

BAD POETRY

Hanno Frank



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Poems and illustrations by Hanno Frank

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This collection of poems is dedicated to my Grandma Judy, who consistently encouraged me to write and publish, even though she actually read my stuff.

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of how bad poetry came to be written.

For Christmas 2005, a friend sent me the latest book by Stephen Fry, one of my favorite authors. I was wildly excited at the prospect of reading the book and decide to save it for a long, overnight train trip to Hungry to savor it properly. And so, for weeks, I had the book but resisted the urge to read it and even tried not to look at the title.

On the evening I departed for Szeged, I settled into my reserved seat for a long, pleasant night of undisturbed reading and finally allowed myself to open *The Ode Less Travelled*.^{*} I was a puzzled by the table of contents — all the previous books I had read from Fry were novels and this table of contents looked a bit less fictional than expected. After carefully scanning through the book, I realized it is not a novel at all, but a book giving technical advice on how to write poetry.

I was stunned. I had never seen a book like this and certainly did not expect to see one now, when I was anticipating one of Fry's wacky, witty stories. To be honest, I was taken aback — not disappointed, mind you, I am sure I would enjoy a technical book giving advice about how to properly delouse a llama if it was written by Fry — but I wasn't sure my powers of concentration were up to reading anything technical.

Well, the next afternoon, I arrived in Szeged, pale and trembling from the sleepless night — and on fire about the book. The writing, of course is superbly entertaining and kept me up all night turning the pages. But, unexpectedly, what was burning me up was the content.

The premise of the book is that, to write satisfactory poetry, you have to have an idea about the technical aspects of writing a poem. If you wanted to learn to play piano, he writes, it would not be very helpful if your teacher sat you in front of a keyboard and said “Just let your feelings out!” You would want to learn scales and a bit of music theory, wouldn't you.

And so it is with poetry. If you sit down with a piece of paper and no better advice than “Just let your feelings out!” you are bound to be unhappy with the results.

^{*} Get the book (because I won't lend you my copy): *The Ode Less Travelled — Unlocking the Poet Within* Stephen Fry, 2005, Hutchinson, The Random House Group ISBN 0 09 179661.

The book is also very encouraging to hobby poets who have no intention of ever publishing their poems:

The average practitioner doesn't expect to win prizes, earn a fortune, become famous or acquire absolute mastery in their art, craft, sport — or as we would say now, their chosen leisure pursuit. *It really is enough to have fun.* [Fry's emphasis]

And it is full of very useful, easy-to-understand information about rhyme, rhythm and form — with exercises for putting the information to use.

I was too eager to read the book to stop and do the exercises, so when I finished, I decided to read it a second time, completing the exercises. Eventually, I read it a third time, making notes and cross-references and various other annotation.

Shortly before I read *The Ode*, I wrote a 1minutestory with the topic of "bad poetry." The topic was suggested by my brother who thought it would be a great opportunity to stick a bunch of raunchy poems in one story. I used the topic to this advantage and wrote a tale about a young student teacher giving English Literature classes to a bunch of impossible students. I have to say, I did enjoy writing all those crap poems. There was something freeing about writing a poem that is intentionally bad.

It was actually really fun to write a poem with the intention to abuse a standard form (in this case a limerick). And it was really great fun to write well formed poems about rather inappropriate topics:

There once was a penguin named Fred,
Who spent all his time in his bed.
It gave him a thrill
To lie very still
'Till the others were sure he was dead.†

My experiences writing intentionally bad poems and the technical information I had gained from Fry's book became a dangerous mix in my brain. After pondering how I could thank the friend who sent me the book, I decided I would send her one poem per week for a full year — all of them bad. (More like revenge than gratitude, actually.)

And thus, the first year of bad poetry was born.

† This poem actually predates the bad poetry story — it was written a few months before as a dedication in a photo book about penguins I gave a friend — but was included because of the appropriate badness of it. I guess I've always had it in me to write bad poems.

BAD POETRY

Incomprehensibly, when I told some friends about my poetry writing activities, they actually wanted to see the poems. I did my best to discourage this, repeating with emphasis that the poems were supposed to be BAD. But the few who refused to be deterred became members of the bad poetry mailing list. I still find it difficult to believe that so many of *my* friends have such damaged sensibilities as to willingly receive poetry that is written with the expressed purpose of being bad. There is no accounting for it! Some of them actually attempted to write poems themselves, although I am happy to say they fell short of writing truly bad poetry (with the exception of my brother, of course, who is commotion poetry personified).

