



Invisible Strings

113 Poets respond
to the songs of
Taylor Swift

Edited by Kristie Frederick Daugherty



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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1. Maggie Smith: Pull](#)

[2. Robin Behn: How can I tell you what dark wing](#)

[3. Susan Rich: Plural as the Universe](#)

[4. Bianca Stone: Love's Cure](#)

[5. Tyler Knott Gregson: A Shared Nocturne](#)

[6. Aimee Nezhukumatathil: Postcard from the Jardin du Palais Royal](#)

[7. Nina Mingya Powles: Raroa Road](#)

[8. Carl Phillips: Last Call](#)

[9. Joseph O. Legaspi: Heaven in Grand Central Station](#)

[10. Yusef Komunyakaa: Dreaming the Lowdown](#)

[11. Tommy Archuleta: Trans/ohm](#)

12. amanda lovelace: alic, tumbling.

13. Kelli Russell Agodon: In Wonderland, We're Surprised/Not Surprised to Learn the Chamomile Tea Tastes Bitter

14. Subhaga Crystal Bacon: Radioactive Apology

15. Christian Gullette: Another Version of Us

16. Jessica Laser: Concessions

17. Lisa Fay Coutley: Letter to Future Me About Which Outfit to Wear for Future Wreckage

18. Rigoberto González: Do Paper Dolls Still Exist?

19. Ming Lauren Holden: can she breathe?

20. Blas Falconer: The bird in my mouth

21. Joy Harjo: On the Stairs

22. Lang Leav: Paperweight

23. January Gill O'Neil: Incantation

24. Anne Waldman: Oracle of a Trickster Night

25. A. E. Stallings: The Gift of Apollo

26. Katie Darby Mullins: Honeycombed and Dangerous

27. Amy King: Lessons Learning

28. Samiya Bashir: Wabenzi Walks

29. Andrea Simpson: Ophelia, *Mania from the Willow Tree*

30. Carey Salerno: No Table I Could Dress

31. Erin Belieu: Cocklebur

32. Kim Addonizio: Resurrection

33. Laura Kasischke: Once

34. Teri Ellen Cross Davis: Tempered

35. Stephanie Burt: the much-maligned swiftie considers her options

36. Shikha Malaviya: Hark, the Raucous Heiress Speaks

37. Diane Seuss: The Lucky One

38. Marilyn Chin: Broken Feather Bad Boyfriend Blues

39. Topaz Winters: Grief Observatory

40. Naomi Shihab Nye: The Williams

41. Jill Bialosky: I Go Back to the Past All the Time

42. Ellie Black: Job 5:7

43. Tess Taylor: If I Could Tell Her What I Know Now

44. Callie Garnett: The Gathering

45. Jennifer Espinoza: Homecoming

46. Honor Moore: Take This

47. Tennison Black: June 1st, 7 a.m.

48. David St. John: Virginia Reel

49. Paul Muldoon: Of All the Girls Who Might Have Made It Big

50. Natasha Sajé: Whereby in Reply

51. Andrea Gibson: Perennial

52. Christopher Salerno: Since You Can't Spell Disaster Without Desire

53. Katie Manning: 1993

54. Evie Shockley: *struggle*

55. James Allen Hall: These Barcelonas

56. Christopher Citro: You're So Gross and I Love You

57. Matthea Harvey: Out of This World

58. Rodrigo Toscano: Espectacularistas

59. Leah Umansky: Oceans Apart

60. Gregory Pardlo: Amusement Ruins

61. John Gallaher: Or Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*

62. CA Conrad: *from* First Light

63. Cornelius Eady: The Supreme Court Blues: July 1st 2024

64. Paul Tran: Pathetic Fallacy

65. Dustin Brookshire: Poem in Which I Realize That One Day I Won't Miss You

66. Molly Peacock: I Don't Need Your Letter

67. Kristie Frederick Daugherty: No Invitations

68. Deborah Landau: Without You Triptych

69. Dorianne Laux: Deep into December

70. Jeannine Ouellette: Firstborn

71. Didi Jackson: Another Round

72. Anna Journey: Visiting the Poet Larry Levis's Archive in Virginia, I Pull His
Black Cowboy Boots from Box Number 40

73. Hollie McNish: *for a friend, considering leaving*

74. Sabrina Benaim: The Suburbs

75. Jennifer Franklin: An Ordinary Day

**76. Barbara Hamby: Ode to the Little Girl Singing Karaoke at My Nephew's
Wedding Reception**

77. Aaron Smith: Letter That You Never Read

