

## Myth, Legend, and Pop Icon

*Come Mass, migrate from Greece and Ionia,  
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts...*

—Walt Whitman

### Lot's Wife

The just man followed then his angel guide  
Where he strode on the black highway, hulking and bright;  
But a wild grief in his wife's bosom cried,  
*Look back, it is not too late for a last sight*

*Of the red towers of your native Sodom, the square  
Where once you sang, the gardens you shall mourn,  
And the tall house with empty windows where  
You loved your husband and your babes were born.*

She turned, and looking on the bitter view  
Her eyes were welded shut by mortal pain;  
Into transparent salt her body grew,  
And her quick feet were rooted in the plain.

Who would waste tears upon her? Is she not  
The least of our losses, this unhappy wife?  
Yet in my heart she will not be forgot  
Who, for a single glance, gave up her life.

—Anna Akhmatova  
(Translated by Richard Wilbur)

The story of Lot and the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are part of our cultural and religious heritage. That Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for the sin of glancing back at Sodom as she was fleeing that burning city is known even to people who have little interest in the Bible.

But Anna Akhmatova is not simply retelling the biblical story; rather, she is using it to express her anguish at the destruction of her native Russia and at her sense of alienation—her spiritual exile—from the police-state created by Joseph Stalin. Akhmatova, one of Russia's greatest twentieth-century poets, saw her son imprisoned and her husband and closest friends murdered by the Soviet terror apparatus. Her dear friend Osip Mandelstam, another of the great Russian poets of the age, was banished to a gulag, where he eventually died, for having written a poem mocking Stalin. Instead of choosing exile, as did so many members of the Russian intelligentsia who were lucky enough to have survived the terror, Akhmatova remained in the Soviet Union and bore witness to the misery of those terrible decades. Despite the fact that her poetry was banned and was not again published in Russia until after her death (before the revolution she had been one of Russia's most widely read and admired poets), she became a symbol for the Russian people of the silent, agonized resistance to the decades of Stalinist tyranny.

Here, Lot's wife is not that Old Testament figure "looking back" with fondness on the life of sin and corruption that the biblical city of Sodom represents, but simply a woman who looks back at her native land—and at the life of fellowship and love that she cherished. How human the story becomes in her hands—how real this desperate figure of ancient legend becomes to the reader!

Richard Wilbur has used four-line stanzas of rhymed verse, a structure not unlike that of the original Russian poem, for his brilliant translation. Notice, however, that the formality of the structure does not impede him from writing with lucidity, power and grace; neither the rhymes nor the rhythm seems at all forced or artificial. In Chapters 16 through 20 we will discuss the formal and metrical structure of poems such as this. For now, simply observe that the poem rhymes and that every line has a similar length (most lines are ten syllables long), and similar rhythmic pattern.

Here is another poem in which a familiar tale is transformed:

### Grete!

said she didn't know anything about ovens  
so the witch crawled in to show her  
and Barn! went the big door.

Then she strolled out to the shed where  
her brother was fattening, knocked down  
a wall and lifted him high in the air.

Not long after the adventure in the forest

Gretel married so she could live happily.  
Her husband was soft as Hansel. Her  
husband liked to eat. He liked to see  
her in the oven with the pies and cakes.

Ever after was the size of a kitchen.

Gretel remembered when times were better.  
She laughed out loud when the witch  
popped like a weenie.

“Gretel! Stop fooling around and fix  
my dinner.”

“There’s something wrong with this oven,”  
she says, her eyes bright as treasure.

“Can you come here a minute?”

—Ronald Koertge

Plot and characterization combine, along with some wonderful phrasing, to give us an amusing revisionist version of Gretel. The poem’s delicious humor should not keep us from noticing how expertly the narrative is constructed. It takes the author just six lines to retell the familiar story, and in those lines he not only gives us the main features of the fairy tale but manages to create a vivid portrait of Gretel as a young woman of calm determination and fairy-tale power. “Barn! went the big door” reveals her no-nonsense decisiveness while setting the jaunty tone of the entire piece. Given that characterization, her final act is completely believable—within, of course, the context of this cartoonish fantasy. For any woman who believes that for too many centuries “ever after was the size of a litchen,” the social commentary behind this poem will not be lost. It is worth noting that Koertge manages to do the whole thing in just twenty lines.

Here’s a little poem by Billy Collins that uses a contemporary “mythological” figure. Like the Koertge poem, it is at once funny and chilling:

#### Flames

Smokey the Bear heads  
into the autumn woods  
with a red can of gasoline  
and a box of matches.

His hat is cocked  
at a disturbing angle.

The moonlight catches the teeth

of his smile.  
His paws, the size of catcher’s mitts,  
crackle into the distance.

He is sick of dispensing  
warnings to the careless,  
the half-wit camper  
the dumbbell hiker.

