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Poetry (sigh!)

Barbara J. Rebbeck

Oh, cruel sea,
You have taken my love away from me.

Why do you act with such elation?
While I suffer this horrid frustration.
Do you not feel any sensation?
Why do you act with such elation?

Oh, wretched sea,
You have taken my love away from me.

Why do you pound with such duration?
Can it be that in our civilization,
We have found no way to curb your strange
elation?
Why do you pound with such duration?

Oh, torturous sea,
You have taken my love away from me.

Why do your depths spell culmination,
To a love that resisted all temptation?
You have drowned my love in your strange
nation.
Why do your depths spell culmination?

Oh, wonderful sea,
You have taken my love away from me.

Can I not join him in your nation?
Take me, too, and strong elation
Will fill my heart with a great sensation.
I shall join him in your nation,
Now!

Dear reader, if you have not yet thrown down this journal in disgust at the above poem, let me explain. This is how I wrote poetry in high school. It was very bad. I share this poem now with my beginning poets, and we laugh together. By the end of my dramatic reading of it, they are a laughing Greek chorus, shouting out the predictable rhyme. How kind that English teacher was back then to give me "credit" for that poem, his only corrections were to red-ink two missing commas. Or was he kind? Did he know how to help me write poetry? Why didn't he suggest this poem should be hurled to the bottom of the wretched sea?

"But, Miss Rebbeck, there are no rules for poetry. It's all emotion on paper." All poetry teachers fight this battle. We live in an age of Hallmark greeting cards. No one reads poetry. It is destroyed in schools by well-meaning literature teachers who extract meaning from a poem like a dentist attacking an abscessed molar. It doesn't help that there are publications out there who feed on the amateur poet's ego. Submit your poem and they'll publish it. For a fee, you can buy the anthology. For a larger fee, your biography will appear. For a still larger fee, your photo will appear. Anyone can be a poet. One of my students couldn't believe I made revision suggestions on her poems. They were perfect, how dare I? Sadly, the next year she appeared in my

doorway one day triumphant with proof that she was a poet as she showed me the book her work had been published in, and sure enough, alongside her poem was not just her bio, but also her photo. It had only cost her sixty-five dollars.

For several years I was a member of a group of teachers who each year judged a major writing competition for a prominent newspaper. Each year there were about one thousand entries in the high school poetry division. We were a committed group of judges, giving up two Saturdays to read poetry. We were also all poets. You might be surprised to hear me label myself a poet after reading my poem, but I have studied with the

best, read many fine poets and, honed my own craft to the point that I have won awards. I've come quite a way. One year as we read poems, we began to make a list of some of the titles of the weak poems. A very long list indeed for the weak far outweigh the strong in this category every year. When we had finally awarded the winners that year, we then made a second list of titles, those of the winners. It is with these two lists that I begin a serious attempt with students to correct misconceptions about poetry. First I show them the list of poems that received no recognition. I just read the list without commenting at this point.

Poem titles that did not win, place, or show:

Absence	Dreams (also Dream and Dreem)
Adventure	Drugs: The Deadly Game
Alone	A Dying Ember
Autumn	Education
The Beauty of Life	Emptiness
Black Hole of the Heart	Epitaph
Care of the Mind	Eternity
A Cruel World	Fate
The Dance of Life	Fear
Death	Feelings (How I Feel, My Feelings)
Despair	Forever (Forever Friends)
Destiny	Freedom, etc.
Disillusionment	

I next present the titles of the third place poems:

The Alley	Inside My Closet
The Bestiary	The Melting
For Jimmy	A Parcel of Poetry
Hide/Out	View Inside a Beautiful Stone
Honey jar	Yesterday

Then I read the second place titles:

The Cactus	How to be happy
Cars in the Field	Hygiene Monsters
Creek Town, West Virginia	Moving
Days of Youth	The Mind's Eye
Eagles Earth	New World through Old Eyes
Elegy: For Edie Sedgwick	The Roly-Poly

Drumroll for the first place poems:

