

# Words As Power: Teaching Poetry

By Barbara Helfgott Hyett

YOUR POEM, MAN...

unless there's one thing seen  
suddenly against another— a parsnip  
sprouting for a President, or  
hailstones melting in an ashtray—  
nothing really happens. It takes  
surprise and wild connections,  
doesn't it? A walrus chewing  
on a ballpoint pen. Two blue tail-  
lights on Tyrannosaurus Rex. Green  
cheese teeth. Maybe what we wanted  
least. Or most. Some unexpected  
pleats. Words that never knew  
each other till right now. Plug us  
into the wrong socket and see  
what blows— or what lights up.

Try

    untried

        circuitry,

new

    fuses.

Tell it like it never really was,

man,

and maybe we can see it like it is.

—Edward Lueders

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## Introduction

This book, assembled from notes, lesson plans and a partial draft of a poetry handbook found in her office, presents a few of the core beliefs Barbara Helfgott Hyett held regarding poetry, as well as some wonderful lesson plans designed for children and beginners. My initial aim in putting this together was help former students like myself describe to others what Hyett’s PoemWorks workshop was like, a desire I feel many of “us” understand— *What the Poem Knows*, a tribute to Hyett by former students, is a moving collection for those who wish to know more.

I hope that general readers will find this book helpful in their classrooms and also with their own work. Barbara’s appeal to poetry’s roots as magic words or chanted language in pre-writing societies is a great base from which to demonstrate poetry’s value for the skeptical audience (which she rightly assumes almost everyone is). At the same time, her teaching is focused on the contemporary, and her careful lessons communicate her profound respect and love for advanced craft.

My thanks to Alexis Ivy and Eric Hyett for their help in putting this together.

Spencer Thurlow



## WHY TEACH POETRY?

Between most adults and the subject of poetry, there is a great distance.

At twelve, we memorized "The Charge of the Light Brigade." At fifteen we listed metaphors from "The lady of Shalott." In college, we may have managed to put all that behind us. Even if we can still drum the rhythms, or recall one lovely image, what we remember most is that poetry was strange, as alien to our daily lives as the exotic gowns from a Paris show.

It looked odd on the page. It had its own elegant vocabulary. It contorted the patterns of familiar speech. It spoke, often, of things we were too polite or too embarrassed to talk about much in ordinary conversation. Poets were peculiar birds, as unnerving to meet socially as psychiatrists.

Still, poetry held its place in the classroom, sometimes out of habit, then gradually out of the proof offered by recent poet-teachers that poetry wasn't alien at all. In their earliest experiments, they were able to evoke their young student's instinctive excitement about language, and published books full of exuberant poems written by children. Suddenly, writing poetry was fashionable.

Most classroom teachers aren't poets. Though they may admire the recent collections they've seen, they're uncomfortable about bringing poetry to their own

students. Boggled down by Tennyson, confused by all the old assumptions, they wonder what they're aiming for. Should poetry rhyme? If not, then how is it different from prose? Should it be about things, Or ideas? How can you tell whether it's good or bad? What can you expect of someone who is ten or eleven or twelve years old?

This handbook is planned for teachers who have little or no experience with contemporary poetry. It suggests a way of approaching the subject which keeps it connected to other forms of writing, and to the children's own lives. It never tries to define what is or is not poetry, but works instead to develop a sense of WORDS AS POWER, out of which poetry's particular intensity follows naturally.

No teacher using this sequence needs to be an expert; nobody is. There are no right answers here, and no matter how much you think you know, the kids will always surprise you. What you have to teach, specifically, are a few universal tools of language, what you have to offer is your respectful attention, as each child uses these tools in his or her own way. Once you've introduced the material for the day, your job less to "teach" than to listen and respond.

Tell the children, as I do, that there's a lot about poetry that you don't know; you're all students together. Then relax, and hear what they say.

## *Tell Me Your Feelings*

Self-expression: that's what we all say we're after. We who teach any sort of creative writing long to turn out a class full of children skilled and comfortable in using language to communicate with the rest of the world. But if we present a writing assignment that says, in effect, "Tell me your feelings" —a demand we'd be embarrassed to make of an adult acquaintance— we usually get just what we deserve: a blank or blotted sheet of paper, or from the clever ones, a con job, a slick imitation of candor, unrelated to any of a child's real concerns. Or if we design a tightly structured lesson to force a child into originality, the kids can wriggle through it on their wits alone, leaving their centers untouched.

Change the word FEELINGS to PERCEPTIONS, and at once you've made an important change in emphasis. "Tell me your perceptions" about spider webs and sports cars and night terrors and fairy tale villains, about magic spells and lemons and growing old. If "perceptions" is too big a word to handle, "how it looks to you," or "what you notice about it," will serve. You can improvise demonstrations of how everybody notices different things, even about the most everyday objects. Each child learns that he is already a distinct, interesting person, who happens to be short.

"Tell me your perceptions"— not to invade the child's privacy, but to share a way of perceiving that is only their own. Formal tools, the generous aids of art, make

room for a child to enjoy being ingenious; they also make it possible to handle parts of the self which otherwise resist control, in a way that distances the danger. Whether a child is assembling a crazy collection of Word Bowl words into a sentence, or crying out for a divorce in the imagined words of Jack Sprat, there is — must be— space to establish beyond doubt the tight connection between the person they are and the craft of words.

### *The Deep Connections*

In a dream, a college friend you haven't seen or thought about for ten years turns up dressed in a Napoleon hat and Boy Scout uniform, driving a tank into the mouth of the Great Sphinx while the Beatles ride by on orange elephants singing the "Hallelujah" chorus.

Somehow, in the crowded storehouse of your brain, all these wildly diverse items are boxed together. Your waking mind can seldom figure out the connections; if it has ever "known" that they exist, it has learned to suppress them, in the name of sanity, and to acknowledge only the conventional relationships supported by logic and social custom.

Yet it is exactly in such odd collections of images as this that the poetic imagination finds its greatest riches. The poet knows that whatever reason tells her about the incompatibility of Beatles, Boy Scouts and the Sphinx, some powerful feelings she has about them assembled them in the same dream. Finding such unlikely objects

grouped together may reveal to her— and to her readers, if she's skillful— some new and startling connections that illuminate both the objects themselves and the poet's unique mode of perceiving them.

On the other hand, the readers may be baffled, infuriated and finally repelled by what appears to be a mass of billowing nonsense. Some contemporary poetry is truly as incoherent as public opinion claims, because such dream material is offered up raw, as its own justification, without concern for communication or craftsmanship. Or, because such poetry is intensely personal in its sources, its images may miss even some good readers entirely.

Nevertheless, there are contemporary poets who, though they seem obscure on first reading, keep us coming back to their work again and again. There's an authority in their words that makes every line feel necessary, even if we can't explain it. And gradually, if we're patient, the images may take hold of us and move us, at some level we can't account for rationally.

Very young children don't recognize any difference between rational and non-rational relationships, and so are natural, spontaneous "poets," connecting all kinds of things, making up in instinct for what they lack in literary skill. Age piles on inhibitions, and most ten-year-olds, like most adults, need to be taught to listen to what's going on inside their heads. It's not necessary, or even wise, to give detailed reasons for this process; kids are just as appalled at the prospect of revealing their

secret selves as you would be. What is important is that they learn to trust and take pleasure in their unique, often unaccountable responses.

Introductions to your lessons should include an abundance of examples of "crazy" connections that work: from published poems, from student writing, and out of your own head too. This is important; you can't ask kids to go out on a limb if you won't. All of you can join in a class warm-up, in which ideas spill out too fast for self-consciousness.

Every lesson you teach in poetry must make room for the "deep connections." One way is to include in the assignment a requirement that is arbitrary or fanciful or preposterous, a question that can't possibly have a right answer, a demand for connecting things that can't reasonably be said to have any connections at all.

Word Bowl games do this, by forcing combinations of randomly chosen words.

Hieroglyphic and foreign-word poems do this, by severely limiting the choice of key words.

Poems in form do this, especially when the forms include patterned repetition of words or lines.

"Translations" do this, by offering inscrutable passages to be made into some kind of sense.

Free-association poems do this best of all, if your preparation encourages the kids to violate the usual categories. (See “Colors,” the model lesson for this section.)

This "deep" dimension of poetry is worth all the attention, care and ingenuity you can give it. Without it, you'll get bland, obedient, predictable little verses, looking exactly like last year's set, and distinguished from one another only by the author's literary skill or superficial cleverness. The kids will lose track of the first lesson, the most fundamental one: that words ARE POWER, ATTACHED TO THE STRONGEST FORCES IN THEIR LIVES.

You may find that one or two of your top students are unnerved or irritated by these lessons. Any element of wackiness may unsettle their orderly minds, to the point that they write little or nothing at first, or ever, out of fear or doing it wrong. Everybody needs reassurance in a new venture, but these children, used to succeeding by giving right answers, need it most of all. On the other hand, you may turn up wonderful poets among your mavericks, who have never cared much whether they pleased anybody or not. One student of mine hated to write, seldom turned in homework, but after I salvaged his poem from the wastebasket, realized that he was doing something very special, and day after day turned out startling, wholly original poems.

If you say "orange" and the kids say "sunset,"  
"pumpkins," "autumn leaves," You've got a long way to  
go.

If you say "ruby" and they say "horses," "shells," "owl  
eyes"; If you say "turquoise" and they say "patchwork  
quilt," "fish," "chandelier," you have reason to rejoice.  
These are real people talking.

## MODEL LESSONS

This handbook contains several complete model lessons. One is intended to be the very first lesson in poetry, others present particularly important concepts. Supplementary lessons to reinforce these major points are outlined briefly. You can develop and apply them as you wish.