78. Paige Ackerson-Kiely: Credit

79. Gustavo Hernandez: Bachelor

80. Major Jackson: On Again, Off Again

81. Dean Rader: Creation

82. David Groff: We Have

83. Victoria Redel: The Long Marriage

84. Betsy Sholl: I Revert to a Familiar Theme: You

85. Rae Armantrout: Ghost Gear

86. Elizabeth Scanlon: Earth Too

87. Oluwaseun Olayiwola: Entanglement

88. Andrea Cohen: Duet

89. Ruben Quesada: Summer Lover

90. Catherine Cohen: Parking Lot Poem

- 91. Mag Gabbert: Anti-Sonnet**
- 92. Joan Kwon Glass: Exit Plans**
- 93. Tomás Q. Morín: Homeland**
- 94. Lauren Camp: My Solitary Buckle of Night**
- 95. Stacy Pratt: Remembered *Veneto, Summer 2004***
- 96. Kai Coggin: Eternal**
- 97. Ellen Bass: Midnight Ruby**
- 98. Mary Jo Bang: After Is After (Everything Is Over)**
- 99. avery r. young: inside an integrated dreamlike state**
- 100. Diane Ackerman: Ballroom of Stars**
- 101. Nickole Brown: Who We Were**
- 102. Victoria Chang and Matthew Zapruder: Friendship**
- 103. Maya C. Popa: It All Comes Back to Me Now**
- 104. J. D. Isip: Moon and Earth**
- 105. Matt Abbott: To the Bone**
- 106. Richard Siken: Close**

107. Kate Baer: Final Straw

108. Melissa Studdard: When You Rise from the Dead, I Drive You to the After Party

109. Kerry Beth Neville: Auld Lang Syne

110. Ilya Kaminsky: Of Flight

111. Brenda Hillman: In the Remodeled Vault of Eternity

112. Jane Hirshfield: And now from the distance of time

113. Diane Seuss and Kristie Frederick Daugherty: For Dr. Taylor A. Swift: A Cento, in Honor of “All Too Well”

Outros: On Responding to Taylor’s Songs

Kristie’s Playlist

Acknowledgments

Credits

About the Contributors

This book is dedicated to my grandparents:
my Granny, the late Ramona Marilyn “Sissie” Perkins (June 16, 1932–June 17, 2016),
and her husband, my Granddaddy, the late Eddie J. Perkins, Sr. (May 6, 1928–August
29, 2024).

You’re alive in my head.

—Taylor Swift, “Marjorie”

Foreword

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THE STADIUM FILLS. THE ANTICIPATION and excitement are palpable. At last, the performer takes to the stage, greeted by thunderous applause. They will sing, perhaps solo, perhaps with a backing chorus. There will be dancing.

This is the origin of lyric poetry in the West over 2,500 years ago. As an integral part of the Olympic Games and other Panhellenic festivals, a celebrated composer of verse, such as Pindar or Bacchylides, would give a performance to remember. They would sing, with dance accompaniment, of heroes, of victors and victims, in a form known as the ode.

Poetry and song have always been associated. The plays of Shakespeare are punctuated with musical interludes—“In delay there lies no plenty, / Then come kiss me sweet and twenty: / Youth’s a stuff will not endure.” William Blake sang his lyrics—“Jerusalem” and “The Tyger.” Poetry intended for the page again and again invokes the spirit of music, as when John Keats writes an ode to the song of the nightingale or T. S. Eliot peppers *The Waste Land* with quotations from Richard Wagner’s epic music drama *The Ring of the Nibelungen*.

But can a mere songwriter, who does not intend to publish their lyrics, be called a poet? Of course they can. Poetry emerged out of the oral tradition and always returns to the rhythmic voice. Eyebrows were raised when Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature, but the ingenuity and durability of his lyrics deserved it: “The times they are a’changin’.” Dylan always began with interesting words and then found the music to go with them. With the Beatles, it was usually the opposite. In his book *The Lyrics*, Paul McCartney recalled that only once did the words come first: Even a ballad with such a strong narrative as “Eleanor Rigby” grew from a chord, not a story.

