



A Ghost in Oklahoma

BY
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MYERS

JOHN BERRYMAN WAS KNOWN AS ONE OF THE GREATEST AMERICAN POETS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, AND HE SPENT MUCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD IN OKLAHOMA. IN THIS ESSAY, A FORMER STATE POET LAUREATE GOES IN SEARCH OF THE ENIGMATIC, TORTURED WRITER'S LEGACY.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HEIDI JO MANN

WHEN I WAS young, my parents sometimes took me Oklahoma ghost hunting, loading my sisters and me into the car to visit some reputedly haunted location. I remember vividly our trip to a hanging tree in the Cimarron Valley, its broad reach of branches still bowed by the weight of the dead. My parents were writers, and they were hunting ghost stories more than actual ghosts. Still, the hobby must have rubbed off on me, because I find myself hunting my own Oklahoma spirit: the ghost of the great American poet John Berryman.

Berryman's 1969 two-volume opus *The Dream Songs* was a compilation of 1964's *77 Dream Songs* and 1968's *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. In it, Henry, the persona adopted by the poet, stands at his father's grave, where "the marker slants, flowerless" and admits, "often, often before / I've made this awful pilgrimage."

The poems in *The Dream Songs* trace Berryman's obsession with his father's death, so the pilgrimage in question may be metaphorical. Nevertheless, it makes me wonder if Berryman ever did return to visit his father's grave, where the body lies, as "Dream Song #143" says, "stashed in Oklahoma." While his poems rarely mention Oklahoma, in what reference Berryman makes to the state, it's clear he associates it with his lost father.

In 1969, poet Adrienne Rich wrote, "The English (American) language, who knows entirely what it is? Maybe two men in this decade: Bob Dylan, John Berryman." Heidi Jo Mann illustrated Berryman for *Oklahoma Today* using charcoal, cigarette ash, and coffee.



“... beneath the gruff surface and the high jinks of these poems we hear, deeper down, a vibrant, loving man with a vast spirit,” wrote poet Henri Cole in a 2016 *New Yorker* profile of Berryman. “Exacerbated and enormously learned, Berryman was a master of the poem written with manic energy from the edges of human experience.”

BERRYMAN WAS BORN John Allyn Smith Jr. in McAlester in 1914. His father, John Smith—the poet would take the name Berryman from his mother’s second husband—was a banker, and his mother at one time was a school teacher in the Seminole County town of Sasakwa. The family moved around Oklahoma a lot during Berryman’s early years before settling in Anadarko, where Smith was a vice president and loan officer at First State Bank, in 1921. Like many Oklahomans, they were following oil money. The younger John attended school in Anadarko and was an altar boy at Holy Family Catholic Church.

John Smith eventually became assistant game and fish warden for the state. Despite this success, the boy’s parents left for Florida in 1925, leaving Berryman and his younger brother at St. Joseph’s Academy in Chickasha. The boys were miserable at the boarding school, however, and were retrieved by their mother before the year’s end. Thus the poet’s time in Oklahoma concluded when he was eleven, but many of the factors that would influence his writing already were present, including the smoldering disintegration of his parents’ marriage and the infidelities and deceptions that may have contributed to his father’s apparent suicide the following year.

FROM THIS BEGINNING, Berryman became one of the most significant American poets of the mid-twentieth century. His masterpiece, the 385-poem sequence called *The Dream Songs*, won him a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. The elliptical, purposefully illogical nature of his writing—along with his intensely personal subject matter—made him, with poets like Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, part of the transition from modernism in the first half of the twentieth century to postmodernism in the second.

Aware of his reputation as a difficult poet, I first read Berryman hesitantly and only because he was born in Oklahoma. His wit, imagination, linguistic acrobatics, and emotional honesty won me over, and I learned to go along for the ride in a wild Berryman poem, not trying to arrive at an easily paraphrased “meaning” for the poem but rather absorbing the mood suggested by the images and allusions. As he says of himself, “These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand. / They are only meant to terrify & comfort.” Berryman’s poems became a part of my life, and I began to wonder how this place, where he was born and lived such formative years, marked his soul.

SITTING AT MY desk, I look out the window at the sycamore across the street, and I think of “Dream Song #1,” specifically of the poignant lines: “All the world like a woolen lover / once did seem on Henry’s side. / Then came a departure.” He continues, “Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang.”

