

## POEMS, LETTERS AND LETTER POEMS

by Emily Berry

Frank O'Hara compared writing a poem to making a phone call. What if he had compared it to writing a letter? In 'Personism: A Manifesto' (available online), he wrote: 'While I was writing...I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It's a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person...and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.'

A poem is fundamentally a piece of communication, whether it's addressed to somebody or not. All kinds of communication can inspire or inform a poem – a phone call may have been more casual than a letter in O'Hara's day, but with emails and text messages written communication can be similarly casual, immediate, direct and intimate.

- Think about the kinds of communications you write (letters, emails, notes, texts, tweets) and what might be particular to the language you use in them. Is there any crossover between this and the language you use in your poetry? If not, why not? How might the one inform the other? (Look the way William Carlos Williams's note poem 'This Is Just To Say' plays with the stock language of correspondence to enliven the poem.)
- Read some published letters – [www.lettersofnote.com](http://www.lettersofnote.com) has many wonderful examples. A good Collected Letters is a great thing for a poet to read – writers tend to write good letters, so dip into a collection by someone you admire. Read a few letters and think about how they work as a piece of writing. What do you notice about the language, tone, forms of address, intimacy, formality, etc? How do you feel as a reader peeking in at someone else's world? What aspects of the letter might be transferrable to a poem? What would have to happen to the letter to make it into a poem?

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## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

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- Look at some letter poems to see how the two forms work together. For example 'E-mail from an Owl' by Frederick Seidel, 'Letter to My Optician' by Judy Brown, 'Letter Poem to Kenneth Koch' by James Schuyler, 'Letter to N.Y.' by Elizabeth Bishop (all available online). Think about what the poet is doing with the letter form, what restrictions it imposes versus what freedoms it allows. Think about the way the mode of address works in a letter poem – what effect does it have on the reader?

### EXERCISES

1. Take a poem you have already written (perhaps one that you're not happy with) and rewrite it as a letter addressed to someone or something. Be imaginative with your choice of addressee – it doesn't necessarily have to be a person, it could be an object, an animal, a country...
2. Take a letter that you have read/written and rewrite it so that it becomes a poem, taking as many liberties with the language as you like – it might simply be a case of inserting line breaks, or you might want to take only certain words and phrases and build upon them.
3. Write a new letter poem responding to a letter or letter poem you have read.

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