In this regard, Taylor Swift is more Dylan than McCartney. She has been writing poetry since she was a teenager. Her inspiration nearly always comes from a verbal idea. She writes out the words then creates the music, often with assistance from a collaborator. The poem, it may be said, precedes the song. In 2022, on accepting the Songwriter-Artist of the Decade award in Nashville, she spoke of her compositional method: In her mind, she said, the lyrics of each song belonged to one of three categories or, to use the literary term, genres. She gave them affectionate names, the Quill, the Fountain Pen, and the Glitter Gel Pen. She went on to explain that she doesn't actually have a quill, though she joked that she did own one until she broke it in a fit of madness.

The "Quill" songs are those in which "the words and phrasings are antiquated, if I was inspired to write it after reading Charlotte Brontë or after watching a movie where everyone is wearing poet shirts and corsets. If my lyrics sound like a letter written by Emily Dickinson's great-grandmother while sewing a lace curtain, that's me writing in the Quill genre." The example she cited was "Ivy" from *evermore*, with its image of how "in from the snow, your touch brought forth an incandescent glow."

"Fountain Pen" songs are those with the most characteristic Swift lyrics:

A modern storyline or references, with a poetic twist. Taking a common phrase and flipping its meaning. Trying to paint a vivid picture of a situation, down to the chipped paint on the door frame and the incense dust on the vinyl shelf. Placing yourself and whoever is listening right there in the room where it all happened. The love, the loss, everything.

For this style, the exemplar is "All Too Well," with its memory of "dancing round the kitchen in the refrigerator light."

As for "Glitter Gel Pen" songs, they are "frivolous, carefree, bouncy." Their lyrics "don't care if you don't take them seriously because they don't take themselves seriously." They're like the effusive "drunk girl at the party." They are a necessary periodic antidote to the trauma of the contemporary world. The kind of song, that is, where you can dance and just shake off any thought of seriousness.

In this self-analysis, we see many of the tools that will be familiar to the dozens of contemporary poets who have contributed to this volume: the art of allusion as an act of homage to the words of previous poets (in Swift's case, preeminently Emily Dickinson). The revivification of a cliché: "Taking a common phrase and flipping its meaning" is a twist on the eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope's definition of good writing as "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." The animation of those moments of emotional intensity we have all experienced: "Placing yourself and whoever is listening right there in the room where it all happened" is again in the spirit of Pope, who in his "Essay on Criticism" went on to describe successful poetry as "something, whose truth convinced at sight we find, / That gives us back the image of our mind."

Taylor Swift crossed over from country artist to everywoman when she gave every teenage girl the image of their mind in the bittersweet songs of *Fearless*. To quote Pope just one more time, he wrote that poetry is a revelation of "wit's wild dancing light," which is as good a description as may be imagined of such witty riffs as "She wears high heels, I wear sneakers / She's cheer captain, and I'm on the bleachers" ("You Belong with Me"). William Empson, the twentieth century's most brilliant reader of the intricacies of lyric poetry, highlighted *ambiguity*—double meaning—as a key poetic device. And that is what we find in this seemingly simple couplet: The persona voicing the song is "on the bleachers" both literally (merely a spectator of the ballgame, while her pretty rival shakes her poms-poms on the cheer team) and metaphorically (she has, for now, been consigned to the margins of the boy's world).

Poetic devices run seamlessly through all the eras of Swift's oeuvre, but it was in the lockdown albums *folklore* and *evermore* that her lyric voice blossomed into a new maturity and depth that broadened her intergenerational appeal (the lowercase titles are perhaps a nod to e. e. cummings). Literary allusion was a signal of this. "The Lakes" explicitly acknowledges a debt to the British Romantic tradition, in which the "Lake Poet" William Wordsworth was the leading figure, inaugurating a new kind of poetry as self-expression: "Take me to the Lakes where all the poets went to die.... Those Windermere peaks look like a perfect place to cry." The verse ends with a moment of neat wordplay: "my words worth." Anyone who finds worth in the words of Wordsworth and shares his sense of the positive emotional valence of the mountains

around Windermere in the English Lake District is a true lover of poetry. Swift's description of those of her songs that are "like confessions scribbled and sealed in an envelope" could as well be a definition of Romanticism.

