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Poems of the Body & the Body of Poems:
Talking About Form in the Classroom

*...all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.*
— Billy Collins

It is no secret—poetry classes kill poetry for young adults. Seemingly endless lectures about iambs, trochees, pentameter and rhyme scheme suck the life out of literature’s liveliest genre. Young adults are taught a method of analysis and writing that feels something akin to a straightjacket. The idea, presumably, is to provide them with the building blocks of good poetry so that they can learn to manipulate these forms and structures later, but what results is an epidemic of aversion. Poetry is not meant to be inaccessible, boring, or stuffy—it is about paying attention to the world. Poetry is about listening to the stories that are everywhere around us, and even more, listening to *how* those stories are being conveyed.

Since poetry is, in a sense, the art of attentiveness, I chose to bind this unit together with a subject that teens and young adults are freshly, sharply, and often painfully aware of: bodies. Aligning body perception and poetry struck me as the perfect analogy to help explain why form is such an essential component of a poem. Different types of verse are like differently shaped vases that artists can pour their words into, ranging from the simplicity of haiku to the intricacy of pantoum to the,

lyricism of ghazal, to the liberation of free verse, in which the artist constructs a whole new vase for his/herself. The form of a poem is *how* the poem interacts with its audience; it is the vehicle through which poetry tries to say what cannot be said. Rip a poem away from its form, and you will watch its meaning collapse like a house of cards. The human body functions much the same way for identity— it is how the curious brain and insubstantial soul interact with the physical world, it comes in every shape and size imaginable and, in many ways, that shape and size define *how* it is able to interact with what surrounds it. American society is overflowing with negative body politics, and young adults drown in it far too often. If you are not fair-skinned, thin, and cisgendered, your body is doomed to a daily torrent of hate and condemnation, and in light of this fact, it is no wonder that rates of depression, eating disorders, and self-mutilation are steadily rising in teen populations. The societal constructs which insist that only one type of poetry is “valid” are the same constructs which insist that only one type of body is beautiful. In this unit of study, I hope to abolish a mentality of exclusivity in my students, and communicate to them that every kind of body, every kind of verse, every kind of vase that contains a story, is valid and worthy of attention.

Toes in the Water: How We Talk About Bodies

- I will begin the unit with a guided discussion of ads and pages taken from fashion magazines. I will explain that ads sell more than just products: they sell values, images, and concepts of love, sexuality, success, and normalcy; they sell us ideas about who we “are” and who we “should be.” Students will

be asked to look for and point out elements of these pages that contribute to the establishment of negative body image. Things that students will be prompted to look for:

- What value does the page/ad place on physical beauty and “perfection”?
- Are there cues to indicate what fits the definition of “perfect” and what does not?
- Does the page/ad present thinness as equivalent to beauty?
- Are people equated with objects? Are bodies “dismembered”? (only showing one part of the body, such as the breasts, rather than the whole person)
- How are people of color represented? Are their features “Anglicized”? (lighter skin, straight hair, slim facial features?)
- Students will then be introduced to the Blackout Poetry method, a style of poetry in which, instead of using your own words, you use the words that are already on a page and simply remove the ones you don’t need. I will show a few examples and we will do one together as a class.
- In the culminating activity for this section, a stack of teen magazines will be provided, and students will be asked to find an article or ad and create a blackout poem using *only the words that are already on the page*. Students will be encouraged to comment on or change the meaning of the original ad in some way through their poem.

- We will take some time at the end of the session to look at everyone's projects, leading into a conversation about the ways that poetry can be a powerful medium for social commentary.

Diving In: Poems Have Bodies Too

- I will open with "Homage to my Hips" by Lucille Clifton. We will read this as a class and analyze it. Connecting back to the previous activity, students will be asked to think about how Clifton uses the symbol of "hips" to empower women, representing large hips that "don't fit into little / petty places" (ln 4-5) as a source of strength instead of shame.
- From Clifton's poem, we will move into a brief discussion of the ways that different "body types" of poems can be recognized. Students will take notes on the different "body parts" that poems have (rhyme scheme, meter, metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, consonance, etc.) and create a checklist of things to look at and look for when analyzing a poem. They will continue to add to this checklist throughout the unit.
- Centerpiece: "I Sing the Body Electric" by Walt Whitman
 - The class will read Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" out loud together, one section at a time, and use our checklist to parse out the meaning in each section. I will talk about the elements of an Ode and define Free Verse, and we will add these to our checklist. The language here can be tricky, so it will be key to leave enough time to work out what Whitman is trying to say. How are the fragmented pieces that make up Whitman's poem like parts of a body? If the body

is how the soul is able to interact with and communicate with the world, then the *form* of a poem is like its body. A poem's form is how it makes its meaning (its soul) heard. Just because a poem is in Free Verse (nonmetrical, nonrhyming lines that usually follow the natural rhythms produced by speech) does not mean that it lacks form.

