WRITING POEMS
"LIKE YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK"

As visiting poet at the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, I've had a chance to work with elementary and high school students in poetry-writing sessions over the past two years, at the invitation of Sheridan Blau at the South Coast Writing Project. In 1980, my first year as a SCWriP consultant, with my friend and fellow writer Kimberley Snow—a former gourmet chef as well as a Ph.D. in English from the University of Kentucky at Lexington—I read a group of poems featuring foods of various kinds, then led a workshop of elementary and high school teachers in writing poems about food, with the stimulus of Dr. Snow's specially prepared bouquet garnis passed round to each writer to sniff, and a delicious Ojai Valley orange to take possession of by mind, mouth, and pen. Another session in 1980 consisted of a round table chat with high school teachers on methods of encouraging a vigorous but non-anxious commitment to revision as well as invention among poetry-writing students.

In the winter and spring of 1981 I offered, through the South Coast Writing Project, poetry presentations to two groups of students identified as having a strong gift with words. The first session included pupils from the fourth through twelfth grades, the second exclusively high schoolers. In both ninety-minute presentations, I used a third of the time for warm-up—commenting on the craft of poetry and reading provocative examples—twenty minutes for students to experiment with poems of their own, and the rest of the period to hear some of the just-written poems read aloud for comment and appreciation. The exercises I handed out to spark this in-class writing worked so well that I wanted to share them—and my method of approach to them—with other teachers here.

My main concern with young writers as they attempt to make poetry is to shake them out of the habit of a sing-song, usually rhyming formalism. Too often imagination fails to appear for students inviting the Muse because they've been encouraged to confuse the light game of versifying, for all the fun it provides, with the energizing plunge of fresh invention. Many are taught, in effect, that the great tool of the poet is the metronome. Speaking against rhyme and formalism and in favor of the leap of discovery as the crucial poetic experience, I went on in each of my presentations to read poems by former students and noted contemporary poets, the principle of selection in every case being oddity, supporting the contention that the poet is a person who "puts moves" on words in order to "make it new." For example, the following poem by Anselm Hollo might radically alter a young poet's sense of the methods of professional poets in these post-Modernist days.
good stuff cookies

2 gods
2/3 cup hidden psychic reality
2 teasp. real world
3/4 cup sleep
2 cups sifted all-purpose iridescence
2 teasp. good stuff
1/2 teasp. pomp & pleasure

beat gods  hidden psychic reality
real world and sleep together
sift together iridescence  good stuff
pomp & pleasure
add to real world mixture
drop by teaspoon
2 inches apart on cookie sheet
press cookies flat
with bottom of glass dipped in sleep
bake at 400 F 8 to 10 minutes

2 dozen cookies  good stuff

As I read such poems, all with a certain freshening nuttiness as to organizing idea, I pause for a bit of discussion-style literature teaching, concentrating on a strangely moving line—say e.e. cummings’ “nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands”—or on the meaning of a teasingly obscure but powerful short lyric like the following one by Josephine Miles:

CONCERT
I was sitting behind a somewhat neat old person
In cream lined beige matching coat and hat
Neat but that the hat crown
Tilted at a curious angle left to right.
As I deliberated, she turned her head impatiently
As at a draft of air,
And pulled the hat from off a mane of hair,
Of wild white hair.

Then, choosing first lines and last lines from similar poems, I pass out worksheets like these below.

WORKSHEET (4th through 12th grades)

Make some poetry to get the first lines through to the last lines. Work on as many as you have an interest in, and time for.

FIRST LINES

1.  When despair for the world grows in me
2.  I stand in the dark light in the dark street
3.  The National Cold Storage Company contains

4.  I can’t live in this world
5.  This lovely flower fell to seed;
6.  somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond

LAST LINES

1.  I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
2.  I pump him full of lost watches.
3.  Stars, all the years of our lives.

4.  Like Yellowstone National Park.
5.  That she would grow again.
6.  nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands

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WORKSHEET (10th through 12th grades)

An Experiment in Poetry Writing

Work your way into a poem by choosing a First Line from those below, one that appeals to you. Once you get going, choose a Last Line to target toward.

Feel free to change, or leave out entirely, this scaffolding of First and Last Lines, once they’ve served their purpose of getting your poem started and bringing it home to a conclusion. But do begin with one of the eight First Lines, and do, eventually, think of one particular Last Line as the closure your poem strives to reach.

FIRST LINES

1. Housewives as the nights came in 5. Before I go
2. We did it in front of the mirror 6. The woman stood up in front of the table. Her sad hands
3. In the corner of the living room was an album of unbearable photos 7. In a small town in Scotland they sell books with one blank page
4. My mother once told me 8. She was born in the midst of the black frock coats

LAST LINES

1. which she tore with her teeth. 5. their evening broth.
2. and broke from those pages. 6. women’s stockings.
3. I take back everything I’ve said. 7. clinging.
4. like the earth of the summer beneath. 8. and then a small song, a little mist, and then nothing?

For the first Worksheet I chose twentieth century poems, each of which began with a rather dire or grim atmosphere and worked through to a degree of affirmation; for the second, I borrowed from the anthology Another Republic: 17 European & South American Writers, edited by Charles Simic and Mark Strand (The Ecco Press, New York, 1976). During the read-aloud session following the in-class writing, students became interested, first, in the amount of self-expression they’d achieved, then in comparing what one or another had done with the same initial or concluding line. At the very end of the meeting they were fascinated to hear what such professional poets as Philip Whalen and Wendell Berry, Yehuda Amichai, Jean Follain, and Nicanor Parra, did with the lines we borrowed from them. In the sheet for the more advanced students, first and last lines were scrambled, so that a writer often began with one poet’s help and ended with another’s. The technique made for a swift start, a high degree of risk both formal and thematic, and offered the urgency of game-playing as the writer invented a path toward the given or chosen last line. It also illustrated some of the range in style and subject of contemporary poetic practice; in both workshops I was gratified to hear students report that they were going away with a whole new idea of what poetry could be in its range of expressive possibilities.

I’d like to conclude with these two poems by students at San Marcos High School in Santa Barbara, both starting with the same first line, both illustrative of the sort of work that came out of the SCWriP workshop meetings.
INNOCENCE

We did it in front of the mirror,
innocent, desiring love.

Touching each other,
yet not feeling.

Whispering to each other,
yet not hearing.

Gazing at each other,
yet not seeing.

But the purity was there.
And the loving, and beauty too.

We were there.
Making love.

Like the earth of the summer beneath.

—Dennise Rojo

‘I’M A HOMEBODY, YOU’RE NOT”

We did it in front of the mirror
we did it again and again
We did it early and late
and none of it has been forgotten
The mirror
The mirror
It was all so easy there
And when we tried elsewhere?
You know, you? no!
The mirror
The mirror
That’s where I’ll hang my hat
not the painting or the chair,
but
The mirror.
I couldn’t wait to see you there
beside me
For when we did it there?
I knew, I? new!
So you can guess, though you are at the door
I am at the mirror,
good times—the mirror
at the mirror clutching.

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