Don't try to memorize and reproduce these lessons exactly as they appear. Blind imitation is death to poetry; there's no reason why you should expect to feel comfortable doing just as I do. Instead, read them carefully, absorb their principles, then adapt them to fit your style, using your own demonstrations, your own examples. NEVER TEACH A LESSON UNTIL YOU'VE TRIED ITS ASSIGNMENT YOURSELF, at least once, and are sure you understand its demands and problems. Be sure also that you've digested the material enough to add, subtract or otherwise modify it, according to the unpredictable mood of the day.

### *Structuring a Lesson*

These model lessons require up to 1¼ hours, from the beginning of the presentation until the last poem has been read aloud. The time might be divided roughly as follows:

Presentation and warm-up: 20-30 minutes  
Writing and rewriting: 30-40 minutes  
Sharing poems: 15 minutes

This schedule assumes a fully developed, self-contained lesson, introducing a major concept which needs to be explained and experienced thoroughly before the children begin to write. A resource teacher who is in the classroom only occasionally will need at least this much time to prepare kids sufficiently. A full-time classroom teacher has other options. "Mini-lessons" reinforce a concept already taught and can be presented with only a quick warm-up, or they can use lessons which grow naturally out of other classroom work—a unit on Eskimos, for example—and depend on that for much of their background.

### *Outline for a Presentation*

1. Orientation. Drama is important: a scene vividly set, a preposterous opening question, a suitcase spilling objects. Use props: an assemblage of photographs, a mysteriously covered basket, weird or pulsating or mischievous music, a carton full of hats, a collage of colors.
2. Involvement of students. Questions and challenges which set up situations to start the kids responding verbally to the materials, defining and practicing the patterns they will use in writing. (This may include a group poem).
3. Examples, model poems. "Real" and student poems, sometimes including your own, illustrating ways of using the lesson's techniques.

4. Assignments. Distribution of work sheets, if any, and kids scattering to write, with those who are still without ideas perhaps staying with you for further priming.

### *Model Poems*

Every complete lesson in this handbook lists, or quotes from, "model poems," published poems by recognized authors, to be read aloud as part of the lesson. They are chosen to show how the patterns and techniques under discussion might be used— to stretch the children's awareness of possibilities.

These poems are not the cheerful bland verse or good-hearted nonsense commonly addressed to kids. Nor are they those "popular" poems traditionally anthologized as being easy and obvious enough for children to understand. Some are full of mystery, or anger, or fear. A few are hard going at first, even for adults. I have found that children respond instinctively to the words, the rhythms, and many of the great themes, up to the limits of their knowledge. They need to see, over and over again, that the great poets rage and tremble and laugh at many of the same things that they do. If some lines remain bewildering, even after you've all tried to interpret them, that doesn't have to be an obstacle. Say, "I don't know exactly what it means, but I like it," and you'll all be freed to respond to the poem as a fascinating new experience, without having to flatten it out into prose.

Writing in imitation of a single model poem may be particularly helpful with young children who can't yet grasp and assemble poetic skills in the abstract, but need to work directly from concrete examples. With older children —5th grade, perhaps 4th— I start with lessons that introduce skills in sequence, and read several "real" poems, including my own, each time to suggest a variety of responses to the assignment. Some of these may be discussed in detail, in terms of that day's focus; others are read slowly once, with a few comments or questions from me. Then, as the kids acquire a range of skills, one model poem can become the center of each lesson, as long as students understand that it is a stimulus, not a rigid pattern. The whole year's study of poetry might be designed around models, as long as you're sure to choose poems with a lot of "space" for individual response.

**WARNING: CHOOSE ONLY MODELS THAT YOU REALLY LIKE.** If archaic language makes your mind shut off, if nymphs and shepherds make you snicker, you'll never convince the children of their value. In his well-known book *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Kenneth Koch identifies some element within each of his splendid models that makes it easily accessible to children, even though the words are difficult and often archaic as well. I prefer to start with contemporary language, since for most children there's so much distance to overcome at first in connecting with any poem.

## *Group Poems*

Every model lesson in this handbook includes a group warm-up of some kind, a short period when the lesson's patterns have been presented and the class is trying them on. Ideas come from the bolder ones first then almost everybody gets involved, until you sense that most of the class is confident, excited and ready to write.

Occasionally you may want to climax this warm-up time not with individual writing, but with a "group poem," written one phrase at a time by the whole class, group poems are fun. They're safe, since nobody has to produce very much, and therefore they're a fine way to make a difficult new concept manageable.

"Translations," for example, should always begin with a short sample poem, done by one volunteer per line. Poems in tight form —pantoums, sestinas, ballads— become easy and hilarious when everybody works together. The results may not be splendid poetry, but they give the kids a good sense of how to approach the task, and most of them will then be ready to try it a second time alone.

There's another way of using the group poem which I've found particularly valuable in giving the kids a sense of what they're reaching for. Often a question from me brings a flood of interesting one-line answers from the class, but nobody can come up with more than one or two good lines, and not one of these is a poem by itself. I've written down the kids' answers as fast as they come

(or asked another adult in the room to act as secretary), then looked at the collection with the class to see how we might give it some shape. Is there a line that could be repeated, as a refrain or the beginning of each stanza? Does any line stand out as a strong beginning for the poem, or a powerful ending? What lines seem to belong together? Could some of them be combined? Once you've grouped related lines together, does there seem to be some logical order in which the groups should be arranged?

Keep in mind, however, that "group poem" is a contradiction in terms, and if you're lucky, one of the kids will eventually make this discovery out loud. When you're assembling images into a poem, and trying to make it come out whole, somebody is sure to notice that one or more of the images already on the board won't go at all with the one they were about to suggest, and instead of keeping silent, may insist that the subject doesn't look that way to them! Welcome the argument. It leads to the awareness that a coherent poem is too personal to be written by committee, and it spurs each child to go write it their own way.

The following group poem began with a discussion of how one's strong feelings can affect, even distort, one's perceptions of the external world. We listed things commonly found in a big city —buses, taxis, tall buildings, parking meters, pigeons— and then tried to imagine being in such a place all alone, lost and terrified. With the words "It was as if..." understood as the beginning of each image, the children visualized familiar

objects turned menacing because of the viewer's emotions.

## THE EMPTY CITY

There was a blackout in a black city.  
The trains had stopped.  
The cars weren't there.  
People's mouths were sewed shut.  
Burglars had parking meters through their  
stomachs.  
Pigeons, unable to land,  
starved from loneliness.

There was a blackout in a black city.  
The dogs were stuffed.  
The trees were all cut down.  
The oxygen was all gone.  
The trash cans were full of emptiness.  
The smoke was put away in a box.  
I was invisible.

There was a blackout in a black city.  
A fire burned without fire engines.  
The smoke was mad.  
Parking meters ate pigeons for a dime.  
People without faces climbed up the  
buildings.  
Buses stood on end.  
I was stuck in the middle of the road,  
Everyone beeping their horns at  
the same time.

The buildings fell down,  
the alleys were full of darkness,  
the smoke drifted to another city.

## Lesson: Magic Charms and Spells

This lesson is designed to introduce your class to the study of poetry. It uses material from the "primitive" oral traditions, found in Jerome Rothenberg's anthologies, *Shaking the Pumpkin* and *Technicians of the Sacred*, for three purposes:

1. It makes an immediate connection between words and the power they wield.
2. It shatters once and for all the myth that poetry must rhyme and be pretty, by opening it up to the expression of strong emotions.
3. In place of rhyme, it offers other ways of giving form to poetry: repetition, rhythm, vivid thematic words and images.

Props: Photographs of wild country, in which the civilizations of men are very small against a vast expanse. (Curtis' Indian photographs, now available in enlarged reproductions, show the towering red cliffs of the Southwest, with a tiny line of men and horses hardly visible at the bottom.) Photographs of ceremonial masks, sand paintings, totems. Records of Navajo songs.

This first lesson might be introduced in a variety of ways, depending in part on whether you've done background work in Eskimo or Indian or African civilizations. What follows is one model, set up to evoke and draw together several key concepts. How much of it

you carry out by question and answer is up to you. A great deal of this material can come from the kids.

You might begin by finding out what they already know, or think they know, about poetry, and later test their preconceptions against what they've discovered. Many preconceptions vanish forever with this lesson.

Indented passages suggest what you might say.

The earliest poets? They didn't even have a written language, except maybe for a few picture-words, the kind we call "hieroglyphics." We know their work only because it was passed on from one generation to the next, changing a little each time. Some of them lived in places where the sun was not seen for long periods of time; all the land was white, snow and ice and savage wind, and the black sky was full of lights in enormous, shifting patterns. Then the sun appeared, low in the sky, just long enough to make a brief spring and summer, muddy, buggy, beautiful, but too short to provide against the hunger of winter. Death came fast— from a whale's immense tail, from a polar bear's terrible jaws, from a sudden blinding snowstorm in which a man could get lost only a hundred yards from home— or slowly, from disease or starvation. In all this huge universe, man seemed so small...

Or their homes were where the land was red: great rust-colored cliffs, carved by the wind into shapes of warriors and wild birds. Men used stones to scrape caves high in these cliffs, and the women walked down and up again, several times each day, to tend their fragile crops, wearing grooves ankle deep in the soft rock. The sun was cruel; rain came in sudden torrents, then not again for months, and the corn and beans that were their only defense against hunger shriveled and died. Vultures, black shapes with hideous red wrinkled heads, wheeled in the hot sky, waiting for something or someone to die. Man seemed so small....

These people didn't just believe there were spirits. They knew there were; they lived among them every day. Sun, moon, rain, wind, fire, seal, caribou, horse, owl, eagle— these spirits and hundreds of others had the power to give life or take it away. Any man, knowing his own smallness, had to call to them for help in staying alive.

How would you do it?

Have you ever been in a situation so difficult, so frightening, that you knew you couldn't handle it yourself, so bad that your parents weren't even enough to help you, and you felt you had to call on magic, spirits, powers, God, whatever words you used to think about it?

How do you speak to these forces, to get them on your side? Can you say, "Hey, I've got this problem, I could use a little help"?