- Supporting pieces from Spoken Word Poetry:

“I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out” by Andrea Gibson

- I will play a video of Andrea Gibson performing her piece “I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out,” (students will have the text of the poem as well) and the class will analyze the poem the same way that we dissected Whitman's. I will talk about allusion and add this to the checklist. Questions for discussion: How does Gibson's poem connect to Whitman's? How does the impact and meaning of Whitman's poem change in Gibson's interpretation?

“The Body is Not Apology” by Sonya Renee

- The class will perform the same exercise with Sonya Renee's “The Body is Not Apology”. I will talk about litany and refrain, and add these to our checklist. To sum up, students will be asked how they could compare and contrast the four poems that were covered in this lesson.

Diving Deeper: Learn the Rules So You Can Break Them

- I will open with a short lecture on sonnets—the basic definition, a 14-line poem on a single subject with a “turn” in the concluding lines—and then

delve further into the rhyme scheme and metrical patterns of both Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets. The class will return to our checklist, adding to definitions of meter and rhyme scheme.

- Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare:
 - The class will discuss this poem as an example of the Shakespearean sonnet, parse any linguistic confusion, and discuss how the body imagery in this piece works to create humor. I will discuss hyperbole and add this term to our list.
- “Half-Hearted Sonnet” by Kim Addonizio
 - This poem is another example of sonnet form, but in a very unique way—students will be challenged to point out the ways that Addonizio’s piece is a “half-hearted” sonnet using what they know about sonnets, rhyme scheme, and meter. I will use this poem as a jumping-off point for a discussion of the flexibility of form, showing the class that form is not something that is rigid and set in stone—in fact, it can be used to create deeper meaning and intricacy in a poem when it is modified with comprehension and intention. With luck, this will motivate students to learn and understand the “boring” rules of Form Poetry, knowing that, once learned, they can be played with.
- “Rule Book” by Suzanne Parker
 - Another example of “rule-breaking,” students will be challenged to get into groups and collaboratively figure out what form this poem takes, what rules it keeps, and which ones it throws away.

Surfacing: Concluding the Unit

- To wrap up the unit, the class will conduct a Reader's Theater with David Levithan's *The Realm of Possibility*, a novel in lyric poetry told through 20 separate voices. Each of the 20 voices belongs to a student of a single high school, and the forms vary from character to character. In response to the Readers Theater, students will be asked to do an in-class writing assignment. The students will choose one poem from a character that they particularly liked or identified with, and write a short essay analyzing it, using terms from the checklist created in class.
- The following will be the prompt for the final project in the unit (which students will receive a handout for on the first class in the unit, and should be thinking about and working on throughout the unit):
 - Like Gibson's "I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out," write your own, contemporary version of a favorite canonical poem—you may use one that we covered in class, or another poem with permission. You can use the same style, write in the same form, elaborate on the same theme, or any combination of these; like Addonizio, you might even try to subvert the form. Do your best to keep the poem fresh, but still recognizable. Include a 1-3 page essay explaining the inspirations and reasoning behind your work. Be sure to fully demonstrate how the two poems are connected.

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Full Text of Spoken Word Poems Covered in the Unit

**I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out
by Andrea Gibson**

This is my body.
I have weathervanes. They are especially sensitive to dust storms and hurricanes.
When I am nervous, my teeth chatter like a wheelbarrow collecting rain
I am rusty when I talk:
It's the storm in me.

The doctor said some day I might not be able to walk
it's in my blood like the iron
my mother is tough as nails,
she held herself together the day she could no longer hold my niece
we said,
"Our kneecaps are our prayer beds
everyone can walk further on their kneecaps than they can on their feet."

