

DAY AFTER JOHN BERRYMAN'S SUICIDE JANUARY 8, 1972

Some call my brother a brick. He's stable
all right. He holds up when things are falling apart.
Anyway, he had always held up until yesterday.
He came in my house feeling low. I mean lower
than I had ever seen him. Ordinarily
he loves freshly perked coffee. He can't wait
to cool it drinking hot. Yesterday he just sat there
and stared at the cup. He didn't ask me how I was
feeling after my doctor's checkup or if Bobby Gene's
disability check ever came. He sighed and said, "He
just shouldn't have done that." Bobby Gene asked
him, "Who shouldn't have done what?" Brother
looked hard at both of us. "John Berryman
had no right to walk off that bridge into the cold
Mississippi River." Bobby Gene wasn't moved
much about the sad story. "John Berryman
was old enough to make up his own
mind wasn't he?" Brother started
to drink his coffee, didn't say anything
more.

WIDOWER AND SON - 1926

With the outside world cut off
by January
bitter wind piling snow around
the old farmhouse
and the Big Ben clock showing
exactly seven

Pa Hale knocked the ashes
out of his corncob pipe
unstrung his boots
and looked hard at his young
son Vergil

And tersely warned him
Boy
You don't know it yet
but women means trouble

Then clumped off to his featherbed
in a cold back room
leaving Vergil in the lamplight

of the dark-walled kitchen
with the Sears Roebuck catalog
for his sole companion