No. You'd better be very polite, and find the best words you can to persuade them. And if they don't hear you the first time, try again, over and over until they do.

Consider a football game. It may not be a life-and-death matter, but still, with two minutes to go, your team eight points behind, maybe you've felt like praying. So out come the cheerleaders, and you and all the other frantic fans start "praying" in the form of a football cheer. What is the cheer like? How does it work? Let's compare a few, even try out one or two. How are they alike? All of them have RHYTHM; all use REPETITION of words, sounds, lines. Some include THREATS or BOASTS.

Why RHYTHM? Why is it such a basic instinct, that we tap our toes or kick the desk when we're nervous, dance, jump rope, and so on? Can you find some of the rhythmic, repeated patterns that shape our lives? (Day and night, seasons, etc.) What is the very first rhythm we hear, even before we're born? Have you ever put a wind-up alarm clock under a new puppy's pillow, as a substitute for that earliest, comforting rhythm, its mother's heartbeat?

Listen to Eskimo and Indian and African poems, made up by poets who were also priests or magicians, who couldn't write, and passed their poetry on from memory to memory. What makes it sound powerful?

(I use "Snake Medicine Poem for a Snake," "Snake Medicine Poem for a Toothache," "The Killer," and "Lullaby" from *Shaking the Pumpkin*, and "A Poison Arrow" from *Technicians of the Sacred*, to illustrate RHYTHM, REPETITION, especially of key POWER WORDS which may be COLORS, IDENTIFICATION WITH SOURCES OF POWER such as animals, BOASTING AND THREATS to intimidate the enemy. Carl Sandburg's "Sleep Song" uses contemporary images for the same effect, and pairs well with "Lullaby.")

THESE WORDS HAD POWER, to summon help from the spirits. Poetry wasn't a game or a luxury; it was a means of dealing with spirits, a way of getting help, of staying alive. What colors contain power— for an Eskimo, for an Indian or African, for you? Why? What are the scariest words you know? Why? What forces might you call on for help, in an industrialized, crowded world? If a primitive tribesman arrived suddenly in Boston or New York, what would he

pick out as the probable sources of power, to be spoken to in his prayers?

### Assignment:

Write a magic spell, a charm that will work for you. It can be peaceful magic: a lullaby, a song to bring rain or spring, a spell to help your teacher fly. Or it can be warlike: to make an invading army shrivel and die, to destroy your worst enemy, to banish snow or pollution or war itself.

Think about using color words. And other power words: those that call on fire, wind, animals, for the exact kind of help you need. Be sure your words are as strong, in sound and precise detail, as you can make them. Repetition makes your rhythm, gives your chant its drumbeat; use it carefully, to pound in the important words.

Remember that words -magic spells and charms- actually do sometimes cause primitive people to die; the words are so strong that the victims can't help believing that they will work. Choose your words to make them "felt": colors, textures ("scratchy," "piercing," "velvet"), strong verbs ("thrust," "rip," "soar").

You might try writing the poem on the page in such a way that the reader knows how you want him to read it, when to pause, what words to emphasize.

The get-your-enemy poems are always the most popular; pleasant kids can turn out to be remarkable, and gleefully, bloodthirsty. I forbid the use of any names or personal remarks, but otherwise let the poison bubble and the daggers fly, and encourage the most powerful language possible.

So much for poetry as pretty rhymes.

## **Lesson: Concrete and Patterned Poems**

In "Magic charms and Spells," the children began to learn to handle several of poetry's basic tools. In this lesson they add one more: the poem's appearance on a page. In fact, some of them have already begun to divide lines and set off words for rhythm and emphasis.

Now it's time to focus on a poem's visual pattern, its first impact on the reader's eye. I've started by talking about the dark period in European civilization when few could read and write, and most had learned to do so for one purpose: the study of Holy Scripture. Monks might devote their lives to making exquisite reproductions of Biblical texts, the "illuminated manuscripts," which were as much pictures as words, and were for their creators an act of worship. Find a print of one page, if you can; the first letter becomes almost invisible, transformed by the intricate ornaments for which it is the ground.

It was a natural next step for men of learning and devotion to write religious poetry, which was visually a sacred symbol: a cross, for example, with the words chosen and compressed to fit that shape. Through the centuries, poets have often returned to this instinct, forming their poems into the shapes of their subjects. The words can outline the shape, or be measured out to fill it in (CONCRETE POEMS); or they can move on the page as their subject would, hopping, blowing, drifting, climbing. Look for examples in the work of e. e. cummings (I use his "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r," a real challenge) or May Swenson. Then try writing poems that

have an explicit shape: a snail, a lightning bolt, rippling waves, a sports car, a rising sun. One helpful method is to cut out a shape, then fill it in with words adjusted to fit the shape.

What to write about? Let the object speak in its own voice, about itself, its work, its power, whatever it wants to tell you. Use its power words, its color words, anything that seems appropriate and important for it to say.

## Lesson: Messages

This lesson refines the concepts taught in "Concrete and Patterned Poems." Most important, it concentrates on the effect of line breaks, which make a poem "look like a poem." It also emphasizes stripped-down language, chosen to fit the "message" format. It provides an occasion to look hard at the differences between prose and poetry, and calls for poems which say in a few words something important that needs to be said.

I start by asking who has a bulletin board at home, and what gets written on it. I write replies on the board—"Sarah call Emily, 235-8743," "rug to cleaners," "Dad: your film is ready," "Mrs. Foster needs baby sitter Thursday," "Gone to Burger King, back at 7:00," "peanut butter, paper towels, sugar" —until the messages fill the blackboard and cross over one another. Is this a poem? Practically nobody thinks so; it doesn't look like one, there's no order to it, too many different ideas, you can't read it out loud. (One of my students suggested printing, "VERY BUSY" at the top as a title; thus unified, it did seem a little more like a poem!)

At this point I write William Carlos Williams' poem, "This is just to say...", on the board, IN PARAGRAPH FORM, and read it aloud.

Here's a message I found stuck on my refrigerator. Is it like the ones you find on your bulletin boards? Or is it a poem? Or neither?

After some debate, somebody usually comes up with the remark that there are too many words for it to be a real, scribbled note. They might write "I ate the plums," and "Sorry" instead of "Forgive me," but they'd leave out all the rest. Then what's been added, exactly? A suggestion of feelings, of a personal experience, of real reasons, in a very few words. And "Forgive me" doesn't actually say that you're sorry at all!)

So, is this a poem? Try writing it to look like a poem, and see what happens. Where does it seem natural to divide the lines? Mark divisions on the board with slash marks, according to the kids' suggestions. Now read it aloud, carefully observing the line breaks. How does it sound different? (It goes more slowly; you hear important words better; there seems to be some almost-regular rhythm.)

That's pretty much the way Williams originally wrote it. WHO? William Carlos Williams, a poet interested in the "specialness of ordinary things."

So try taking some of those original bulletin board messages and turning them into poems. Like this:

Gone for a walk.  
Back by dark.

What very few words might you add to make it include a sense of a person speaking?

Gone for a walk

The sun is hot  
and the daisies are starting to bloom  
Back by dark

Or

Gone for a walk  
Nobody home  
The house so still  
Back by dark

Two different versions of the same message offer two entirely different, personal reasons for that walk; one speaker is going to find something outside, the other getting away from something inside.

Model poems:

“Florida Road Worker” – Langston Hughes  
“Cyclops” –Margaret Atwood  
“Creep” –Linda Kershaw, age 10 (In Miracles)  
“The Pasture” –Robert Frost  
“Directions to the Armorer” –Elder Olson  
“Lament” –Edna St. Vincent Millay

Assignment:

Write a message-poem, one that reminds me at least a little of a note I might find in my kitchen. You may stretch the subject matter to include not only apologies (for something you're really glad you did), but also explanations (the real reason for something you're doing), instructions (out of your own experience, or fantastic directions for

something like becoming invisible), or warnings (don't step on a crack, don't talk to strangers, BECAUSE). Your message should be fairly short, simple, with no words you don't need, and should tell someone something she "needs" to know. But it should also contain something that makes me hear one person's voice speaking though the words. Whether it's funny, or crazy, or quiet, or sad, or scared, it should sound as if only one person in the world could have written it.

Try using line breaks, at least on the second draft.

Most of the results of this lesson are funny: wild images of what will happen if you walk under a ladder, elaborate apologies to Mom for destroying the entire contents of the house. But there are always a few astonishing pieces, in which the images become genuinely frightening, or mysterious, or lovely. The indispensable model poem is "Lament," the last one mentioned above. This simple, painful poem has a stunning effect on kids. It may be the first time they've heard death talked about openly in the classroom; it produces total silence, and seems to be the stimulus for the fine serious poems that occasionally follow from this generally light-hearted lesson.

## Lesson: Catalogue Poems

catalogue poems –made wholly or partly of lists– are fine exercises in metaphor, besides being fun to write. John Ciardi has a collection of them in *How Does a Poem Mean?* and it's worth our attention because of its diversity. It includes one very familiar one, Rupert Brooke's "The Great Lover" ("These I have loved..."), which I find rather sticky, but there are plenty of others to give you ideas.

The catalogue poem joins together many things in a category: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways..."; "dappled things": "Some Good Things to be Said for the Iron Age." If it is effective, this joining will produce a sense of discovery, of seeing these things in a surprising way because of the relationships between them which the poem points out.

Try these two ways of using the catalogue poem:

1. A few carefully chosen concrete details can add up to a whole scene, and imply one's reaction to it. (Model poem: Carl Sandburg's "Summer Morning," in *Wind Song*.) What half-dozen very specific details would you choose to tell somebody about this classroom? (Each child can make a list, to be compared with others.) "Field trips" to the cafeteria, the playground, the library, the nearby woods can become occasions for poems made of sounds, smells, details of light

and color and texture, interesting or funny things you hear people say or watch them do. Poems can be called, "In the Principal's Office," "Kindergarten," "On the School Bus." In every case, details should add up to a picture which needs no comment from the author to convey not only facts but atmosphere, since everybody perceives the atmosphere differently, efforts to make a group poem out of this assignment ought to fail.