Broccoli Soup

Kudzu the Clown: Freak by choice

Old Suede Shoes

Guinea Pig

Studying

To my hands

Then we talk. We talk about which of the lists would make better reading. Which poem titles are they really curious about? What common traits do the lists have? I have done this introductory lesson many, many times, and kids always say the same things: The first list is very depressing, and they wouldn't really want to read them. They are very intrigued by the first place poems, especially Kudzu. We then talk about the titles grammatically. The students always note the repetition of nouns for titles. Eventually someone suggests how abstract the first list is compared with the concrete winners' lists. Bingo! Now we're on our way. Just by looking at these titles, we have seen that there are differences between unsuccessful and successful poems. Standards for poetry do exist.

My next step with poetry is getting kids to have something concrete to write about. In my opening poem I have nothing concrete to say, partly because I knew nothing about the sea (although I was fascinated with Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca* then) or love. I begin by having kids do a timeline of ten major events in their lifetimes. They may plot this line any way they want, it need not even be a line. But they must give two or three sentences to flesh out the memory, and also give a date. This often sends them scurrying to relatives for help. That's fine. Sometimes they do elaborate timelines on posters, sometimes they are only on unlined paper, sometimes they are done on computer. I then proceed with having students do a memory map. This activity is outlined in Stephen Dunning and William Stafford's wonderful poetry text, *Getting The Knack*. Students think back to a room they spent a lot of time in when they were five or six years old, and they map it from a bird's eye view, prompted by a series of memory-stirrers. I have helped students do maps of their bedrooms, kindergarten classrooms, family rooms, and even their whole neighborhoods. After these two ac-

tivities we begin to cull the memories for possible poems.

We are looking for the concrete in our memories. So we look at concrete models. At simple, concrete models. In *French Lessons* by Alice Kaplan she describes her mother's closet:

I walk into my mother's closet. It is full of bright colors and delicate patterns. There is a faint odor of talcum powder in the air. Clothes are smashed together; the patterns of a black lace nightgown stand out against a solid blue silk dress. These are the fabrics of a life my mother has with my father when she is not wearing her car coat or her garden smock or her plaid fishing shirt. I recognize the dress from a photograph on my parents' dresser. In the photograph, my mother and father stand on a dance floor, poised for a fox trot. At age fifty, the outlines of my father's face have started to spread; his hair thinned. He is looking at the camera with a grim smile set on a closed mouth. He must not like dancing. My mother, half a head shorter than he, is wearing the silk dress and a string of pearls that sets off her black hair. Her smile is rushed. She has her eye on someone to the right of the camera; she's waiting for the picture to be taken so she can continue a conversation. I reach up to touch her clothes. I feel the crinkles of the lace. I run my cheek, which only comes up as high as the skirt, over the rough silk fabric.

The description here is wonderful. The appeal to the five senses that every poet works to achieve is there, as is the concreteness of detail. I then have students find an evocative photo from home. A word of caution. Sometimes students have no photo. One student of mine explained with tears in her eyes that she had no pictures because her dad had won them in the divorce settlement. I told her to write that as a poem. She did, and won an award with the poem. Students often need help in realizing the power of their memories. It is the gift of talented writers to be able to choose what to write about, to be able to select issues or

memories that link them with readers in powerful, empathic ways. Young readers often need help sorting through their lives.

One activity high school students love is the trip down memory lane for Show-and-Tell. Each student brings in a toy, or book, or piece of clothing, anything that connects with a strong childhood memory. They then get to crawl up into my author's chair and tell the class the story or memory. They have more fun with this; tough seniors will lovingly unwrap Matchbox cars, dancers will hold up tiny costumes from pre-school recitals. More detail for writing.

An activity that helps young poets is the chance to take a passage as the one from *French Lessons* and play with it and convert it to poetry. Students need the experience with linebreaks. Just where do free verse lines end on paper? Do all poets agree? Here are two different versions of the Kaplan piece.

FABRICS

I walk into my mother's closet,
full of bright colors
and delicate patterns.
A faint odor of talcum powder.
Clothes smashtogether
A blacklacenightgownasolid bluesilkdress.
Fabrics of a life I know nothing about.
A life when she is not wearing her car coat
or her garden smock
or her plaid fishing shirt.
I reach up to touch her clothes.
I feel the crinkles of the lace.
I run my cheek over the rough silk fabric.

