poets: "Lyric poetry refers to a short poem, often with songlike qualities, that expresses the speaker's personal emotions and feelings. Historically intended to be sung and accompany musical instrumentation, lyric now describes a broad category of non-narrative poetry, including elegies, odes, and sonnets."

4) Of course, our poems don't necessarily fit into neat categories. They can be and often are hybrids of narrative and lyric, a mix of narrative, concrete image and metaphorical ones, and thoughts/feelings:

Paul Monette
Here

everything extraneous has burned away
this is how burning feels in the fall
of the final year not like leaves in a blue
October but as if the skin were a paper lantern
full of trapped moths beating their fired wings
and yet I can lie on this hill just above you
a foot beside where I will lie myself
soon soon and for all the wrack and blubber
feel still how we were warriors when the
merest morning sun in the garden was a

kingdom after Room 1010 war is not all
death it turns out war is what little
thing you hold on to refuged and far from home...

5) Conversational poems can begin at the beginning, or they can begin *in media res*, in the middle of the action, sometimes indicated by an opening conjunction.

Seamus Heaney
Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild...

Stephen Dunn
And So

And so you call your best friend
who's away, just to hear his voice,
but forget his recording concludes
with "Have a nice day."

Matthew Olzmann
Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem

So here's what I've got, the reasons why our marriage
might work: Because you wear pink but write poems
about bullets and gravestones. Because you yell
at your keys when you lose them, and laugh,
loudly, at your own jokes. Because you can hold a pistol...

Compare to:

Danusha Laméris
Berkeley

And then there were those winters in Berkeley
(if you can call them winters) rain falling sideways
against the brown shingled houses along Benvenue,

La Mediterranée with its little wrought iron tables
covered in tile. Sipping lemon chicken soup
and reading Vonnegut. I loved the decay...

6) Conversational beginnings that literally include conversation:

Natasha Trethewey
Flounder

*Here, she said, put this on your head.
She handed me a hat.
You 'bout as white as your dad,
and you gone stay like that.*

Aunt Sugar rolled her nylons down
around each bony ankle,
and I rolled down my white knee socks
letting my thin legs dangle...

Stephanie Pruitt
Mississippi Gardens

*slaves, she answers, as I sink
my fingers beneath the roots.*

the knees of that blue housedress are threadbare.
she wears it on Tuesdays and Fridays when we tend the flowers.,,

Stephanie Brown
The Satanist Next Door

What is that? Is that a kid? Is that Tom?

No, it's her.

Eew, I think that's a whip.
No, it's a hand coming down hard.
No, listen, there's like a wind-sound to it.

I need to go to the bathroom.

That one was fake.

Are you still awake? ...

7) Epistolary (Letter Poems):

Matthew Olzmann

Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now

Most likely, you think we hated the elephant,
the golden toad, the thylacine and all variations
of whale harpooned or hacked into extinction.

It must seem like we sought to leave you nothing
but benzene, mercury, the stomachs
of seagulls rippled with jet fuel and plastic.

You probably doubt that we were capable of joy,
but I assure you we were. ...

Susan Laughter Meyers (from the book, *My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass*)
Dear Yellow Speed Bump

One summer night a friend, on a dare,
played your game with other friends,
lying down across the narrow mountain road
and telling their best secrets. First kiss,...

Susan Laughter Meyers
Dear Heavy Traffic

Mornings I rise and hear you faintly,
close my eyes to pretend you're the sea.
Wave after wave, swells and lulls...

Susan Laughter Meyers
Dear Great Crested Flycatcher

Dusk, and the sound that pulls me:
your *wheep*

of a whistle. Before me the fringe tree
in full bloom. ...

Sharon Olds
Ode to Dirt

Dear dirt, I am sorry I slighted you,
I thought that you were only the background
for the leading characters—the plants
and animals and human animals.
It's as if I had loved only the stars
and not the sky which gave them space
in which to shine. Subtle, various,
sensitive, you are the skin of our terrain,

8) Interrogative/Inquisitive Beginnings:

May Swenson
Question

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt...

Walt Whitman
Miracles

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water...

Jacqueline Allen Trimble
This Is Why People Burning Down Fast Food Joints and Whatnot

Q. *How do others sin against you?*

A. By cursing me—telling lies about me—or striking me.

Q. What must you do to those who thus sin against you?

A. I must forgive them. *

See, I learned my catechism well.
Learned to offer my cloak and coat, my cheek
again and again as the skin was splayed
from my body. I can quote
Martin Luther King Jr. with ease...

Trimble opens with a question and quote from the catechism below that is used as a footnote to the poem: *A Catechism, to Be Taught Orally to Those Who Cannot Read; Designed Especially for the Instruction of the Slaves in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States.↵

9) Image-Based Beginnings:

Jack Gilbert
A Brief For The Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not...

Sharon Olds
Ode to the Tampon

Inside-out clothing;
queen's robe;
white-jacketed worker who clears the table
prepared for the feast which goes uneaten;
hospital orderly; straitjacket
which takes into its folded wings
the spirit of the uncapturable one;
soldier's coat;
dry dock for the boat not taken;...