Singing in a sycamore is an image of boyish freedom and, as Berryman biographer Paul Mariani points out, it gestures toward the poet’s childhood in rural Oklahoma. In the first poem of Berryman’s masterpiece, Oklahoma is a paradise lost. In “Dream Song #195,” Berryman laments, “Oklahoma, sore / from my great loss leaves me.” This association makes sense of the first poem’s penultimate line, “Hard on the land wears the strong sea.” This image perhaps recalls Berryman’s move from the safe interior of the country to Florida, where things went terribly wrong for his family.

Occasionally, Berryman offers idyllic memories of life in Oklahoma. In “Dream Song #11,” he recalls skating up and down in front of the home of a childhood crush named Charlotte.

TERRENCE SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES

Speaking in third person, he describes his younger self as “wishing he could, sir, die,” an expression of childhood passion which seems whimsical when contrasted with the pronounced death wish that runs through many other poems in the volume. In “Dream Song #167,” he comically contrasts the poor postal service in his current city with “the town in Okie-land when I was young— / three and four deliveries a day!” In “Dream Song #241,” he recalls watching his father march with his National Guard unit on a rainy hillside, which he describes as “a fraction of sun & guns / ’way ’way ago,” a kind of boy’s paradise. In all three poems, Oklahoma is the unrecoverable golden world before the fall. Yet I find no mention of a return to the state of his birth. Perhaps he thought it impossible to come back.

WANTING TO SEE Berryman’s Oklahoma, I decide to drive to Anadarko. The land heading into town on U.S. Highway 62 from Chickasha is typical Oklahoma—rolling but still wide open under domed blue sky. Round bales and pump jacks are scattered across the yellowed fields along the highway, an occasional silo reaching upwards. There is smoke in the distance, perhaps from a controlled burn. I feel hopeful about encountering a ghost.

Mariani’s 1990 biography *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* gives the family’s address, and on the appropriate block, I find a few houses, all on the wrong side of the street. The entire block on the Smiths’ side is occupied by the Caddo Baptist Association and a crisis pregnancy center. Berryman’s childhood home is gone. The surrounding neighborhood, however, is as I pictured it. Many original houses remain, some of which may have belonged to Berryman’s childhood playmates. I wonder which house might be the one little John skated in front of hoping to

catch sight of young Charlotte. I wonder which one might have belonged to the Callahan family, whose son F.J. Berryman remembered as being one of the first people he knew to die—a death which he appears to recount in “Dream Song #129,” which took place by a cottonwood tree and made the boy permanently a “part of Henry’s history.”

Crossing the four-lane that cuts the block short, I spot a large, low-limbed sycamore suitable for climbing. “Once in a sycamore I was glad / all at the top, and I sang.” It is a very small, very uncertain victory, but I gladly take it.

I’ve come to Anadarko looking for a ghost, and I feel like that ghost has remained just outside my grasp, like Berryman’s elusive and disorienting poems. But I understand *The Dream Songs* better for having been here, if only in that I can more perfectly picture the sidewalks, the trees, the setting of his earliest memories. On the way out of town, I stop at a renovated soda fountain and sandwich shop on old Main Street just a few blocks from Berryman’s neighborhood. Reading the history of the building, I see that it began in 1901 as Dinkler’s Drug. It is easy to imagine young Berryman sent here to pick up prescriptions for his high-strung mother. It is easy to imagine him stopping in for a soda with Charlotte or F.J. I have no evidence that he did so, but I enjoy imagining a young man—before his father’s suicide, before his own alcoholism—taking a moment of simple enjoyment here.

If Berryman’s ghost haunts anywhere, one would expect to find him around the bridge in Minneapolis from which, following his father’s example, he jumped to his death in 1972. But I wonder if his spirit also returns to the wind-swept plains of Anadarko. Does John Berryman haunt Oklahoma as Oklahoma seemed to haunt him? All I can say is that his spirit haunts me and eludes me. It keeps me reading. It keeps me hunting. ■



Berryman has remained a source of inspiration for contemporary poets and lyricists. The band Clap Your Hands Say Yeah refer to him by name in song. Australian singer Nick Cave named his 1992 album *Henry's Dream* after the narrator in *The Dream Songs* and included the lyric “Berryman was best!” in the 2008 song “We Call Upon the Author.”