ROUGH SILK FABRIC

My mother's closet.
Bright colors and delicate patterns
With a faint odor of talcum powder.
A black lace nightgown smashes
Against a solid blue silk dress
Whispering a life my mother has
With my father when she does not wear
her car coat or her garden smock
or her plaid fishing shirt.

Once students understand the freedom they have in moving good words around on paper, they meet with their writing partners and compare their drafts. I ask for three or four volunteers to put their drafts on overheads and we look and discuss as a class.

Another great source for changing prose to poetry are picture books. I love to use these beautiful books in a secondary classroom because many of them are as well written as illustrated. I enjoy browsing through the children's section of any bookstore. I seek out text that is alive with description and concrete detail, and appeals to the five senses. My latest find is *See The Ocean* by Estelle Condra, illustrated by Linda Crockett-Blassingame. Listen to her language, already poetry:

Slowly Nellie started. "The ocean is an old, old man born at the beginning of time. He breathes a loud, salty breath, and his beard blows white on the sandy beach. Fish swim in his long, wavy hair. On his head he wears a crown of pearls. On his feet he wears shoes of shells.

"Sometimes the wind blows his hair about in big wild waves. Then he gets angry, and he roars and hisses and spits. When the sun shines, he laughs and gurgles and prattles in the rock pools. He smiles a wide silver and green smile on the beach. On his shoulder he carries ships and boats.

"But at night he's more beautiful than ever. At night he wears a dark, silvery gray cloak with moons and stars sprinkled upon it..."

Now students are ready to begin a draft based on their own lives. No matter how much modeling and pre-writing we do, they are always very unsure. I tell them that at this point they have to just dive in and begin to get words on paper, then we'll talk. What we begin to draft is a poem that tries to capture their timeline in terms of one concrete noun. For instance, a poem that follows shoes, books, food, anything that has been a constant in their lives. Here is an excellent example by Michigan poet, Jim Daniels from the anthology, *Drive, They Said*.

WHEELS

My brother kept
in a frame on the wall
pictures of every motorcycle, car, truck:
in his rusted out Impala convertible
wearing his cap and gown
waving
in his yellow Barracuda
with a girl leaning into him
waving
on his Honda 350
waving
on his Honda 750 with the boys
holding a beer
waving
in his first rig
wearing a baseball hat backwards
waving
in his Mercury Montego
getting married
waving
in his black LTD
trying to sell real estate
waving
back to driving trucks
a shiny new rig
waving
on his Harley Sportster
with his wife on the back
waving
his son in a car seat
with his own steering wheel
my brother leaning over him
in an old Ford pickup
and they are
waving
holding a wrench a rag
a hose a shammy
waving.

My brother helmetless
rides off on his Harley
waving
my brother's feet
rarely touch the ground -
waving waving
face pressed to the wind
no camera to save him.

Actually I have discovered this poem since my students first tried their hands at noun poems, so they began their poems with no real models. Judge for yourself if they succeeded by these examples:

PAGES

My first true love sprouted
From the pages
Of Bedtime stories
Colorful images captivating
My shining eyes
Mama's voice
A stream of crystal
Flowing
Through my head

At six
My first grown-up book
With chapters
Delivered laughter and tears
And immeasurable pride
A bright red barn
Held close the dreams of
A pig in his solitary pen
A flame-haired girl on a wooden stool
A wise spider in her woven home

Years later
I discovered the magic
of science fiction
Found that I could
Soar with a dragon
Golden scales shimmering in the sun
Ride with the knights
Bright banners marching on high
Conquer the dark wizard
A foe worthy of a hero
Like me

But
Friends want to know
When I'm coming outside
To play
Pages of homework
Streaming from textbooks
Crowding the pictures
From my mind
Until a lazy afternoon
Wrapped in a fuzzy afghan
Takes me away
Again

Erica Freeman, 9th grade

Another ninth grader chooses to remember his life in dentist chairs:

MADMAN!!!

