

The Villanelle – for NMSPS Albuquerque Chapter, April 2022

The House on the Hill

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.

- - Edwin Arlington Robinson

I. History & Appeal of the Villanelle Form

Although known as a highly structured poetic form, the villanelle has its roots in less fixed forms from the Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries). The *villanella* and *villancico* (from Italian *villano*, or peasant) were Italian and Spanish dance-songs. French poets wrote poems that spoke of simple, often pastoral or rustic themes. They did not follow any specific schemes, rhymes or refrains and called them “villanelle.” Some scholars suggest that the form as we know it has been around since the 16th century. Others say that only one Renaissance poem was ever written in this fixed manner—Jean Passerat’s “Villanelle,” or “J’ay perdu ma tourterelle” (“I Lost My Turtle Dove”); they suggest that it was in the late 19th century that the villanelle was defined in its current fixed form by French poet Théodore de Banville, who was imitating Passerat. Nevertheless, it was after this that the form became increasingly popular among poets writing in

English. Ironically, it became more fixed-form over time rather than less, although many of the poets writing at that time didn't know that.

The love of villanelles has been compared with listening to echoes, reciting prayers and mantras—when the words we speak, chant or sing come back to us. Villanelles are considered well suited to meditations on mystery, forgiveness, grace and goodbye. Other phrases associated with villanelles from various sources: moods of obsession and delight, structured through the marriage of repetition and surprise, move from obsession to acceptance through repetition. In spite of these rather serious descriptions, the form can be applied much more broadly, even to light verse.

II. The Structure of the Villanelle

- a structured poem of 19 lines composed of five tercets (3-line stanzas) followed by one quatrain (4-line stanza), with two repeating end-rhymes throughout and two repeating refrain-lines (that use one of the two end-rhymes)
- there is not a specified line length or meter, although many have traditionally used iambic pentameter
- NOTE: below and beyond, I'm going to use several alternate ways of labeling lines; you can choose which one is most intuitive for you
- the first line of the poem is also the first refrain (labeled A1) and it is repeated as the last line of the second stanza (line #6), the last line of the fourth stanza (line #12), and the penultimate line of the last stanza (line #18).
- the third line of the first stanza (line #3) is also

Villanelle Diagram

TITLE _____

1 _____ A1

2 _____ b

3 _____ A2

4 _____ a

5 _____ b

6 _____ A1

7 _____ a

8 _____ b

9 _____ A2

10 _____ a

11 _____ b

12 _____ A1

13 _____ a

the second refrain (labeled A2) and it is repeated as the last line of the third stanza (line #9), the last line of the fifth stanza (line #15), and the last line of the poem (line #19).

- the two refrain-lines (A1 and A2) should be, as Annie Finch says, *genuinely attracted to each other but also wholly independent of each other, so that their final coupling will feel both inevitable and surprising.*
- the first line of each stanza ends with a word that rhymes with the A1 end-rhyme (labeled lower case “a”)
- the second line of each stanza ends with a word that rhymes with all other second line end words (labeled lower case “b”)

This sounds VERY complex but it will become clearer when we diagram a few poems. One easy way to deconstruct/reconstruct this is as follows:

start with this form aba / aba / aba / aba / aba / abaa

then apply the rules (A1)b(A2) / ab(A1) / ab(A2) / ab(A1) / ab(A2) / ab(A1)(A2)

III. Diagramming A Villanelle

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

| | | |
|----|---|----|
| 1 | Do not go gentle into that good night, | A1 |
| 2 | Old age should burn and rave at close of day; | b |
| 3 | Rage, rage against the dying of the light. | A2 |
| 4 | Though wise men at their end know dark is right, | a |
| 5 | Because their words had forked no lightning they | b |
| 6 | Do not go gentle into that good night. | A1 |
| 7 | Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright | a |
| 8 | Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, | b |
| 9 | Rage, rage against the dying of the light. | A2 |
| 10 | Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight, | a |
| 11 | And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way, | b |
| 12 | Do not go gentle into that good night. | A1 |
| 13 | Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight | a |

| | | |
|----|--|----|
| 14 | Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay, | b |
| 15 | Rage, rage against the dying of the light. | A2 |
| 16 | And you, my father, there on the sad height, | a |
| 17 | Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. | b |
| 18 | Do not go gentle into that good night. | A1 |
| 19 | Rage, rage against the dying of the light. | A2 |