This is my heartbeat
Like yours, it is a hatchet.
It can build a house or tear one down.
My mouth is a fire escape,
the words coming out don't care that they are naked,
there is something burning in here.
When it burns,
I hold my own shell to my ear,
listen for the parade when I was seven.
The man who played the bagpipes wore a skirt
he was from Scotland;
I wanted to move there,
wanted my spine to be the spine of an unpublished book,
my faith the first and last page
the day my ribcage became monkeybars for a girl hanging on my every word
they said,
"you are not allowed to love her,"
tried to take me by the throat to teach me
I was not a boy,

I had to unlearn their prison-speak
refuse to make wishes on the star on the sheriff's chest,

I started asking the sun about the Big Bang
 the sun said, "it hurts to become."
 I carried that hurt on the tip of my tongue
 and whisper "bless your heart" every chance I get
 so my family tree can be sure I have not left
 you do not have to leave to arrive, I am learning this slowly

So sometimes when I look in the mirror
 my eyes look like the holes in the shoes of the shoe-shine man
 my hands are busy on the wrong things.
 Some days, I call my arms wings while my head is in the clouds
 It will take me a few more years to learn flying
 is not pushing away the ground
 safety isn't always safe
 you can find one on every gun.
 I am aiming to do better.

This is my body.
 My exhaustion pipe will never pass inspection
 and still my lungs know how to breathe like a burning map
 every time I get lost in the curtain of her hair
 you can find me by the window
 following my past to a trail of blood in the snow
 the night I opened my veins,
 the doctor who stitched me up asked me if I did it for attention.
 For the record:
 If you have ever done anything for attention,
 this poem is attention.
 Title it with your name
 it will— scour the city bridge every night you spend kicking at your shadow,
 staring at the river,
 it does not want to find your body doing anything but loving what it loves
 love what you love
 Say "this is my body,
 it is no one's but mine,
 it is my nervous system
 my wanting blood,
 my half-tamed addictions,
 my tongue tied-up like a ball of Christmas lights
 if you put a star on the top of my tree, make sure it is a star that fell,
 make sure it hit bottom like a tambourine
 'cause all these words are stories for the staircase to the top of my lungs,
 where I sing what hurts
 and the echo comes back
 "Bless your heart"
 Bless your body."

Bless your holy kneecaps, they are so smart
 You are so full of rain,
 there is so much growing,
 hallelujah to your weathervanes,
 hallelujah to the ache
 hallelujah to your full, to the fall,
 hallelujah to the grace,
 and every body
 and every cell
 of us all.

The Body is Not an Apology
by Sonya Renee

The body is not an apology. Let it not be forget-me-not fixed to mattress when night threatens to leave the room empty as the belly of a crow. The body is not an apology. Do not present it as a disassembled rifle when he has yet to prove himself more than common intruder. The body is not an apology. Let it not be common as oil, ash or toilet. Let it not be small as gravel, stain or teeth. Let it not be mountain when it is sand. Let it not be ocean when it is grass. Let it not be shaken, flattened or razed in contrition. The body is not an apology. Do not give the body as communion, confession, do not ask for it to be pardoned as criminal. The body is not a crime, is not a gun, the body is not a lost set of keys or wrong number dialed. It is not the orange burst of blood to shame white dresses. The body is not an apology. It is not the unintended granule of bone beneath will. The body is not kill, it is not unkempt car. It is not a forgotten appointment. Do not speak it vulgar. The body is not soiled, it is not filth to be forgiven. The body is not an apology. It is not a father's backhand, is not mother's dinner late again, wrecked jaw, howl. It is not the drunken sorcery of contorting steel round tree. The body is not calamity. The body is not a math test. The body is not a wrong answer. The body is not a failed class. You are not failing. The body is not an apology. The body is not a crime, is not a gun. The body is not crime, is not sentence to be served. It is not prison, is not pavement, is not prayer. The body is not an apology. Do not offer the body as gift. Only receive it as such. The body is not to be prayed for, is to be prayed to. So, for the ever-more turtle tenth grade nose, hallelujah. For the shower song throat that crackles like a grandfather's Victrola, hallelujah. For the spine that never healed. For the lambent heart that didn't either. Hallelujah for the slowly pulp of back, hip, belly. Hosanna for the errant hairs that road the base like a pack of wolves. Hosanna for the parts that we have endeavored to excise. Blessed be the cancer, the palsy, the womb that opens like a trap door. Praise the body in its black jack magic even in this. For the razor wire mouth. For the sweet God ribbon with it. Praise for the mistake that never was. Praise for the bend to fall and rise again, fall and rise again. For the raising like an obstinate Christ. Praise the body that bends like a baptismal bowl for those that will worship at the lip of this sanctuary. Praise the body for the body is not an apology. The body is deity, the body is god, the body is god. The only righteous love that will never need repent.