He is going to show them  
how a professional does it.

No one runs after him  
with the famous lecture.

—Billy Collins

Just as Ronald Koertge managed to create a surprising version of Gretel, Billy Collins has turned Smokey on his head. Notice how the poet manages to characterize his protagonist with a few masterly strokes. The second stanza, with one well-chosen detail—“His hat is cocked at a disturbing angle”—gives us a chilling picture of this darker, sociopathic version of Smokey the Bear. Indeed, the entire disconcerting story has been told from a “disturbing angle.”

It is often difficult to speak of the social and political world without sounding like someone on a soapbox mouthing political platitudes. But here’s a poem that avoids such a pitfall by playing with a well-known bit of mythology in order to create a controlling metaphor that illuminates the poet’s sense of political frustration. Any political activist who’s ever grieved over the lack of front-line support can identify at once with LoVerne Brown’s poem and the implications of its clever metaphor:

#### A Very Wet Leavetaking

Comrades, I regret to inform you  
I’m about to abandon this project.  
The city cannot be saved,

does not deserve to be saved,  
does not want to be saved—  
since our warning cries went unanswered,  
since, though the night was clear,  
they chose to remain

with Merv and Johnny and carcinogenic beer.

Our own involvement was simple,  
a matter of timing.

These holes appeared in this dike  
and we were here.

We remembered that big-thumbed kid,

the hero of Holland,  
and thought we could hold back the sea  
till the townsmen came.

Well, the night's half over;  
it's plain that they're not coming;  
the tide is high and  
the holes in the dike grow larger.  
My arm is too small a cork  
and floats in the flood,  
and I must tell you  
with shame but in all honesty  
I am not yet fully committed  
to sticking my head in.

—LoVerne Brown

When we think of the use of mythology in poetry, we often think of a poet alluding to some biblical character or Greek myth, such allusions being one of the adornments of English poetry. But the mythy world of folk and fairy tales, of comic book heroes, soap opera characters, and old movies, can also be used by contemporary poets—indeed, those pop-mythology characters are often more effective figures because their significance is more fully a part of our popular culture. That is not to say one can't take inspiration from the figures of Hecuba weeping before the ruined walls of Troy or Iphigenia, about to be sacrificed, bidding farewell to her mother. But the idea that the use of myth is limited to such figures is to fail to see the possibilities of using material from our own culture. It makes perfect sense for the plays of Euripides to be filled with Greek legends and for the works of contemporary American poets to be filled with American ones.

### Poem 18: Apocryphilia

Choose a character with whom you are familiar and whom it might be provocative, inspiring, useful, or fun writing about: Wonder Woman, Rambo, Job's wife, Attila the Hun, Lilith, Betty Crocker, Ozzie and Harriet, Bart Simpson, Sirtung Bull, Goldilocks, Madonna, Beetle Bailey, Snow White, Al Capone, Rapunzel, Pinocchio, Mickey Mouse, the Prodigal Son, Dagwood Bumstead—or any of scores of other figures whom you might be interested in reinventing.

Find an unexpected situation in which to place your character and an unexpected personality behind the stock figure we are all familiar with. Anna Akhmatova gives us a Lot's wife who is a refugee looking back on a country she has been forced to leave. Ronald Koertge pro-

jects Gretel into an unhappy marriage. Billy Collins creates a Smokey the Bear entering the woods with a can of gasoline. You might consider, for example, Dagwood Bumstead's eating disorder. What might happen if Barbie the doll became a radical feminist? How would Beetle Bailey react if he were suddenly in a real war and saw his friends getting killed? Did the third little pig, the one who built his house of bricks, eventually become a land developer? And what did Noah's wife feel like after the flood? Once you put your character in an unexpected situation, you can discover what happens next. For this poem, do *not* worry about your "theme" or idea; let that reveal itself to you in the course of the writing. By the end of the first or second draft, you should have a clear idea of the poem's thematic direction. From that point on, consciously steer the poem so that it all moves in a single, coherent direction.

Like the poets you have been reading in this chapter, try to surprise the reader while keeping the story logical. For example, Barbie might be a closet anorexic while Lazarus might return from the dead with some terrible secret that only the dead know. Those are perfectly "logical" situations, considering the characters.

Rather than give in to the impulse to write at length, see if you can do it all concisely—in fewer than twenty-five lines. That will force you to search for the one detail that will speak volumes. If you have difficulty keeping it so short, go back and reread the poems in this chapter, paying attention to how the writers manage to keep their stories to a single scene and how the details quickly bring character and setting to life.

If you are writing a comic, light-spirited poem, be sure that your humor is not sophomoric and obvious. On the other hand, there is no reason for this poem not to be as serious and significant as the Akhmatova poem with which this chapter began. Comic or serious, your object is to write a poem that is crisp, quirky, admirably wrought and memorable.