2. A catalogue poem can be a journey from literal, "real" relationships into metaphor; it can become a game, in which the class works together, then separately, to find connections.

Begin with a rich category: "Hats," for example. Bring a box of hats, at least one for everybody, ranging from a baseball cap to the Tin Woodman's funnel. Pass them around; try them on; trade off. List on the board all the "real" hats you can think of: bonnet, fez, veil, derby, helmet, yarmulke, and so on. (Roget's Thesaurus will add to your list.) What do hats do? Group them by function: protection from sun, rain, wind, blows to the head, decoration, warmth, sign of membership or office, etc.

Is a wig a hat? Why, or why not?

Who needs a hat? What for?

What can hats be made of? Is there anything that can't act as a hat, in some way?

Can you think of other things that aren't "really" hats, but act as hats? What do they do? Some of the same things as "real" hats?

A roof: protection from weather.

A pot lid: keeps out flies, but also keeps steam in for cooking. If a lid is a hat, could your head "be" the steaming pot? What does it mean to say that somebody "flipped his lid"?)

What about a steeple? a dome? snow on a mountain? a flame on a candle? Are these hats, in any sense? If they are, are they like a "real" hat in what they do? What others can you think of?

This game can turn into a group poem, made of the best lines about hats that come from the discussion, and organized from literally true statements at the beginning toward metaphorical ones at the end. A wonderful model poem is Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Pied Beauty," which should be visualized carefully line by line to understand exactly how the things he names are all "dappled," and what his conclusion means. Can you add to his list, with things that are either actually or metaphorically dappled?

You might find enough energy in the class to send each child off on their own, wearing a hat, to write any kind of poem that has to do with hats: a poem spoken by the hat they're wearing;

an acrostic, using "top hat" or "derby" or "fedora" as the initial word; a story about a hat; whatever else seems appropriate.

Other model poems:

"The Question of Hats" by John Hollander, in *Tales Told of the Fathers*  
"Hats" and "Under a Hat Rim" by Carl Sandburg in *Wind Song*  
"The list of Famous Hats" by James Tate

I've followed almost the same procedure with boxes, bringing some of my own favorites into the classroom, asking kids to do the same, talking about the kinds of things we keep in each (treasures, secret things, business, recipes). Then I've labeled six identical boxes with "feeling" words chosen by the kids: fear, loneliness, excitement, etc. I've gone on to read from slips of paper at least two dozen widely assorted words—"elephant," "asparagus," "bus"—and for each, taken a very fast, silent class vote: into which box should that word go? When we're finished, we look at the contents of each box and find a wild mix of apparently unrelated words, all held together by a feeling.

The children can go on to write a poem using all the words out of one box, with the requirement that they never mention the feeling word. Or they can use this pattern for writing:

I found a box, It looked like....  
I marked it:  
Into my box I put:

What's put into the box should be as varied,  
precise and surprising as possible; memories,  
smells, sounds, objects.

Questions to start a Catalogue Poem:

What can a safety pin hold together?  
How many kinds of clocks can you think of?  
What is paper for? (See "Paper I" and "Paper II,"  
by Carl Sandburg, in *Wind Song*)  
What is a door for? (See "Doors," in *Wind Song*)  
What do walls do?  
What is stored in your attic?

Model Poems, all in *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*:

"Crossing Kansas by Train: Donald Justice  
"Wonder Wander" Lenore Kandel  
"The Child's Morning," Winfield Scott  
"Swift Things are Beautiful." Elizabeth  
Coatsworth  
"Two Lives and Others," Winfield Scott  
"Oregon Winter," Jeanne McGahey  
"Legacy," Christopher Morley

## **Lesson: The Word Bowl**

The concept of the Word Bowl is widely used by poet-teachers. A large bowl (two or more, for a full class) is filled with scraps of paper, each bearing a strong, emotionally loaded word: THORN, RIPE, FIAME, DAGGER, ROBE, EMERALD, SERPENT, etc. Every child picks out several slips at random, and must combine the words into a poem, no matter how incompatible they seem to be. It's fun to do, but often much more; the game is so arbitrary that it shatters the expectation of a "right answer," and may produce poems startling in their fresh connections. (Another way of doing this assignment is to find a short, vivid, perhaps somewhat dreamlike poem, lift half a dozen words from it, ask the kids to write poems using those words, and then compare their results with the original.)

My version of the Word Bowl was originally planned as a review lesson, pulling together a group of concepts which the class had met before in different contexts. I asked the kids to draw six words (no trade-ins allowed), and to use these words in several different kinds of poems, chosen from a long list of possibilities. The list included acrostics, a good one to start with, shaped poems, message poems, and a variety of others which gave the kids a sense of working within a form, against tight restrictions. I picked out six words myself, and we practiced some of the harder exercises as a group. Then everybody worked alone, with some guidance from me as to what they might try next. The results were often hilarious, sometimes surprisingly moving.

Of course, any of these exercises can be used by themselves, and should be, unless you've done a great deal of groundwork. You might want to try one a week, as a short assignment, preceding or following a related lesson.

## Supplementary Lessons

1. Most Like / Most Unlike. A loosening-up, oral lesson in relationships, which may precede a writing lesson— a catalogue poem, for example. Questions come fast, without allowing time to think: "What is most like a sweater? What is most unlike it, of anything in the world? What is most like a bell? broccoli? a wheel? What's most unlike them?" Kids should answer with the first thing that comes into their minds, and be encouraged to enjoy their most surprising responses. No reasons have to be given for what they say, but if they think they know the reason for a particularly unusual answer, urge them to explain: "What is it about a sweater that makes you think of a horn?" If you find certain answers fascinating, say so— even if you don't know why: and if you do know why, tell them.

This exercise, like most of the others, is much more likely to succeed if you play, too. To make it fair, you might have the kids ask some of the questions, and you join in giving answers.

2. One Word. A poem built on one special word, repeated several times in a variety of patterns: one word on a rubber stamp, or a made- up "crazy" word used throughout a poem as if everybody knew what it meant. (See "Pooballs" by John Hollander.

3. Arbitrary First Lines. A proverb, a road sign, a line picked at random from a textbook or newspaper, an evocative line from a student poem, or one invented by you or the class; the poem is to be completed in any way the first line suggests, the wilder the better. (Both proverbs and sins can be made "crazy" and fun if one key word is changed according to your whim— "Out of sight, out of bubblegum" —and these revised proverbs could be arranged into a sort of poem themselves.)
4. Hieroglyphic Poems. Using a vocabulary of picture-words you've invented, preferably to fit a culture you're studying (man, woman, fire, wind, mountain, bird, sun, ice, fish, tree, etc.), supplemented by English-language connectives.
5. Foreign-word Poems. Built on a few rich Spanish or French or German words which you translate, practice saying aloud, and then incorporate into a poem. (This is especially exciting when there's a foreign child in the class.)
6. Translations. Children look at a poem in a foreign language and make their own parallel sense-nonsense poem, by starting with words that remind them of words they do know and linking them in any way which the sound of the original suggests. They'll need to warm up by doing one short poem or stanza as a group.) If you have a

foreign-language student, they might be proud to provide a real translation of the original.

7. Dream poems. A discussion of dreams— who has them what they're about, stimulated by a few reproductions of Surrealist paintings such as Dali's melting watches, leading to poems with a dream-like quality. It's important to talk about what makes dream-experience different from waking experience: distortion of time, "crazy" combinations of images, etc. How could these qualities be suggested in a poem? The resulting poems may be actual dreams, made-up dream-like narratives, or even "dreams" drawn from the paintings. Pay particular attention to line breaks, as a source of "dreaminess." (See Kinereth Gensler's essay in *Poemmaking* for a fuller discussion of this technique.)
  
8. Mirror poems. Begin by talking about mirrors, what people use them for, where you find them, what it's like to see yourself in one by accident. Have a big one on hand, hold it up casually and turn it. then talk about how the kids behaved in response to seeing themselves reflected. Then consider what things act as mirrors, and how they distort your image sometimes: a pool of water (what happens when you throw a pebble in?? A hubcap, window glass which lets you look both out and in. Review what happened when Alice went through the looking glass. Tell the story of Narcissus, too absorbed in his own reflection: are

there any real people like him? What did a mirror mean to Snow White's stepmother? To the lady of Shalott? On the whole, would we be better off without mirrors? In what other ways do we see images of ourselves reflected and distorted? (What people say about us; report cards; photographs; our parents, who may later come to seem like aged versions of ourselves; our children, who imitate us; and so on.) Finally, give everybody a small mirror of some kind and ask for whatever poems come from looking at it, or talking to it. Try to maintain enough quiet for real "reflection."

9. Naming. A lesson built on an immensely important Native American naming ceremony which marked a child's passage to adulthood, the name being carefully and often magically chosen to signal the person the child was becoming. (You might consider also the crucial importance of Rumpelstiltskin's name, and the old Jewish prohibition against saying or writing God's name.) This may be only a discussion lesson: kids can choose their own names, and explain why, or become Adam for an hour, naming the beasts and birds according to their natures, with either made-up syllables or combinations of real words. See "Adam's Task," by John Hollander, in *Night Mirror*.) The point here is to give the children a sense of how names or nicknames act as labels, affecting the way we perceive people

and things, and sometimes the way people perceive themselves.