-- Dylan Thomas

IV. Pointers for Writing Your Own Villanelle

- *“Many poets have said, often ruefully, that a villanelle is an easy poem to write as long as you come up with two great lines, which is easier said than done.”* Robert McDowell in his chapter on Villanelles
- It is true that coming up with those two lines/refrains (which also have to rhyme) is most important and probably has to come first. Some find that it’s helpful to develop these lines as part of a theme since they have to work as repeated line throughout the poem in conjunction with other lines as together as the two ending lines.
- There are only two end-rhymes that encompass the entire poem, so make sure to select words for which there are lots of options for rhyming (e.g., “pray” is a better word to select than “orange”!). Using a single set of examples, you can use perfect rhymes (boot, shoot, loot), or you *can* use slant rhyme (clout, short), even assonance (tune, reputed), or consonance (mate), etc. This will become easier as you become more comfortable with the form. If you have a line or idea that you really like but it ends with a really bad potential rhyming word, play around with other ways to state the same line (other word orders or other words that mean the same).
- When you are beginning with a new form, it’s often easier to start with end-stopped lines (lines that end with a period or at least a comma), but as you begin to play with the form, you can begin to play with enjambment (in which lines continue onto the next line and sometimes stop in the middle of a line). This allows the cadence of the poem to be more interesting and less predictable.
- I still use a diagram when working on repeated-line forms like villanelles, pantoums, ghazals, and repeated-end-word forms like sestinas. It allows me to lay out the form and

then I can break the rules later! Use the diagram I've provided below if you find it helpful. The other thing I do is brainstorm and create rhyme lists as soon as I have the two refrain lines (A1/A2/a) and as soon as I identify the other end-rhyme (b). Having the lists of words often helps to come up with the lines that go with them.

- Villanelles don't have to be serious or about serious subjects. They can be about sports (!) (see Stephanie Burt's "For Lindsay Whalen" on p. 9 about NCAA Final Four women's basketball). They can be silly (see R.S. Gwynn's "Optimist" on p. 10 about someone who wrote six poems a week for a syndicated column for over 15 years).
- If you don't have any of your own ideas to start with, you can start with one of these prompts from Robert McDowell's chapter on Villanelles. (1) use the following 1st and 3rd lines - - "At last I see myself the sum of twos" (A1) and "I split myself by listening to the blues" (A2), and go from there. OR (2) for something light-hearted, subvert Dylan Thomas' great lines and use the following 1st and 3rd lines - - "Do not rub gently waith that handiwipe" (A1) and "Rage, rage against the rusting of the pipe" (A2).

V. Other Villanelles to Diagram, Read as Examples, or for Later

The Art of Clay

The years in the blood keep us naked to the bone.
So many hours of darkness we fail to sublimate.
Light breaks down the days to printless stone.

I sing what I sang before, it's the dream alone.
We fall like the sun when the moon's our fate.
The years in the blood keep us naked to the bone.

I wouldn't reach your hand, if I feared the dark alone;
My heart's a river, but it is not chilled with hate.
Light breaks down the days to printless stone.

We dance from memory because it's here on loan.
And as the music stops, nothing's lost but the date.
The years in the blood keep us naked to the bone.

How round the sky, how the planets drink the unknown.
I gently touch; your eyes show it isn't late.
Light breaks down the days to printless stone.

What figures in this clay; gives a sharper bone?
What turns the spirit white? Wanting to abbreviate?
The years in the blood keep us naked to the bone.
Light breaks down the days to printless stone.

- - Duane Niatum (Klallam); in the anthology *When the Light of the World was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through* edited by Joy Harjo

Beach of Edges

A drift of snow edges a new drift of sand
as edges grow deeper. It's March, month of edges.
Wet rocks yield to pebbles like opening hands.

The glisten of rockweed trails, splutters, and bends,
and sparkles of rivulets bounce down in ledges.
A drift of snow edges a new drift of sand;

it's March, month of edges, and I'm left to stand
alone outside time as new light pulls and nudges
wet rocks. Yield to pebbles like opening hands,

light; pull me from winter. How have I planned
for light that's not winter, for live light that fledges
a drift of snow, edges a new drift of sand

beyond my last sight, and waves me like a wand
out back over the surges of these rocking sedges?
Wet rocks yield to pebbles like opening hands;

I want to go back to him, as to the land;
light, carry me over from the wild old grudges.

A drift of snow edges a new drift of sand;
wet rocks yield to pebbles like opening hands.

- Annie Finch

The Door to Night is Ajar

Above my head an arc of ancient light
flows—a river through inky pre-dawn sky.
Across my view a flash of feathered night

twists and flutters wings in stuttered flight,
trails the banner of his dark, throaty cry.

Above my head an arc of ancient light

flares from long-dead stars, impossibly bright,
as silhouettes of shadowed absence fly
across my view. A flash of feathered night

sweeps the phosphorescent flames of starlight
from ghostly grasp of thorny branches high
above my head. An arc of ancient light

begins to pale—the dying of the night.

Milky river, with dawn's approach, runs dry.

Across my view a flash of feathered night

makes one last pass to hold in memory's sight.