POEMS OF THE BODY & THE BODY OF POEMS

Talking about Form in the Classroom

By Kate Reed

Introduction to Poetry

by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way
out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light
switch.

I want them to waterski

across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on
the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with
rope
and torture a confession out of
it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

“I Sing the Body Electric”

by Walt Whitman

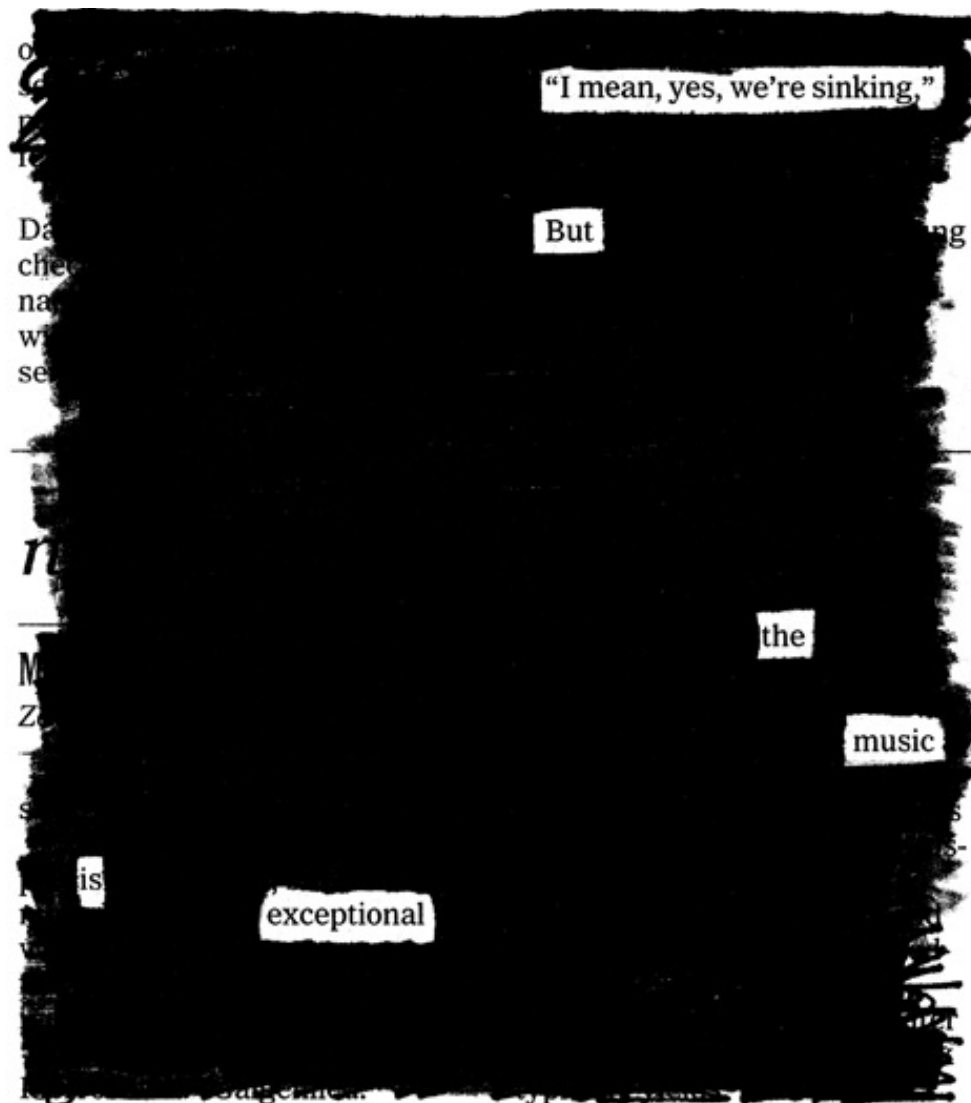
“O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul”



<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/walt-whitman>



Blackout Poetry



“Homage to My Hips”

by Lucille Clifton

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!