Kim Addonizio
High Desert, New Mexico

Temple of the rattlesnake's religion.
Deluge and heat-surge. Crèche of the atom's
rupture. Night blackens like a violin
and bright flour falls from the kitchens of heaven...

Pam Baggett
Get This Through Your Head

She's dead. Dead as a doorknocker.
Dead as canned tuna. Bloodless as a Sixties
re-run with the sound turned off. Late
as Hendrix, Joplin, Jim Morrison,
Brian Jones. Dead as the Grateful,
as disco and add-a-beads. She's *muerta*...

Chris Abani
White Egret

The whole earth is filled with the love of God.
Kwame Dawes

A stream in a forest and a boy fishing,
heart aflame, head hush, tasking the world—
lick and pant. The Holy Scripture
is animal not book. ...

Leila Chatti
I Went Out to Hear

The sound of quiet. The sky
indigo, steeping
deeper from the top, like tea. ...

Jack Gilbert
Searching For Pittsburgh

The fox pushes softly, blindly through me at night,
between the liver and the stomach. Comes to the heart
and hesitates. Considers and then goes around it.
Trying to escape the mildness of our violent world.
Goes deeper, searching for what remains of Pittsburgh
in me. The rusting mills sprawled gigantically...

The poem opens with a metaphorical, internal fox, then turns to images of Pittsburgh. More from the poem below, because I just had to share this:

Locomotives driving through the cold rain,
lordly and bestial in their strength. Massive water
flowing morning and night throughout a city
girded with ninety bridges. Sumptuous-shouldered,
sleek-thighed, obstinate and majestic, unquenchable.
All grip and flood, mighty sucking and deep-rooted grace....

10) Musical Beginnings:

Stephen Dobyns
How To Like It

These are the first days of fall. The wind
at evening smells of roads still to be traveled,
while the sound of leaves blowing across the lawns
is like an unsettled feeling in the blood,
the desire to get in a car and just keep driving...

Danez Smith
The 17-Year-Old & the Gay Bar

this gin-heavy heaven, blessed ground to think *gay* & mean *we*.
bless the fake id & the bouncer who knew
this need to be needed, to belong, to know how
a man taste full on vodka & free of sin. i know not which god to pray to. ...

Patricia Smith
Black, Poured Directly into the Wound

Prairie winds blaze through her tumbled belly, and Emmett's
red yesterdays refuse to rename her any kind of mother.
A pudgy-cheeked otherwise, sugar whistler, her boy is
(through the fierce clenching mouth of her memory) a
grays-and-shadows child. *Listen*. Once she was pretty. ...

Patricia Smith
Katrina

I was birthed restless and elsewhere

gut dragging and bulging with ball lightning, slush,
broke through with branches, steel...

Adrian Blevins
How to Cook a Wolf

If your mother's like mine wanting you honeyed and blithe
you'll get cooked by getting evicted

since the mothers can teach with a dustpan the tons of modes of tossing. ...

Adrian Blevins
Hey You

Back when my head like an egg in a nest
was vowel-keen and dawdling, I shed my slick beautiful
and put it in a basket and laid it barefaced at the river
among the taxing rocks. My beautiful was all hush
and glitter. It was too moist to grasp. My beautiful
had no tongue with which to lick—no discernable...

Laura Newton
Bird Canticle

Let there be multitudes of birds
in the backpacks and tents under our bed.
Let them fan the small campfire of our sleep. ...

Let Carolina wrens nest in the empty

guitar cases in the guest room closet.
Let them teach all hollow bodies to sing. ...

11) Didactic/Instructional:

Dorianne Laux
Antilamentation

Regret nothing. Not the cruel novels you read
to the end just to find out who killed the cook, not
the insipid movies that made you cry in the dark,
in spite of your intelligence, your sophistication, not
the lover you left quivering in a hotel parking lot...

W. S. Merwin
Thanks

Listen
with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you...

David Wagoner
The Principles of Concealment

If you're caught in the open
In an exposed position, alone,
Disarmed, and certain you may be
Attacked at any moment, you should settle quickly
All your difference with whatever lies
Around you, forcing yourself to agree
With rocks and bushes, trees and wild grass,
Horses, cows, or sheep, even debris...

Mary Oliver
Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves...

(the indented line is intentional, part of the poem)

Adam Zagajewski
Translated by Clare Cavanagh

Try to Praise the Mutilated World

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of rosé wine.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world. ...

David Welsh (poem in its entirety)
Instructional Ghazal

beginning on a line by Misty Harper

1: on lying

*You will want to make the corners of the mouth
very dark, so the teeth appear asleep and silent inside the mouth.*

2: on breathing

Even coming softly the wind rattles the sills.
The windows whistle a song in parting, like the mouth.

3: on swallowing

Take only the smallest bodies with your tongue: accept
the muscled rules you must maintain inside the mouth.

4: on kissing

I felt your nose like a plum in the dark. Suddenly
I was swimming—unable to breathe or see the mouth. ...

5: on tying

There are three ways you can teethe and three knots: the shoelace, the noose, and the mouth.

6: on loving

If his stomach is the surest path to a man's heart,
you must be sure to take him by the mouth.