10. **Creator-Destroyer.** A group poem (later individual, if you wish) in which very strong, vivid words are used to command an exotic creature into existence, feature by feature. ("Let fourteen sharp scarlet eyes bulge from your fuzzy forehead.") Anybody can contribute a line, adding some fantastic detail, or suggest a change for a line already on the board. Concentrate on powerful verbs, try to eliminate any form of the verb "to be," except as an auxiliary. Then annihilate your creation, in the same gradual way. ("Let your nose sizzle and drip off in globs.") Of course you can create a graceful, gentle creature, and then make it dissolve peacefully, but it's not as much fun.
11. **Physical Forms.** Poems written on measured strips of adding machine tape, after a discussion of what subjects are appropriate and how the narrow paper should affect the language and voice of the poem. You can also use paper bags, candy wrappers, newspaper (writing with a bright felt pen), paper towels (what happens to the poem when the ink spreads and gets blurry?), or anything else that ties form to content.
12. **Found Poems.** These poems take a particularly striking passage from a public source— a newspaper, a school bulletin, directions for a

game— and add line breaks to intensify its language and call attention to what it says. You can also try assembling a "found" poem out of advertising slogans, road signs, newspaper headlines. (See "Brazilian Happenings" by Richard O'Connell in *Some Haystacks*, or "What are the Most Unusual Things You Find in Garbage Cans?" by James Schevill, also in *Some Haystacks*.)

## What is a Persona Poem?

“It's a little mad, but I believe I am many people. When I am writing a poem, I feel I am the person who should have written it. Many times I assume these guises; I attack it the way a novelist might. Sometimes I become someone else, and when I do, I believe, even in moments when I'm not writing the poem, that I am that person. When I wrote about the farmer's wife, I lived in my mind in Illinois: when I had the illegitimate child, I nursed it - in my mind- and gave it back and traded life. When I gave my lover back to his wife, in my mind, I grieved and saw how ethereal and unnecessary I had been. When I was Christ, I felt like Christ. My arms hurt, I desperately wanted to pull them in off the Cross. When I was taken down off the Cross, and buried alive, I sought solutions; I hoped they were Christian solutions.”

—Anne Sexton, interviewed in *The Paris Review*

“...in all of our lives we are involved with uncertainties, with fear, even with terror, and in some cases with love and tenderness, and gentleness and sympathy. What has struck me as amazing is that, in talking to people about the arts, they do not realize that this is what the arts deal with— that the arts deal with just those areas of life that everyone keeps hidden, areas that in other societies are sometimes looked upon as primitive.... Our job is to touch those people who look at the arts as something expendable. They don't know what the arts are about, and if they, in their own lives, can look at the emptiness,

the fear, and the mirror of their emotional selves, it is up to us to make them see the incredible import and fulfillment the arts can provide.”

—Lorin Hollander, quoted in *Coming to our Senses*, report of The Arts, Education and Americans Panel, published by McGraw-Hill Book Company

A Persona poem is one in which the speaking voice is clearly distinguishable from that of the author. In a sense, there's a persona in every poem, with the possible exception of that breed of alleged poem which is a faithful transcription of a monologue with a tape recorder. Writing a poem preserves a mood that would otherwise merge with another and dissolve. It distills and often "revises" real experience, and it concentrates language to a degree rare in speech. Thus, it's dangerous to read any poem as an accurate representation of its author. But the term "persona" usually refers to an assumed and more or less explicitly defined identity: an old man, a young child, a middle-aged housewife, Ulysses, Circe, Ahab, Saint Peter, Snow White, a head of broccoli.

A Persona poem is an exercise in stretching. It requires the writer to "become" another person, seeing through their eyes, speaking with their voice. It can be an experiment in play-acting. More important, it can make

room for talking about one's own real concerns without self-consciousness, as if they belonged to someone else.

To be more than clever, this kind of poem usually needs considerable preparation time. It can even climax a unit of several days' or weeks' work. Use whatever props you can to make the alien worldview come alive. What is it like to be old and lame? Try walking with a cane or crutches. What is it like to be blind? Take a turn around the corridors with a blindfold on. Use photographs of faces: What do you think she's so sad about? Use films of an unfamiliar environment, and ask questions that draw attention to very specific sense details: What does the ground feel like under his feet? How would it feel to wear clothes like that, or to be in that body? What would she smell, or hear, in that place? Ask other questions that demand precise answers from the persona's point of view: What does she worry about? What is he proud of? What does she like to keep on her dresser? What is he frightened of? What is their biggest disappointment? This information, though it may not all be used in the poem, will help to establish a sense of connection between student and speaker; roleplaying may be used to make it even stronger.

Once the persona is clearly in mind, consider the poem:

1. Is the persona thinking out loud, or talking to someone else: a daughter, a TV interviewer, a stranger on a bus, a judge, a husband?

2. What is the situation? Is the persona in prison, on a merry-go-round, in a space ship or hospital?
3. Does this person have a special way of talking, a special vocabulary or way of putting words together?
4. What pattern on the page would best suggest the person's voice? A solid block or words? A long ramble, full of gaps?

Some of these decisions may be made in advance in the terms of your assignment, others may be made by agreement among the kids, or left to individual choice. You may also want to make specific suggestions as to what the persona is talking about, leaving enough room for kids to "hear" the voice themselves.

## **Lesson: Children's Voices**

Children's Voices asks students to remember how they saw the world when they were very small, and to write about a remembered experience exactly as they saw it then, without interference from their "grown-up" voice. This makes them aware of the "speaker" in a poem as someone slightly or even enormously different from themselves; they must consider carefully how the poem might be affected by what such a person was capable of seeing and what she might choose to tell us. They also must adapt their words and phrases to the speaker's imagined voice. Furthermore, they must imagine the

kinds of memories that would be imprinted on a small child's mind. Lead to a poem rich in vivid images, and free of abstractions.

This lesson is especially wonderful when parents and grandparents are invited to share it. I've used it as the last of a ten-week workshop series, and sent out invitations which do not mention the fact that guests will be participants, not just observers.

Props:

On posterboard, pictures of children, happy, sad, yelling, angry, all kinds and moods of children. Perhaps a few once familiar objects, such as a blanket with its satin binding worn through, a compartmentalized dish, a battered teddy bear.

Today I'm going to ask you to remember a person you knew well, a long time ago; someone you remember only now and then in flashes, but are connected to very closely. Yourself, at three to six years old.

On a scrap of paper, write down the very first thing you remember, exactly as you remember it, with every detail of smell or sight or touch or sound that you recall and without any "grown-up" explanations. This is not to be handed in, only to help you remember. Now tell us about it, anyone who wants to.

Your questions should try to expand the stories, as they're told: "Why do you think you remembered that, and nothing before it? How do you know you're really remembering, not just repeating something you've been told about? Do you remember feeling scared when that happened? What was the doctor's voice like? Do you remember any colors?" It helps if you tell your own memory first, to get everybody started.

Look for common themes, to which everybody can contribute: the monster under the bed, learning to swim, "I used to think."

I've found the following poems particularly useful in getting the memories started:

"The Fury of Overshoes" by Anne Sexton: the helplessness of being very small  
"Listening to Grownups Quarreling" by Ruth Whitman: fear of adult anger  
"Game after Supper" by Margaret Atwood: hide-and-peek can be scary, too  
"Where Knock is Open Wide" by Theodore Roethke. Perhaps the most valuable model poem on the list, since it recreates not only a child's perceptions but also the struggle with language; known words are put together to express new concepts, and everybody can join in figuring out what's meant.

Additional model poems:

"Fern Hill" —Dylan Thomas

"Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle" –  
John Tobias (in the book by that name)  
"Child on Top of a Green house" —Theodore  
Roethke (also in *Watermelon Pickle*)  
"Those Winter Sundays" –Robert Hayden (in  
*Some Haystacks*)  
Poems by Hilary-Anne Farley, age 5, in *Miracles*

For reference and background reading: *The Magic Years*  
by Selma Fraiberg.

Assignment:

Choose a memory of your own, from when you were no more than six, and write a poem about it from a small child's point of view, using very simple words and all the exact details you remember, and leaving out everything "adult." (A list of suggested topics is useful.) You might try "inventing" words, as Roethke does in his poem, or any other way of 'making the small child's voice come through.

Ideas for Childhood Poems:

The Scariest Thing

A place: the attic, the basement, the hospital, an empty house, your room in the dark. What was it like to be there? What did you see, hear, smell, feel? What did you do there? What did you imagine about it?

A person: an old woman down the block, a man at the grocery store, your grandfather, a big boy around the corner, a stranger on a bus. What did they look like to you— eyes, mouth, hair, clothes, hands, movements? What did they sound like? Say or do? What did you imagine they might do? What did you do about it?

An event: swimming (or falling in), going to the dentist, hearing parents arguing, learning to ride a bike, attending a funeral. What, exactly, did it feel like? What did you think about it then? Were you able to tell anybody about it, and get help, or were you all alone?

### The Happiest Thing

A place: the park, a tree house, your grandmother's kitchen,, the beach, your father's office. Why did you love to go there? How did it look, smell, feel different from other places? What, exactly, did you do there?

A person: your best friend in kindergarten, a particular babysitter, an aunt, a teacher, a much older brother or sister. What did you do together? What was special about their voice, face, way of playing with or listening to or helping you, that made you love them?

An event: your birthday, a holiday, a trip, your first loss of a tooth, bringing a puppy home, learning to ride a bike.

*Sample Childhood Persona Poems*

wash your face  
do I use a facecloth yes  
Ma ma Mama  
no  
Papa  
Mama  
Papa  
Mama Papa  
I smile  
sit on my lap  
No  
go Woothworths  
I jump  
MOMMY  
Daddy  
I cry  
Mommy puts me on her lap  
nap time  
I hide  
under  
the bed  
and fall  
asleep

Molly Greaney

A little boy hides  
and his sister  
will think he has disappeared  
he is cramped in the darkness

so he tries to get out  
but can't  
he is afraid  
he won't see them again  
he starts to scream  
but nobody hears him  
he weeps loudly  
then he sees light  
He cries softly in his mother's arms

Jimmy Sullivan

Mommy Mommy  
Doggy got a toothache  
He's mad  
Sticks are in the air  
Mommy

Kim Cooke

When my sister was just turning 13  
she had a slumber party  
and I was only 5 ½  
and I was scared  
so I went down in the play room  
and all the girls were laughing at me  
because of my bunny pajamas  
but then I cried  
so then I slept in my sister's friend's Gene  
Brazil's  
sleeping  
bag.