I used the results of the exercises to write the first few poems and continually referred to *The Ode* for inspiration and advice. It seemed that my life at the beginning of 2006 was full of topics for bad poems and the poetry began to flow from me like some sort of gastro-intestinal disturbance.

After a few months, any sort of irritation or disgust would suggest a poem. At the time I had developed a pathological irritation with the German train system. Even though I knew at least 50% trains would be late, I couldn't help but become irate — every single time. While waiting for a delayed train, I decided to write bad poems to pass the time and dissipate the irritation enough so that, if and when the train arrived, the urge to kick anyone subsided by the time I boarded. To be prepared, I started carrying a notebook and pen in my bag and would pull them out when I realized the train was not going to make it on time. Eventually, I started considering the poem on the walk to the train station. One day, I realized as I ran up the stairs to the platform, I was actually hoping the train would be late so as to have time to finish the stanza on which I was working.

It was a breakthrough for me.

Writing bad poetry had transformed from simple recreation to therapy. I used poetry to dissipate the considerable irritation that was welling up in me as I waited out my last year in Germany with dire impatience for starting my new life in Malaysia.

And sometimes I wonder — if I hadn't been writing poetry, what would have happened instead? Would I have eventually assaulted a train employee...? Or kicked down some old people blocking up the sidewalk? Or tossed an ashtray at the head of a surly waitress?

You could, if you were of a certain bent, almost of believe that bad poetry might have saved lives...

Anyway, I did have a lot of fun. And, just in case your judgment is a bit wonky today, here are all bad poems I have the guts to publish.

Happy reading! Happy writing!

Shannon Frances, Nibong Tebal, December 2006

BAD POETRY

Words like birds

Words, like birds, fly up into the air
Hover 'round my head and nest among my hair

Words, like birds, are picking at my brains
I feel ill, start thinking up refrains

Words, like birds, screech a noise inane
Shouting out stanzas, I fear I've gone insane

Words, like birds, fly off into the air
Leaving me here with a blank and empty stare...
And a whole bunch of really bad poetry...



Hot tub

Finally a moment at home all alone
Guests are all gone, and the house is all mine
Filled up the tub — let me soak to the bone
Washed off the stress and I'm feeling just fine
Deep satisfaction, sweet scent of the foam
Body relaxes, warm thoughts fill my mind
Happy, my soul is beginning to sing
Suddenly, rudely, the telephone rings

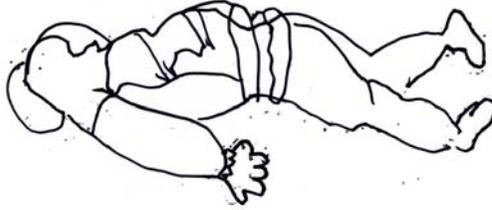


BAD POETRY

Winter haiku

Winter's cold silence, snow stillness
Grim days freeze endless nights — nature depressed
Snowflakes and my heart sink

Tears freezing on my cheek
Prone, my only company frozen grey clouds
Damn neighbors didn't shovel again



Monotonous grey, cold wind razors
Everything's dreary dead frozen to the bone
I hate the fucking winter

Snot-frozen nose, blue fingers
Trodden snow refrozen, treacherous knee-shattering slide
Oh shit, it's snowing again

Sweater, jacket, coat, gloves, scarf
Bundled in winter clothes, a grumpy onion
Shuffling cursing, braves the cold



I think of green leaves
Cold reality blows away dreams of warmth
Ugly pile of dirty snow



Coffee overdose

Coffee, coffee, I love you
Hot espresso, black and sweet
Only thing in life that's true

Coffee, coffee, such a treat
Had so much I'm turning blue
Makes my heart go beat, beat, beat

Coffee, coffee, milk or soya
Feel the thrill down to my toes
On the edge with paranoia

Coffee, coffee, time to go!
Could it be I'm out of luck?
Why are those guys over there staring so?

Coffee, coffee, what the fuck?
Can they read minds? What do they know?
Why are you guys following me? I can't take it anymore. Leave me alone!
Who do you think you are? Huh? HUH? Hey, you all SUCK!

Television brain death

Why should I try to write a poem
Or bother with some prose?
I could be rotting out my brain
And watching a TV
Drown out my thoughts with senseless noise
And advertising tunes
Give up my personality
Replaced with crap for free!

