

**this short lesson adapts Carl Phillips' remarks on the blues strophe from his The Art of Daring*

on the Blues Strophe

In Carl Phillips' *Art of Daring* he shares that his own reason for making poems is "as a way of understanding not entirely but a bit more clearly what resists solution," noting the importance for the poet "to understand from the start that solution is impossible, even as she nevertheless attempts it." In his own enterprise of risking the unknown or impossible, Phillips offers that he tends to begin writing a poem with a sense that he "knows how to navigate the territory" he's entering--he writes: "the thing that gives me that initial misleading confidence about my psychological bearings is the set of bearings I establish at the level of structure"--"it's not until the end, or more likely halfway through," he says, "that I remember the truth, abandon myself again to being lost, and just hope to arrive wiser, though no less lost, in one piece." By orienting ourselves within a more or less fixed form, we can safely become disoriented, having a way of continuing on even after we're lost.

A structure Phillips suggests as a useful and evocative resource is the *blues strophe*--typically, a three-sentence long poem over the course of which, Phillips writes, "an idea is put forth, pushed a tad further, and then pushed to what feels comparatively like a resolution." Here are his two examples:

W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues"

Gypsy done tole me, "Don't you wear no black."
Gypsy done tole me, "Don't you wear no black,
Go to St. Louis." You can win him back.

& Langston Hughes's "Morning After"

I was so sick last night I
Didn't hardly know my mind.
So sick last night I
Didn't know my mind.
I drunk some bad licker that
Almost made me blind.

The set structure of these poems--their use of rhyme and repetition--create that compelling tension between what we know and what we can't know, or the sometimes sad sometimes humorous fact that what we know can't always help us change the things we wish we could; Phillips writes: "The effect of a blues strophe is to at once push something a little further away and, by staying with it--revising it--to bring it a little more closely into focus; often enough, sorrow is pushed further away by being brought into a perspective that allows the speaker to remember that sorrow can only exist in the context of joy and laughter." As a slightly more complex example of the blues strophe, Phillips' offers Gayl Jones's "Deep Song":

The blues calling my name.
She is singing a deep song.
She is singing a deep song.
I am human. He calls me crazy.
He says, "You must be
crazy."
I say, "Yes, I'm crazy."

He sits with his knees apart.
His fly is broken.
She is singing a deep song.
He smiles.
She is singing a deep song.
“Yes, I’m crazy”
I care about you.
I care.
I care about you.
I care.
He lifts his eyebrows.
The blues is calling my name.
I tell him he’d better
do something about his fly.
He says something softly.
He says something so softly
that I can’t even hear him.
He is a dark man.
Sometimes he is a good dark man.
Sometimes he is a bad dark man.
I love him.

This is a poem whose use of strange gestures and statements (strange because they don’t reveal what they mean, or move the story forward, but instead create what Phillips calls a kind of “psychological claustrophobia”) suggest a relationship wherein, as Phillips writes, the speaker loves someone “against her own better thinking”—loves him even if she wished she didn’t, or can’t say why she does. Different from a conventional blues strophe, Jones’s “Deep Song” resists “easy solution”—it “routinely disrupts its own progress,” abruptly shifting its subject, stuttering instead of progressing. Rather than revising its previous statements toward clarity, the poem stays with its own undecidedness.

Writing prompt

Write your own blues strophe—starting with the conventional 3-sentence structure that involves some use or combination of repetition/rhyme. Like Handy and Hughes, begin with an idea, push it forward through revision, and aim to turn toward some change in the final statement. Then try a more complex blues strophe, that, like Jones’s “Deep Song,” uses repetition to “interrupt its own progress” and returns to previous statements in ways that surprise, create tension, and complicate.

Here’s an example (my own attempt):

I stacked three books on the bed.
Lacking a pillow, I stacked my three books.
Lacking you, I stacked my head like a book.

I stacked my papers by the candle.
I made a neat stack of paper by the candle.
Covering your name again and again, and keeping it unlit.