"Invisible String," one of the very best songs on *folklore*, reanimates the old trope of "we were always meant for each other" through a simple but memorable metaphor: Swift proposes that it is "just so pretty to think" that there is an "invisible string / Tying you to me." This works as poetry not only because of its precision—"tying" is exactly the right verb for the idea of the lovers' bond—but also because it pulls on an invisible string of literary precedent. Consciously or unconsciously (it doesn't matter which), three antecedents are threaded together. Conceptually, there is seventeenth-century poet John Donne's gorgeous image of a pair of lovers being physically apart but spiritually together in the manner of a geometer's open compass ("A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"). Then for the deliberately understated and gently ironic word choice "isn't it pretty," there is the closing dialogue of Ernest Hemingway's great wartime love story, *The Sun Also Rises*:

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together."

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

And, decisively, there is the moment when Mr. Rochester finally admits his love for Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*:

I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you—especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame.

Jane Eyre begins with a lonely young girl, who sees herself as an outsider, sitting in a window seat reading a book. For generations, literature has been a resource for teenagers seeking solace amid heartbreak and the confusion of adolescence. Taylor Swift has become their voice.

She has always had a literary sensibility. The earliest song on her debut album is called “The Outside.” “This is one of the first songs I ever wrote, and it talks about the very reason I ever started to write songs,” she explained in an interview. “It was when I was twelve years old, and a complete outcast at school.” The song suggests that the way to deal with this sense of exclusion is to carve your own path: “I tried to take the road less traveled by.” The line is a clear allusion to a staple of American middle school English classes, Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

The image of the road not taken, or less traveled by, recurs in the songs “Illicit Affairs” and “’Tis the Damn Season” on those haunting albums *folklore* and *evermore*, which for millions of listeners of all ages became the soundtrack of lockdown. The road of songwriting has indeed made all the difference to Taylor Swift. By diverging from style to style, not always going down the same well-tried road in the way that so many musicians do, she has kept finding herself new audiences while retaining the loyalty of her original fans.

Swift is famous for hiding “Easter eggs” that tantalize the Swifties. One such was the date of the announcement that she was about to drop her second surprise album of 2020: December 10. That is the birthday of Emily Dickinson, one of whose best-known poems about a love triangle—a perennial Swiftian theme—ends:

*I spilt the dew,
But took the morn—
I chose this single star
From out the wide night’s numbers—
Sue—forevermore!*

Taylor Swift has not revealed whether this was the inspiration for the title track of *evermore*, but there is no doubt that some of that song’s lyrics have an extraordinarily

Dickinson-like feel. “The cracks of light” and “floors of a cabin creaking under my step” evoke the slanting light and claustrophobia of the secluded nineteenth-century New England genius, who has been a muse to some other great modern songwriters, such as Paul Simon (“For Emily, whenever I may find her”). And the verse that begins with an image of addressing lovelorn correspondence “to the fire” could almost have been written by Dickinson herself.

The strength of that particular verse of the song comes not least from the way in which it only half abandons rhyme for free verse: Though most of the lines are irregular and unrhymed, there is still a rhyme on “breath” and “death”—a coupling as venerable as the art of poetry itself, which has always been a matter of expressive breath and the recognition of death, whether metaphoric (the end of an affair) or literal (that kind of poetry known as *elegy*, meaning the remembrance of those we have lost). The imagination has its own ways, below the level of the writer’s deliberate craftwork. It is impossible to know whether Swift’s conjunction of breath and death was conjured out of the memory of the Shakespearean play that inspired the “Love Story” of *Fearless*. Romeo in the final scene: “Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath.”

Another ancient form of lyric is the ballad: the poem that tells a story. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” are the classics in the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition, while Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” is a modern example of astonishing power. Taylor Swift’s songs have, as yet, eschewed overt political commitment of the kind that created problems for those other crossover artists from country to mainstream, the sometime Dixie Chicks. “The Last Great American Dynasty,” her song about the heiress Rebekah Harkness, does not pack the political punch of Dylan’s indictment of racial violence in the days of segregation. It is a ballad that on the surface takes joy in eccentricity (“And in a feud with her neighbor / She stole his dog and dyed it key lime green”) and, to those in the know, exhibits self-mockery over conspicuous expenditure: “I had a marvelous time ruining everything” nods to the fact that some of Swift’s own neighbors were far from happy about her Fourth of July parties in the Rhode Island house that once belonged to Rebekah.