And they turned on the record player  
and they listened to fire.  
And everybody got up and danced.  
So then everybody got tired  
and I got tired  
and went to sleep.

Lockie McNeish

The big dog doesn't need  
any food,  
Mamma, he eats sticks  
and bones.

Mamma,  
you better catch that leaf  
it might hurt itself coming  
down.

Mamma when I learn to  
flap will you let me climb  
trees?

Holly Smith

Witches and pots walking  
down the red blocks. seeing persons  
with shape but no form. Being  
scared, sweating crying hoping for  
sympathy from her so I won't have

to go in the murky dark bottom.

Being pushed down the blocks  
not by hands but by words. Crying,  
heart beating going down really quick  
coming right back to the top even  
quicker,

Mary Gannon

## Persona Poems: Supplementary Lessons

1. Old people. Possibly the climax of a series of discussions and films on aging spread over several days. Prepare for writing with experiments to find out what it's like to have impaired vision, or to need a cane for walking. Look closely at a variety of photographs, and at model poems (Anne Sexton's "old," W.C. Williams' "To a Poor Old Woman" and "The last Words of my English Grandmother," "The Old Man's Song, About His Wife" in *Shaking the Pumpkin*.) Consider the changes that come with age, both good—wisdom, freedom from the child-raising responsibilities—and bad—physical impairment, financial problems, loss of independence, etc. How have your grandparents and great-grandparents reacted? What choices would you make, if their problems forced changes in your life? Now, speak in the voice of an old person; what would you want to tell someone?
2. Alien. A person from another planet, who's led a very different life from ours—subterranean, perhaps—and sends electronic messages home to tell their fellow creatures about the incredible things they've found on earth. You should locate them in one particular spot, which they would have to believe represents our civilization: a baseball park, a shopping mall, a factory. (This may be a "naming lesson," also; just like a small

child, they'll have to invent names and comparisons for what they see out of what they've known before. It will also be a sort of "message lesson," with relatively few, carefully chosen words for long-distance transmission.) See "Southbound on the Freeway," by May Swenson, in *Watermelon pickle*)

3. Cultures. A person from another culture, one you've studied in class. What would they want to talk about? What things in their life would seem important enough to say, and very different from what we know? How would their concerns be the same as ours?
4. Beasts. An invented, fantastic animal, carefully imagined in terms of appearance, habit, habitat, enemies, then allowed to speak for itself. Or a real animal, saying what's on its mind. (See the essay by Elizabeth Mckim and Judith Steinbergh in *Poemmaking*. "Prayers from the Ark," by Carmen Bernos de Gasztold, is full of model poems.)
5. Objects. A poem in the voice of any interesting, inanimate object. I've used lemons brought to class wrapped in a blanket like foundlings, and "adopted" which is to say so thoroughly examined, touched, tasted, smelled, even lived with overnight, that the kids can begin to talk, then write, in its voice, about how it feels to be

that object. (Again, see the McKin-Steinbergh essay in *Poemmaking*.)

6. Myth. A character from a fairy tale or nursery rhyme (avoid TV), preferably a villain, certainly someone whose point of view wasn't heard in the original story. How is this person's version of the events different from the usual one? What would Snow White's stepmother, or Cinderella's stepsisters, or the Big Bad Wolf, or Peter Pumpkin Eater, want to tell you to explain why she acted as she did? At what point in the story would she have both opportunity and reason to do so? (Many villains die at the end, so it might have to be before that.) Are Rumpelstiltskin and the witch in the candy house really tragic characters, long misunderstood? Surely they think so? Famous non-villains, from mythology or the Bible, are fine personae, too. What is it like for Persephone, in the underworld? See "The Builders," by Sara Hay, in *Watermelon Pickle*: the third little pig comments on the sorry deaths of his brothers.

## ESSAYS

### **Line Breaks**

The subject of line breaks is one on which there's wide, often noisy disagreement among poets: most of them follow instincts rather than rules. The suggestions below are only to make you aware of some things that line breaks can do, not to keep you from your own experiments.

In traditional rhymed poetry, the line ends with the rhyme. To avoid monotony, poets often do not end the phrase at the end of the line, so that as you read the poem, your ear sweeps over the rhyme and on to the next line without stopping; an interesting contrast is set up between form and content. Likewise with blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) or any other regular rhythm.

In free verse, however, there's a wide choice of methods. Here are a few possibilities:

- All line breaks create "space" in the poem, slowing the reader down, directing closer attention to details.
- Line breaks may simply occur whenever the sense of the poem requires a pause; they may come after—or instead of—commas and periods.

- They may be used to help the reader "hear" the poem as its author does. Short lines which imply frequent short pauses can create an effect of hesitancy, delicacy, breathiness, abruptness, etc., depending on further clues from the content. Merely the appearance of such a poem —slender or open, as opposed to a visual "concrete block"— may aid its desired effect. Lines may also be moved toward the right-hand margin of the page, for still more openness.
- Line breaks may be used to emphasize key words, by putting them at the end (or sometimes the beginning) of a line, or all by themselves on a line.
- They may surprise the reader, by making his eye stop at an unexpected point, by deliberately burying a rhyme within a line, etc.

Take time to look closely at the use of line breaks in a variety of poems. Read them aloud, with a very slight hesitation and lift to your voice at the end of every line, whether or not the sense seems to require it. (See "Reading Aloud.") In some cases, you may decide that the break really serves no purpose except to get the line over with. But look for line breaks that work in the ways mentioned above, and any other ways you can find.

In the classroom:

The very first lesson isn't too early to suggest, at least to the kids who seem to be going strong, that they should write the poem on the page just as they "hear" it, to make the reader read it that way. The repetition common to magic spells begs for line breaks that put the same strong word at the beginning of several lines.

Then try putting line breaks into several pieces of writing— student work, or "real" poems which you've reproduced as paragraphs (see the "Message lesson"), or even lively excerpts from pieces of prose, discussing alternatives with the whole class, writing them out on the board, experimenting by reading the results aloud to see what happens, and in the case of "real" poems, comparing your results with the published poem. At the same time, try moving lines over, dropping them down giving the words breathing space.

You'll have to know the kids to determine whether it's best to suggest writing with line breaks initially, or to wait till revision time. In some lessons, line breaks become inseparable from the "voice" of the poem ("Messages," for example).

There may be times when a student's writing looks like prose, but sounds as if it were straining toward line breaks. Sometimes I type such a "poem" as if the line breaks were there, and the author sees vividly what the next step could have been. It's also a valuable technique to drive a wedge between prose and poetry, in such a

way as to dramatize the presence of extra words and "prosy" constructions: often line breaks can replace connective words or even whole phrases. Line breaks do not make a poem, not all by themselves. Much dizzily patterned "poetry" written these days uses all that flashy visual stuff as a cover-up for impoverished language, and too much pattern may be distracting. But used with care, it can greatly enhance the poem's vitality.

Note:

When typing student work for anthologies, I found that the pieces written as prose lost all their force when I typed them from margin to margin of an 8 1/2 x 11" page; they took up so little space that they looked stringy and insubstantial. As an experiment, I tried breaking the lines exactly where the originals had been forced to break at the edge of the page. The result was a surprising intensification of the language. See, for example, Roy's "Brown is...." Shannon's "Green is....," Robert's "To Catch a Fish."

## **What About Grammar and Spelling?**

It's a dilemma.

On the one hand, we hope that our presentations will be so exciting that the writing will spill out, overwhelming inhibitions. If we're successful, then words may come in a rush, rhythmic, vigorous, startling and perhaps oblivious of rules. We sense that leaning over a child's shoulder to point out mechanical flaws will cut off the excitement we've worked so hard to evoke.

On the other hand, we feel the heavy weight of our duty to turn out students with a decent respect for the laws of the English language. And we believe, moreover, that effective writing of any kind requires discipline, working within the boundaries of form to achieve originality and power.

The fact is that rules of grammar and spelling are at least as relevant to poetry as to any other form of writing, perhaps more so. Write an illiterate poem, and the consequences for the poem may be mortal. A poem asks the reader to be at his most alert, responding with all his faculties to words, word sounds, visual designs. Errors of spelling and grammar are, first of all, distracting, calling attention to themselves, and away from the force of the poem. Worse, they may actually muddy the poem's meaning, by making words and word connections seem to be far from what the poet intended. Correct grammar and spelling are inconspicuous; they don't interfere.

Thus, it's entirely appropriate to ask for corrections AT THE STAGE WHERE THE POEM IS ALMOST READY TO BE SHARED. They belong in the same category as a flock of other faults, the ones you point to by insisting, "This isn't clear to me," "I don't see what you mean here," In this context, the laws of language are as they always should be, not a teacher's arbitrary prescription but an indispensable part of clear communication. If a paper's a mess, I can't read it. If words are misspelled, I can't understand them easily. If a pronoun and its antecedent don't agree, I am —if only for a moment— confused.

Q. Then why does so much contemporary poetry look so ungrammatical? Sentences without punctuation or capitals, sentence fragments, words wrenched out of their usual syntax. How do they help communication?

Sometimes they don't of course. Some poets, of this and any period, are either ignorant or contemptuous of the rules. But many others are paying close attention to them, even as they break them, and asking you to do the same. The deliberate violation of rules we're all assumed to know becomes part of the poem's whole design. For instance, the practice of capitalizing the pronoun, "I," or the first letter of any word or every line, gives such words a visual importance that may be inappropriate to their function in the poem; writing "i" instead may suggest that the speaker isn't important except as an observer, a speaking voice, or does not want to give himself more prominence than the other people in the

poem. Another example: periods end a sentence firmly and with conviction; substituting line breaks for periods may encourage the reader to "hear" the poem in a more tentative, or frightened, or dreamlike voice.

