

# Sailing Our Tides: The Polyvocal Self & Poetry Prompts on Voice

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- I. Invocation of the Muse: W. S. Merwin’s “Berryman”
- The Uncertainty of Creativity
  - Idealized Mentorship vs. Actual Mentorship
  - Embracing One’s Own Strangeness *in*, Not Removed *from*, the World
  - Rejection’s Constant Presence
  - Poem as Meta-Poem – Mature Merwin, Young Merwin, and Berryman All Speak
  - “In Tides of His Own Through Which He Sailed” = **Many Voices, Many Selves**
- II. The Secret to All Writing (Regardless of Genre):
- =====> closing the gap <=====  
(what you’re trying to say) (what you actually wrote)
- III. The Big Picture
- Needs of an Individual Poem > Maintaining a Unified Image or Style
  - Finding One’s Voice = Myth?
  - Trusting the Inevitability of Your Work’s Cohesiveness
- IV. The Obsession-Driven Voice
- Changing the Connotation of “Obsession” from Negative (ex. Hoarding) to Neutral (ex. Fandom)
  - Rejecting the Myth of Subject Worthiness
  - Two Key Prompts: Wonders and Wounds / Midnight Binge
  - Other Prompts
    - Apostrophe Prompt / Letter Prompt (Richard Hugo’s “Letter to Simic from Boulder”)
    - Reference Entry Prompt (Dictionary, Encyclopedia, Wikipedia, etc.)
    - Screenplay Prompt (Zoom, Fade, Jump Cut, Pan, etc.)
- V. The Process-Driven Voice
- Exploring Repetition (Potentially Artful) While Guarding Against Redundancy (Wheel-Spinning)
  - Weeding the Garden – Embracing Uncertainty, Discomfort, and Muck
  - Game It: Timed Exercises, Cut It Up, Reverse the Circumstances, Genre Cross-Training, etc.
  - Experimenting with Chronology and Tense
  - Key Prompt: Anaphora
  - Other Prompts
    - List Prompt / Recipe Prompt (Janice Mirikitani’s “Recipe”)
    - Fragment Prompt / No Punctuation Prompt
    - Ekphrastic Prompt (Responding to Art in a Different Mode – Music, Painting, etc.)
- VI. The Persona-Driven Voice
- Ethical Considerations – Honoring History and Avoiding Appropriation / False Ownership
  - Key Prompt: Inanimate Object
  - Other Prompts
    - Dramatic Monologue / Character Prompt (Rita Dove’s “The House Slave”)
    - Tour Guide Prompt
    - Autopsy Report Prompt

## Berryman

by W. S. Merwin

I will tell you what he told me  
in the years just after the war  
as we then called  
the second world war

don't lose your arrogance yet he said  
you can do that when you're older  
lose it too soon and you may  
merely replace it with vanity

just one time he suggested  
changing the usual order  
of the same words in a line of verse  
why point out a thing twice

he suggested I pray to the Muse  
get down on my knees and pray  
right there in the corner and he  
said he meant it literally

it was in the days before the beard  
and the drink but he was deep  
in tides of his own through which he sailed  
chin sideways and head tilted like a tacking sloop

he was far older than the dates allowed for  
much older than I was he was in his thirties  
he snapped down his nose with an accent  
I think he had affected in England

as for publishing he advised me  
to paper my wall with rejection slips  
his lips and the bones of his long fingers trembled  
with the vehemence of his views about poetry

he said the great presence  
that permitted everything and transmuted it  
in poetry was passion  
passion was genius and he praised movement and  
invention

I had hardly begun to read  
I asked how can you ever be sure  
that what you write is really  
any good at all and he said you can't

you can't you can never be sure  
you die without knowing  
whether anything you wrote was any good  
if you have to be sure don't write

from *Migration: New & Selected Poems*, Copper Canyon Press, ©2005 (also available online [here](#))  
(You can learn about the poet John Berryman [here](#).)

## Letter to Simic from Boulder

by Richard Hugo

Dear Charles: And so we meet once in San Francisco and I learn  
I bombed you long ago in Belgrade when you were five.  
I remember. We were after a bridge on the Danube  
hoping to cut the German armies off as they fled north  
from Greece. We missed. Not unusual, considering I  
was one of the bombardiers. I couldn't hit my ass if  
I sat on the Norden or rode a bomb down singing  
The Star Spangled Banner. I remember Belgrade opened  
like a rose when we came in. Not much flak. I didn't know  
about the daily hangings, the 80,000 Slavs who dangled  
from German ropes in the city, lessons to the rest.  
I was interested mainly in staying alive, that moment  
the plane jumped free from the weight of bombs and we went home.  
What did you speak then? Serb, I suppose. And what did your mind  
do with the terrible howl of bombs? What is Serb for "fear"?  
It must be the same as in English, one long primitive wail  
of dying children, one child fixed forever in dead stare.  
I don't apologize for the war, or what I was. I was  
willingly confused by the times. I think I even believed  
in heroics (for others, not for me). I believed the necessity  
of that suffering world, hoping it would learn not to do  
it again. But I was young. The world never learns. History  
has a way of making the past palatable, the dead  
a dream. Dear Charles, I'm glad you avoided the bombs, that you  
live with us now and write poems. I must tell you though,  
I felt funny that day in San Francisco. I kept saying  
to myself, he was on the ground that day, the sky  
eerie mustard and our engines roaring everything  
out of the way. And the world comes clean in moments  
like that for survivors. The world comes clean as clouds  
in summer, the pure puffed white, soft birds careening  
in and out, our lives with a chance to drift on slow  
over the world, our bomb bays empty, the target forgotten,  
the enemy ignored. Nice to meet you finally after  
all the mindless hate. Next time, if you want to be sure  
you survive, sit on the bridge I'm trying to hit and wave.  
I'm coming in on course but nervous and my cross hairs flutter.  
Wherever you are on earth, you are safe. I'm aiming but  
my bombs are candy and I've lost the lead plane. Your friend, Dick.

from *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo*, Norton, ©1991 (also available online [here](#))

## Recipe

by Janice Mirikitani

### Round Eyes

Ingredients: scissors, Scotch magic transparent tape,  
eyeliner - water based, black.  
Optional: false eyelashes.

Cleanse face thoroughly.

For best results, powder entire face, including eyelids.  
(lighter shades suited to total effect desired)

With scissors, cut magic tape 1/16" wide, 3/4"-1/2" long -  
depending on length of eyelid.

Stick firmly onto mid-upper eyelid area  
(looking down into handmirror facilities finding  
adequate surface)

If using false eyelashes, affix first on lid, folding any  
excess lid over the base of eyelash with glue.

Paint black eyeliner on tape and entire lid.

Do not cry.

## The House Slave

by Rita Dove

The first horn lifts its arm over the dew-lit grass  
and in the slave quarters there is a rustling—  
children are bundled into aprons, cornbread

and water gourds grabbed, a salt pork breakfast taken.  
I watch them driven into the vague before-dawn  
while their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick

and Massa dreams of asses, rum and slave-funk.  
I cannot fall asleep again. At the second horn,  
the whip curls across the backs of the laggards—

sometimes my sister's voice, unmistakable, among them.  
“Oh! pray,” she cries. “Oh! pray!” Those days  
I lie on my cot, shivering in the early heat,  
and as the fields unfold to whiteness,  
and they spill like bees among the fat flowers,  
I weep. It is not yet daylight.

from *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 1980 issue (also available online [here](#))