7: on closing

In spite of tradition, I'm leaving it open:
[place any name you want in my mouth]

Pam Baggett
Instruction for Caring

Lie often. When she thinks you're her sister Pauline,
talk about growing up on the family farm:
jumping from the hayloft, that unheated bedroom.
About the trip to Atlantic City
where you rode bikes on the boardwalk,
boys you kissed behind the roller skating rink,
the years you worked together in the war factory.

If she refuses cough medicine,
lay a hand on her chest
to show where the sickness is,
speak as her mother, call her Lillian...

12) Openings that reverse the expectations created by the title:

Ellen Bass
Relax

Bad things are going to happen.
Your tomatoes will grow a fungus
and your cat will get run over.
Someone will leave the bag with the ice cream
melting in the car and throw
your blue cashmere sweater in the drier.
Your husband will sleep
with a girl your daughter's age, her breasts spilling
out of her blouse...

Ellen Bass
What Did I Love

What did I love about killing the chickens? Let me start
with the drive to the farm as darkness
was sinking back into the earth...

Tony Hoagland
Lucky

If you are lucky in this life,
you will get to help your enemy
the way I got to help my mother
when she was weakened past the point of saying no...

Barbara Hamby
Ode to Forgetting the Year

Forget the year, the parties where you drank too much,
said what you thought without thinking, danced so hard
you dislocated your hip, fainted in the kitchen,
while Gumbo, your hosts' Jack Russell terrier,
looked you straight in the eye, bloomed into a bodhisattva,
lectured you on the six perfections while drunk people
with melting faces gathered around your shimmering corpse...

Crystal Wilkinson
Asking About My Mother

In the small kitchen, the hog's head weaves
the gamey scent of death throughout the house.
My grandmother scrapes black hair
from the hog's pink head with the sharp blade
of her butcher knife. I ask her about my mother;
I always ask her about my mother. I play paper dolls...

13) Blunt Opening Lines That Surprise or Even Shock:

Crystal Wilkinson
Asking About My Mother

In the small kitchen, the hog's head weaves
the gamey scent of death throughout the house

Maxine Kumin
Woodchucks

Gassing the woodchucks didn't turn out right.
The knockout bomb from the Feed and Grain Exchange
was featured as merciful, quick at the bone
and the case we had against them was airtight,
both exits shoehorned shut with puddingstone,
but they had a sub-sub-basement out of range...

Gabrielle Calvocoressi
Hammond B-3 Organ Cistern

The days I don't want to kill myself
are amazing...

Jericho Brown
Bullet Points

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed...

14) Beginning with an Epigraph:

Grace Schulman
American Solitude

“The cure for loneliness is solitude.”
—Marianne Moore

Hopper never painted this, but here
on a snaky path his vision lingers:

three white tombs, robots with glassed-in faces
and meters for eyes, grim mouths, flat noses,

lean forward on a platform, like strangers
with identical frowns scanning a blur,

far off, that might be their train.
Gas tanks broken for decades face Parson’s

smithy, planked shut now. Both relics must stay.
The pumps have roots in gas pools, and the smithy...

Richard Jones
The Field Trip

visiting the Holocaust Museum
after reading Elie Wiesel’s Night

I enter the empty freight car,
a box that carried many away.
Three girls and two boys—

I’d seen them in another gallery,
walking past the mounds of shoes—
board beside me, the two boys

pushing the giggling girls
up the ramp. In the quiet dark,
the teenagers huddle and whisper...

Carol Ann Duffy (“Anne Hathaway” is the title. She was married to William Shakespeare.)
Anne Hathaway

‘Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed...’
(from Shakespeare’s will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world
of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses...

Fatimah Asghar
Pluto Shits on the Universe

On February 7, 1979, Pluto crossed over Neptune's orbit and became the eighth planet from the sun for twenty years. A study in 1988 determined that Pluto's path of orbit could never be accurately predicted. Labeled as "chaotic," Pluto was later discredited from planet status in 2006.

Today, I broke your solar system. Oops.
My bad. Your graph said I was supposed
to make a nice little loop around the sun.

Naw...

Alicia Ostriker
Daffodils

—for David Lehman

*Ten thousand saw I at a glance
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
—William Wordsworth*

*Going into hell so many times tears it
Which explains poetry.
—Jack Spicer*

The day the war against Iraq begins
I'm photographing the yellow daffodils
With their outstretched arms and ruffled cups
Blowing in the wind of Jesus Green

Edging the lush grassy moving river
Along with the swans and ducks
Under a soft March Cambridge sky
Embellishing the earth like a hand...

15) Epigraphs can be used to indict, to create an opportunity to bear witness.

Patricia Smith (from *Blood Dazzler*)
Thankful

“What I’m hearing is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality...And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this—this [chuckles slightly] is working very well for them.”

—Barbara Bush, touring a Hurricane Relief Center in Houston

Our mothers once crafted banquets
from chicken necks, or that part of a hog’s belly,
whatever it was, that dragged low in its shit.
They decorated mirrored shadowboxes
with chipped porcelain nothing-at-alls,
jelly glasses, or white dolls stunned in their gingham. ...