To prove the point, show the kids the poems of e.e. cummings. He breaks the rules constantly, for a purpose; his poem, "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" is a letter-by-letter account of a grasshopper's leap, and it makes sense only to someone who knows and cherishes the rules of grammar.

Finally, you can endorse both the rules and creative innovation by telling the kids that anything goes if it helps communication, and if they are consistent. Experiment with reading aloud some of these "crazy" poems, making your voices follow all the signals of pattern and punctuation; grammar and spacing. (cummings' "in Just-" works well.) Try putting in all the omitted periods and capitals; what happens to the poem?

Now you're ready to ask the kids, "Why did you leave out the period here, but not here? Why no capital letter here?" You'll have to rely on your sense of the class, or the individual student, to know when the time is right. The poem has to be well along on the way to completion. In the meantime, your reproductions of student work can present the poems corrected and immaculate, if you wish; the corrections will speak to the author for themselves.

WARNING: START BY RESPECTING THE WAY THE STUDENT HAS WRITTEN IT, EVEN THOUGH IT LOOKS TECHNICALLY WRONG.

Read a new poem first exactly the way it's written, to see how the mechanics work. Unsophisticated writers often write a poem as they hear it; try to hear it their way, and to find a way to preserve this important aspect. The omission of punctuation or capitals, grammatical "mistakes," peculiar line breaks may actually help the poem to sound like a human voice. Just make sure the student sees what she's done; point out instances in which the poem's voice is helped--or hurt--by unorthodox grammar. Thus, you and the student both acknowledge that it's unorthodox and share a keener understanding of how the rules work.

Note:

Occasionally a child with a major learning disability, or one for whom English is a second language, hands in a piece of writing full of errors, yet oddly wonderful because of them. I have in rare instances reproduced such pieces exactly as they came to me, not only to endorse the child's courage in writing at all, but to illustrate the mysterious magic of a very special kind of voice, working in ways we can't always account for.

## Reading Aloud

Before you start teaching children to write poetry, teach yourself to read it aloud effectively. Poetry began as an oral tradition; it existed long before people had a complex written language. The awesome power of words, as they were formed into incantations and charms, relied on sound as much as meaning to hypnotize, exorcise or terrify. Even if you have no such radical intentions, kids need to hear words reverberate to be finally persuaded of their magic.

So get out the tape recorder and practice. Read slowly, "tasting" every phrase. (Dylan Thomas and John Crowe Ransom are my favorites for richness of sound, but reading any poem aloud also helps you to get hold of parts you're having trouble understanding.) Try to observe all the clues the poet gives you for how the poem should be read: punctuation, line breaks, length of lines, shape of stanzas, repeated words, echoing sounds, heaviness or delicacy of consonants and vowels. Don't worry about "interpretation"; begin by reproducing accurately what's on the page. When you can do that with confidence, then you're ready to let your voice interpret the poem according to its content. Don't overdo it - a good poem has its own voice, and it's much more important to let that voice be heard than to try to dramatize.

If you're a full-time classroom teacher, you can try the same sort of work with the kids. If you're not yet convinced that your own reading is exemplary, find

some records: Siobhan McKenna reading Yeats, for instance. Even if the kids can't always understand what she's talking about, they're likely to be entranced by the sound.

Read "real" poems aloud to the class, whenever you can. Make a habit of it, when you have five minutes to spare. Not just poems written for children, but poems that require some stretching. Read a poem slowly and thoughtfully; when there's time, let the kids respond to it. Who's speaking? What do you know about them? Read it again, repeating the questions: Who's speaking? What do you know about the speaker, where they are, what they're doing? What do they want to tell you? Why is it important to that person? Read it again, until the kids begin to know lines by heart. After several such sessions, you might ask them to choose the poem they like best so far and memorize it. They'll already be well on the way, and they'll understand enough to choose something that touches them and they'll have the great satisfaction of splendid words on their tongues.

Note:

In free verse, read with a very slight pause at the end of each line, and let your voice lift, not drop. This same method used on a poem that has a regular rhythm and/or rhyme can produce a monotonous sing-song effect; instead, follow the punctuation and sense of the poem, sometimes carrying a phrase over a line break, for a more varied and interesting pattern.

Meanwhile, for the purposes of poetry-writing, forget your usual practice of having children read their own work to the class, at least the first time through. The kids need to learn that those scribbles they've made can sound wonderful, just as they need to see their writing in the sober beauty of print. YOU read their poems, with all the resonance and enthusiasm you can muster. In every poem, let your voice emphasize the luscious words, the dramatic repetition, or whatever tools have been well used. This is no time to let children mumble over their papers. They have to hear what's good in their writing; only in that way can they get a clear sense of what they're doing right.

There are always a few who do not want their poems read aloud at all. My policy has been, first, to tell the class that I know there are some things too personal to share with classmates, and that in such a case they should print PRIVATE in big letters at the top of the page and I'll respect their wishes, But I tell them also that if the problem is really just embarrassment, I do not identify the author when I read the poem aloud, and hope that for that reason they'll change their minds. If they won't, their decision has to be final. Sometimes they'll allow you to put a poem in the anthology, even if you can't read it aloud.

## **Should Children Be Taught to Write in The Traditional Forms?**

Robert Frost, in some speech I've never been able to locate, was quoted as saying, "Writing poetry without rhyme is like playing tennis without a net. It is further reported that as he sat on a platform listening to a colleague analyzing and praising a passage of free verse, he was heard to mutter, over and over, "Loose iambics, loose iambics."

Readers raised on traditional rhymed and/or metrical poetry often feel uneasy with free verse. Like devout football fans, they rejoice in watching a genius work within tight restrictions to produce a brilliant performance. The restrictions are necessary to the beauty of it; a sonnet or a touchdown shimmers with its triumph over boundaries.

There is a school of contemporary poetry that spurns all rules, for a variety of more or less philosophical reasons. The results, to my mind, range from boring to infuriating. They sprawl, they preen, they fool around, and finally they fail to move me.

Most artists recognize a master beyond themselves, in the laws of their art. They perceive that these laws come from some of humankind's deepest instincts, those that reach for rhythm, for music, for the subtle patterns of language to grapple with a fierce and fearful universe. A terror that defies control, a sorrow too great to bear, can

be managed and in some mysterious way diminished by words that click superbly into place.

In a sense, fine free verse is even more difficult to write than the traditional rhymed or blank verse. Having no rigid external structure, it must create its own, from inside, so that it "feels" as tight, as compressed, as explosive as its formal counterparts. Some of the tools available are discussed in the sections called "Line Breaks" and "The Question of Rhyme."

However, once it is understood that free verse is a legitimate and exciting alternative, there is a tremendous amount to be learned from writing in form. In working with children, I prefer the forms that set up letters, words or even lines that must be used in a prescribed pattern: acrostics (always leaving the choice of the initial-word to the child), elaborate pantoums or sestinas, or the nameless patterns on the Word Bowl sheets. Try doing some of them as a class first, then individually.

Amazing things happen when you're "forced" to follow such an arbitrary form. Words bump into each other in unexpected ways, setting off all sorts of associations that never would have occurred to you otherwise. Often connections are evoked that you never knew were there. Sometimes the patterns produce apparent "nonsense" that turns out to have a puzzling beauty or excitement, as dreams do. It's a fascinating way to expand one's writing, while learning something about the power of the old conventions.

One category of formal poem —the syllabic poem— depends for its pattern on the exact number of syllables in each line. Despite the current popularity of the haiku in elementary schools, I find this category very disappointing when used with children. As in the case of rhyme, it seems to subordinate all other considerations to one narrow demand, and too often produces dreary results full of words added or distorted merely to fit the scheme. Consider Myra Cohn Livingston's bracing essay on haiku in *When You Are Alone...* to be sure you understand the form's severe requirements. Ron Padgett's essay, "Haiku," and William J. Higginson's "Japanese Poems for American School Kids? .....", both in *The Whole Word Catalogue II*, show how to achieve the haiku's ideal of sharp, concentrated images without being strangled by the form.

## The Question of Rhyme

Most kids believe that poetry rhymes.

Tell them otherwise, and deep down, they won't believe you. Ask them to write a poem, with no other instructions, and nine times out of ten they'll hand you a rhyme.

One reason for this tendency is in what they've been exposed to. Nursery rhymes rhyme; nearly all the old favorites rhyme; and most books of poetry for children rhyme, on the correct but potentially pernicious theory that children enjoy the rhythmic repetition of sound. They enjoy Saturday morning TV cartoons, too, but too much of them and the mind goes dead.

There's another reason, and a more compelling one, why kids hang onto rhyme long after they should know better. Kids know that poetry is supposed to be somehow "different" from prose; and the difference that is immediately visible is rhyme. If they use that, they don't have to do anything else to assure themselves that they're writing poetry.

The trouble is that for novices, rhyme is an awkward artifice, another one of those meaningless contrivances stuck on the surface of learning. It may be fun, and certainly there's a place for that, but unless you're sophisticated in the use of language, it gets in the way of everything else that poetry's about. It impedes thought, wrenches meaning, eliminates important details that can't

be wrestled into rhyme, and often results in a clutter of nonsense:

Las Vegas, I like  
Because it is more  
Exciting than a bike  
I'm always for  
People to win.  
I get really souped up  
When it's my kin  
That can win.

Or:

Silence is nice once or twice  
Morning, noon, or night--anytime all right.  
Silence is a word where nothing can be heard  
Silence isn't cool anytime in school.

Thus the rule I insist on, at least until our study of poetry is well advanced:

**NO RHYMING ALLOWED.**

Instead, I begin at once to offer other ways of shaping a poem, making its language special. Repetition: of key words, phrases, patterns, refrains. Rhythm. Line breaks. Economy, compression. And to supply that missing music, after all the rest is understood, then and then only I describe the repetition of beginning or middle or end sounds (tossing, traveling, towers; far, fear, fur; heat, throat, light) without full rhyme. This half-rhyming goes

by a variety of technical names (see Babette Deutsch, *Poetry Handbook*, if you're interested), but the kids need only to understand that this is a way of satisfying the rhyming instinct without binding themselves in chains.