Nightjar departs, bright'ning air breathes out a sigh.

Above, a fading arc of ancient light
and my last view, a flash of feathered night.

-- Janet Ruth

Villanelle For Our Time *by Frank Scott*

From bitter searching of the heart,
Quickened with passion and with pain
We rise to play a greater part.

This is the faith from which we start:
Men shall know commonwealth again
From bitter searching of the heart.

We loved the easy and the smart,
But now, with keener hand and brain,
We rise to play a greater part.

The lesser loyalties depart,
And neither race nor creed remain
From bitter searching of the heart.

Not steering by the venal chart
That tricked the mass for private gain,
We rise to play a greater part.

Reshaping narrow law and art
Whose symbols are the millions slain,
From bitter searching of the heart
We rise to play a greater part.

-- Frank Scott (but made famous by Leonard Cohen)

For Lindsay Whalen

You only have the skills that you can use.

The shots you make surround you like a breeze.

When someone wins, then someone has to lose.

You don't show off. We know you by your moves:

A feint, a viewless pass, a perfect tease

Make space for all the skills that you can use.

Defenders and their shadows, three on two,

Start at you like infuriated bees:

You glide through them. You take the looks they lose.

As serious as science, picking clues

And dodges that no other player sees,

You find the skills that only you could use:

Applause, then silence. Scrape of distant shoes.

Then race through packed periphery to free

Space no one lifts a hand to. – Win or lose,

Such small decisions, run together, fuse

In concentration nothing like the ease

We seem to see in all the skills you use,

Til someone wins. Then someone else will lose.

-- Stephanie Burt

Optimist

--For Ailene Michaelis of Beaumont, Texas, who published, as The Rhyming Optimist, six poems a week 1919-1935 for the International and King Features syndicates.

Villanelle follows sonnet, day by day,
Like multi-colored bon-bons on a plate.
Fridays bring fishcakes and a triolet.

Your scattered rosebuds falling where they may,
Drifting away like every ripped off date,
Villanelle follows sonnet, day by day.

The stacks of yellow foolscap mount. Can they
Confess the fiery mildness of your fate?
Fridays bring fishcakes and a triolet

While aches and years are gathered in the gray
That spreads from roots to ends: your husband's late.
Villanelle follows sonnet, day by day,

And soon enough a world has spun away
Like headlines whirling at a heady rate.
Fridays bring fishcakes and a triolet;

Mondays start the round again: you say,
The camphor gaily blooms beside my gate.
Villanelle follows sonnet, day by day.
Fridays bring fishcakes and a triolet.

-- R. S. Gwynn

The Waking

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

- - Theodore Roethke

A Villanelle

When the ruins dissolve like salt in water,
only then will they have destroyed everything.
Let your blood till then embellish slaughter,

till dawn soaks up its inks, and "On their blotter
of fog the trees / Seem a botanical drawing."
Will the ruins dissolve like salt in the water?

A woman combs--at noon--the ruins for her daughter.
Chechnya is gone. What roses will you bring--
plucked from shawls at dusk--to wreath the slaughter?

Or are these words plucked from God that you've brought her,
this comfort: They will not have destroyed everything
till the ruins, too, are destroyed? Like salt in water,

what else besides God disappears at the altar?
O Kashmir, Armenia once vanished. Words are nothing,
just rumours--like roses--to embellish a slaughter:

these of a columnist: "The world will not stir";
these on the phone: "When you leave in the morning,
you never know if you'll return." Lost in water,
blood falters; then swirled to roses, it salts the slaughter.

-- Agha Shahid Ali

A Quarrel of Crows: a Villahaikunelle

A quarrel of crows
glean treasures from torn trash bags
on a rural road,

strut and cakewalk with
raspy-throated posturing.

A quarrel of crows

strip away limp gray rind
like coyotes feasting on doe.

On a rural road,

coon-topped barrels,
bequeath uneaten orts to
a quarrel of crows
who caw, grateful for
this desiccated banquet
on a rural road.

On the first Friday

of the last month of the year,
a quarrel of crows
on a rural road.

References and Links to More Villanelles

Annie Finch and Marie-Elizabeth Mali (Editors). 2012. *Villanelles* (an anthology). Everyman's Library Pocket Poets Series.

Robert McDowell. 2008. *Poetry as Spiritual Practice*. Free Press.

Sylvia Plath [“Mad Girl’s Love Song”](#)

Elizabeth Bishop [“One Art”](#)

Oscar Wilde [“Pan–Double Villanelle”](#)

W. H. Auden [“If I Could Tell You”](#)

Martha Collins [“The Story We Know”](#)

Steve Kowit [“The Grammar Lesson”](#)

Tracy K. Smith [“Solstice”](#)

Seamus Heaney [“Villanelle for an Anniversary”](#)