Drilling
Digging
Filling

My first dental experience, a construction site
of horror,

involving a madman tooth architect
preaching enormous eruptions,
mauled molars,
and persistent pain.

In a month I returned to that dungeon of
dentistry,
gassed into the fourth dimension
and forced to escape to the bathroom like a
fugitive.

I did return,
collapsing in the chair of woe
to dream of crazed dentists
dressed as cartoon characters:
Mickey Mouse
Donald Duck
Bugs Bunny.

Throughout my life I have had
cavities plugged,
teeth yanked,
bleeding gums attacked.
Frozen in fear
in the dentist's chair.

Josh Klemme

And finally:

DANCE COSTUMES

As I open the closet door, the memories come
spitting out at me:

My black and electric pink costume
feeling like I had just walked out of
"Funky Town,"
my flesh peeking out from my one
armed leotard.

My yellow and white striped pants with
the silver sequin
suspenders
memories flowing back of not feel-
ing "Hip to Be Square,"
but more like a clown under the
big top.

My tiny white costume with the frilly black
lace and petite red bows,
innocent,
I pranced on stage with "All That
Jazz."

My hot pink halter top, lace gloves and
matching pants,
living by the motto of "Let's Hang
On,"
only the tiny strip of velcro hook-
ing the costume to my body.

My bright, baggy, balloon pants,
flapping in the wind
with the teeny tiny top that stuck
to my skin,
determined to be "Too Legit to
Quit,"
living through the embar-
rassment of the costume.

And my red and black sequined unitard,
as I danced in unity as part of a
"Rhythm Nation,"
across the stage with my
fellow dancers.

I shut the closet,
knowing when there is dance,
there are ridiculous costumes.

Amanda Warner, 9th grade

I think these poems, though primarily exer-
cises, hold up well, so well in fact that all of these
students won awards for them in statewide writ-
ing competitions. The important result of this
careful scrutiny of style in poetry and insistence
on the concrete is the transferral students make
to their prose pieces. I know of no better example
for young writers than the work of Gary Soto. All
my ninth graders read his wonderful collection of
childhood memories, *A Summer Life*. Basically all
the stylistic and grammatical structures I hope
students will absorb in my ninth grade class can
be found in the opening sentence of his sketch,
"The Shirt." When I tell this to teachers, they
always ask for that sentence, so here it is:

*Uncle Shorty was back from the Korean War
and living in our sunporch, his duffel bag in
the corner, his ceramic Buddha laughing on
the sill, his army uniform hanging like an
invisible man on a hanger.*

This sentence is rich in detail supported by participial phrases, absolutes, and prepositional phrases, all laid out in parallel structures. In short, it is a perfect, concise model for my students and helps them develop voice and style as can be seen in the opening of an award-winning sketch, "The Mountaintop Trek" by Jeff Kaplow:

I skidded to the floor, air whooshing from my lungs, over-whelmed. Everything in this house was so new, the pink electric outlets just right for sticking fingers into, the carpet in the living room vacuumed so that each strand stuck up like a summer's blade of grass, the white tiles glowing, light reflected from the chandelier. It was a whole new world to be explored, and I had seen it all, a witness to every shadowed corner. Except for one part, Upstairs.

or this excerpt from a sketch, "The Streaker," by Kelly Wachsberg:

On a Tuesday night in mid-summer our neighbors were hosting a huge summer birthday bash for their daughter. It was a beautiful night so she had over a hundred people just "living it up" in her backyard. I had never seen such a party before. Each and every guest lay sprawled out on a beach chair, birthday hat on and margarita in hand. It was summer at its best. The friendly grilled hot-dog aroma sneaking into my nose, the helium-filled balloons reaching up for the sky, the sunlight bouncing off the silvers and golds, I was entranced.

My students begin and end the year with self-evaluations. By June they have finished the journey, many of them delighted with their accomplishments. For their final exam, they

revise and annotate the first piece they wrote, pointing out just how they have grown as a writer. They discover themselves through writing and move on, confident that they are writers and poets.

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