If a child insists —as at least one always does— that they can't write poems without rhyming, let them go ahead. And then look at the results, line by line, asking questions to demonstrate that some lines don't make sense, that some words don't fit at all, that some statements are made and dropped without earning their place in the poem. If she can solve these problems and still keep the rhyme, that's a triumph. But if she can't, then she'd better try one of the above alternatives, or switch to free verse. Effective communication has to come first.

## Common Problems in Student Writing

"I can't think of anything to write."

No easy answers here, Basic to success is your confidence that everybody really does have something interesting to say, and it's just a matter of finding it.

BRAINSTORMING is the most productive technique for stimulating ideas without imposing them. Gather all those who are stuck, ask the lesson's questions again (or break them down into simpler stages), let people call out any thoughts they have, no matter how wild. Ask some provocative questions yourself, to suggest possible directions. Try relating the lesson to something you've been working on in class, or some interesting object in the classroom. (If you've tried the assignment yourself first, you'll have a much better sense of the problems and alternative solutions.)

With a few children, brainstorming still isn't enough. You may need to sit with one or two and so through this whole procedure again, attaching it to what you know about them, their hobbies, their experiences. Then, as they start responding, you may actually take dictation for a sentence or two, or insist that they write their own words down immediately, to break the page's fearful whiteness. Or write a wild or funny first line,

which begs to be continued. (Better give this some thought in advance, just in case: it's not easy to come up with a good one on the spot.)

A change of seats may work wonders. Sitting under a table, or in the coat closet, gets some kids started. So does somebody at the same table who's sympathetic, comfortably talkative and full of ideas.

Have a few odd tools on hand, for inspiration. If someone can't cope with black and white, how about green ink on orange paper? or a paper bag or candy bar wrapper or graph paper to write on?

Sometimes the right music is a fine stimulus; tell the children to think about the lesson's subject while listening to what the music "says" about it, and to start writing as soon as pictures start forming.

The most treacherous enemy is that small voice in each of us which keep objecting, "That doesn't make sense!" You'll need to advise the kids, again and again, to ignore that voice, write down whatever they feel like writing, and then. See if they like it afterwards.

There are always one or two stubborn ones who vow they have nothing to say, and give you all sorts of reasons. Listen to those reasons carefully; often there's an idea in them well disguised,

which you can seize and hand back to them as a starter. These are likely to be the kids who moan and writhe for 25 minutes, and then in the last 5 minutes of writing time, scrawl something that turns out to be wonderful.

“This doesn't look like a poem at all.”

First, you'll need to ask why. Often kids who say this are still caught in the old belief that poetry has to rhyme; or they may still have a narrow concept of what poetry ought to be about.

Often, though, they're right; what they have written isn't a poem. Even though it's faithful to the terms of the assignment, it lacks intensity, focus, resonance of language, that quality of "specialness" that we expect from a poem.

Review the steps listed under "Rewriting." Perhaps the problem is too many words; or imaginative use of line breaks might help; or the author might be encouraged to find words and images which are more personal, less a collection of abstractions or clichés. But if the result still doesn't "look like a poem," there's no reason to count it a failure. Learning to write poetry is a gradual process, adding to skill, as a carpenter must master each tool in turn before she can turn out a beautifully crafted table.

This handbook avoids any definition of what poetry is; it would be hard to find two poets who agree. If the kids are learning to trust their own perceptions, and to care about the words they use to share them, then they have a good chance of eventually producing that sort of triumph which instinct tells us is poetry.

"But I like my poem just the way it is. I don't want to change it."

Fine. If the author has heard all your suggestions, and rejected them, it's their poem, and they have the right to be the final judge.

"Swears" and other offenses

On this point it's hard to give advice; your own sensibilities and the political realities of your school system have to be considered. My own conviction is that no subject can be categorically forbidden, if we're to convince the kids that poetry has anything to do with their most important feelings. A few teachers have found even some of the "Magic Charms" too strong for their stomachs, and yet it's that lesson, perhaps more than any other, that gets rid of the Hallmark-card image of poetry and establishes the power of words.

Do you mean it when you say that poetry has room for whatever the kids are thinking about? Sooner or later, somebody's going to test you. One response is to accept whatever is clearly necessary and well carried out; evaluating "dirty" writing by exactly the same standards you apply to any other kind ("This line is too long; this is too general; I don't know what you mean here") proves you're consistent, and diminishes the thrill of the forbidden. A colleague of mine, confronted by quantities of "bathroom poems," gave her seventh grade boys models from Ulysses, and said they could write whatever they chose, as long as it was as good as Joyce. There are limits to this approach, however: another colleague's students produced witty and skillful bathroom poems, but he was promptly fired. I've found most kids willing to understand that such material must be kept within the classroom, or even between them and me, just because a lot of people are bothered by it.

Once a student of mine used "hell" in a poem, in a context where the word was not only appropriate but essential. When I read it aloud, gasps and giggles ran through the class, and murmurs about how "My mother would kill me if I said that." I stopped to point out that they had just proved what I'd been saying, about words that carry enormous power. Why should so small a word get such a strong reaction? Why should four letters be so "bad"? They couldn't explain,

but were fascinated by such an unexpected question from a grownup, and saw vividly what a weight of emotion words can carry.

Michael was a child in one of my first classes, a scrawny, feisty, troubled kid from a turbulent family. Usually, he didn't write at all in class, but thrashed aimlessly around the room. Suddenly he turned out a "message poem" that had little to do with the assignment but a lot to do with excrement. He looked scared when he showed it to me; clearly this wasn't a joke. I pushed the assignment aside, told him what he'd done well, and what needed to be improved. The next week he whispered, "Is it OK to say bad things?" and assured that it was, poured out poems full of nightmare visions, fierce, painful, frightening, and sometimes very powerful. For the sake of kids like Michael, and the many others whose strong feelings are less apparent, I had to keep poetry wide open, by any means possible.

## Rewriting: How to Help

The first draft is done, or partly done, handed to you in pride or embarrassment or despair or a burst of courage. What now?

Q. What are we aiming for?

A. A poem in which I hear an authentic human voice, not an assemblage of big words or clichés or predictable banalities. A POEM THAT CONVINCES ME THAT ONLY ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD COULD HAVE WRITTEN IT.

A poem in which I experience something new, or something familiar in a new way. A GOOD POEM TAKES ME BY SURPRISE.

A poem in which everything counts.

Q. How do we get there?

A. Concentrate on positive comments, for the first few lessons. This poetry business is formidable enough already, for most children; it requires a new way of handling language, implies a new kind of self-exposure. Rather than hearing immediately what's wrong, they need to know, specifically and emphatically, what they've done that works: an effective use of repetition, a vivid or surprising phrase, a clean, forceful line, a

dramatic line break. Often, they will have been entirely unconscious of what they were doing. (A line break may be only the result of running out of space!) But if you point out successes, even successful accidents, next time they'll be more aware of techniques, able to use them deliberately. Soon you'll have a collection of fine student poems; duplicate one, every now and then, and examine it carefully together, to see what techniques make it so exciting. The children will pay close attention to a classmate's work, the author will receive recognition, and everybody will see the proof that one among them really can write this stuff.

A first draft that sputters to a halt can be helped along by your questions. Talking is easier than writing, so much so that sometimes you have to cut it short: but the first sentences of what's said can be written down fast, by you if necessary, and lead quickly to more.

"Tell me about his eyes, and his hands."

"What did the feathers feel like?"

"What did you think would happen?"

If you ask such simple questions, out of your own curiosity, BELIEVING THAT THEY HAVE ANSWERS which need only to be "discovered," the child will believe also, and will enrich their writing not as an arbitrary exercise in vocabulary or use of detail, but because you, the reader, are interested enough to want to know more. And

what they write will be their own, not your well-meant, imposed suggestion.

When you're looking at first drafts, keep these questions in mind, for the kids to consider as they revise:

1. Is every word absolutely necessary? Could you cross it out without losing either clarity or power? (Prime candidates for elimination: GENERALIZATIONS, which either restate or substitute for precise concrete details— "It was a beautiful day," "I was very unhappy"! CONNECTIVES —and, the, but, because— which are often understood without being stated; long INTRODUCTIONS or EXPLANATIONS or tidy CONCLUSIONS which dilute the poem's concentration.)
2. Have you told the reader enough for him to be able to see what you see? Is everything in the poem that needs to be, to make it a vivid experience?
3. Does every word say exactly what you mean, as strongly as possible? ("Nice," "good," "pretty," and other such vague words might be banned from poetry; they're too weak to convey anything, except in the hands of a master. Beware of words that merely fill space, especially in a rhymed poem!)

4. Do spelling, punctuation and line breaks all make the poem easier to read? Do they emphasize what's important, and help the reader to "hear" the poem's voice?

At first this list is for your reference only, not to be presented to the kids from the start as a rigid definition of what poetry has to be. If you wish, after a few lessons, to work out a "procedure for rewriting" that can be summarized out of the children's experience and written on the board, it might turn out something like this:

1. Complete the "vision" of the poem.
2. Cross out all unnecessary words.
3. Strengthen what's left.
4. Decide on line breaks and arrangement on the page.
5. Make punctuation and capitalization consistent.

Or again, as a single statement: IN A POEM,  
EVERYTHING COUNTS.

But gradually, please. We're not expecting perfect poems. Even the finest professionals often rewrite their best work a dozen times over as many years before they're satisfied: to demand a finished work in an hour or so would be not only preposterous but damaging to your progress. Be content if every lesson represents a new awareness of something not seen before, a step forward in deliberate skill. When a poem is so nearly right that it could in fact be just about perfect, that in itself may be

motivation enough for its author to follow your questions through the final corrections. Otherwise, cheer for the good things, focus on a few major improvements, and move on to try the new muscles on something else.