- Poetry as political! Empowering!
- A “checklist” of terms, definitions, things to look for when analyzing poetry...we’ll start it now, and add to it as the unit progresses. There will be a final in-class writing assignment, and students can use this list to help them on it.
 - Rhyme scheme
 - Meter
 - Iamb, trochee
 - Metaphor, simile
 - Alliteration, assonance, consonance
 - Litany, refrain
 - Types of Forms and Verse

Centerpiece

- How are the fragmented parts of Whitman's poem like the parts of a body?
- The important part of a body is that it is generative—it can create! It can experience! Is this also true of poetry?
- The important part of poetry is the experience of it!
- Body = how the soul interacts with the world
- Form = how a poem creates and communicates something “beyond words”

““I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out”

by Andrea Gibson

<http://vimeo.com/31888473>

“The Body is Not an Apology”

by Sonya Renee

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrbUTI95o3U>

Subverting the Sonnet

- Begin with Sonnet 130...

Subverting the Sonnet

“Half-Hearted Sonnet” by Kim Addonizio

He'd left his belt. She
followed him and
threw it in the street.
Wine: kisses: snake: end

of their story. Be-
gin again, under-
stand what happened; de-
spite that battered

feeling, it will have been
worth it; better to
have etc...

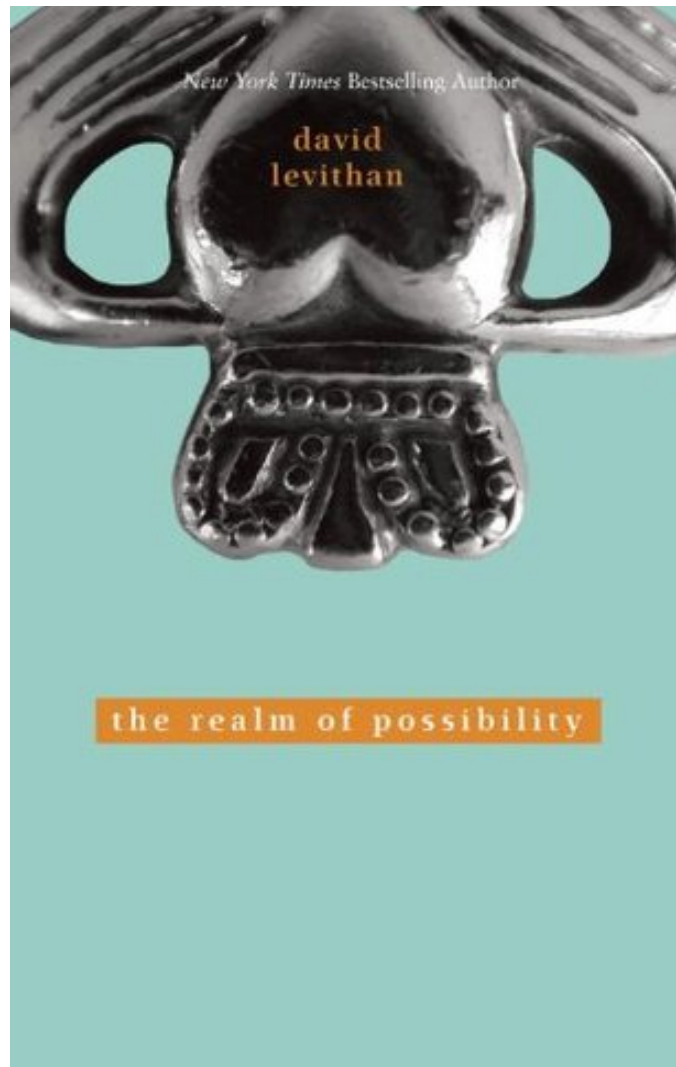
(—*not to have been born*

at all— Schopenhauer.)

But, soft! Enter tears.

The Realm of Possibility

by David Levithan



The Realm of Possibility

by David Levithan

- Reader's Theater!
- In-class response to one “voice,” students will conduct a brief analysis of the poem using our “checklist”

Final Project—

- Like Gibson's "I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out," write your own, contemporary version of a favorite canonical poem—you may use one that we covered in class, or another poem with permission. You can use the same style, write in the same form, elaborate on the same theme, or any combination of these; like Addonizio, you might even try to subvert the form. Do your best to keep the poem fresh, but still recognizable. Include a 1-3 page essay explaining the inspirations and reasoning behind your work. Be sure to fully demonstrate how the two poems are connected.