

Mockingbird: Exploring Poetry Through Imitation

A Handbook for Student Teachers

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Introduction

I hope this handbook will help you do three things: First, to teach poetry to students as something they can attempt to do themselves, like student athletes watching sports on TV, and happily emulating what they've seen out on the field. Second, to help students understand not only what the poems might mean, but also how the poems are made—a kind of reverse engineering.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of the teacher as poet. You yourself, I believe, will probably need to write in order to continue teaching writing enthusiastically, and with conviction. None of these assignments is very likely to succeed unless you first try the assignment yourself before you attempt to convince a class it can be done. You can then present the assignment as someone with insider information.

This is important for the students, but also for you, because teaching is a truly unselfish, other-centered occupation and can also result in a kind of burnout. Devoted so much to understanding what's happening with others (the students), you may come to feel that your inner life is starving. To preserve that life, it's good to write.

The Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer (b. 1931) says, "With his work, as with a glove, a man touches the universe." Teaching can be that glove. You won't share everything about yourself, and neither will you ask the students to do that. But if you have them write poems, you won't feel quite as mystified about who they are.

And, if you write yourself, you might not feel quite as mystified about who *you* are. Tranströmer, who was a psychologist working with prisoners, also said: "I have to be alone/ ten minutes every morning, every night." Without time to be alone, how can one say one has a self at all? Writing a poem, even briefly during the day, can be like throwing a bucket down into the well of your own mind.

In this handbook, I have described poetry writing assignments based on imitating certain features of poems by contemporary and older poets. Imitations like these (based almost always on imitating the way the poem is made, not its subject) stretch a writer's idea of what's possible. They can also help, when the desire to write is there, to provide a container, or a method, a starting place, a road map, a chord structure, a dance rhythm The paradox in teaching writing is that the more specific the writing assignment, the easier it is to do, so that the constraints of imitation are often liberating. More than that, such assignments can also give students the experience of engaging in a common activity with poets of all eras, making them colleagues.

After studying in my workshop for several years, where each week we try out a different assignment, Emily Wheeler suggested that I write some of them up and use the title

“Mockingbird.” This bird’s ability to mimic other bird calls, as well as the voices of other animals and even car alarms, enables it to increase the scope of its repertoire.

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1. Feelings

Thirty-five years ago I wrote an off-hand little poem about my developing family life (my perennial subject) that I still enjoy reading, and that I'm grateful to have. It records a tiny, but interesting tremor of feeling, a little landmark in my relationship with my wife, that, without this poem, would probably be long-forgotten. For me, this poem is like a tiny snapshot that, when I squint at it hard, puts me into the head of my younger self.

We went more rapidly through the courtship and newlywed stage than most young people do now, and were soon (just over a year after our wedding) engaged in child-rearing. Obviously, the birth of our daughter was inspiring. But this little moment of feeling occurred later, when our son was on the way:

THE QUIET YEARS OF ORDINARY OBJECTS

This pretty maternity blouse for example—
 \$16.95 with pastel embroidered flowers
 Around the neck. Washable.
 I pass it while heading for Botolph's
 Where they sell expensive, arty jewelry
 But nothing I haven't already given you
 Except a hand silk-screened card
 With a pastel rainbow and a pale yellow sun.

Back at the Stork Shop the salesgirl and I
 Speculate on your probable size.
 "Her first?" she asks.

"No, second."

She gives me the blouse in a bag.

Later, at home, with you off
 To evening class, the afternoon sun
 In silver pajamas, our daughter bathed
 And singing herself to sleep
 I find a gift box from Gilchrist's in the closet
 Pack it with tissue paper, fold the blouse carefully
 With the rainbow card on top
 And write something shamelessly corny
 Like: For my sunlight, my rainbow—
 Happy Birthday . . . and sign it
 Alan. Though we're beyond names.

I'm glad I have this poem, preserving that momentary *frisson* I experienced when hesitating over signing the card—like a fly trapped in amber. But I don't remember writing it. What if any models did I have in mind? What gave me the idea of starting a poem by recording the price of a maternity blouse?

It seems clear to me now that the poem was actually an example of mimicry. I was writing a type of poem I knew quite well: what Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) once referred to as his "I-do-this-I-do-that" poems. Ironically, our lives couldn't have been more different. He was urban, I had become suburban. He was gay. But since I had been a teenager I'd always admired O'Hara's eloquent and interesting ways of conveying his (sometimes tempestuous and complicated and even amusing) feelings.

O'Hara's "Steps" expresses the exuberance of being in love, something that most adolescents have already experienced. Perhaps it's interesting—or maybe it isn't—that O'Hara was in love with the dancer, Vincent Warren. In some ways he's like anyone who's just "fallen" for someone. As we all know, the world looks quite amazingly different when we're first in love, and one of the ways O'Hara draws us into his feelings is to show us how his city world (particularly Central Park) looks to him at this moment:

STEPS

How funny you are today New York
like Ginger Rogers in Swingtime
and St. Bridget's steeple leaning a little to the left

here I have just jumped out of a bed full of V-days
(I got tired of D-days) and blue you there still
accepts me foolish and free
all I want is a room up there
and you in it
and even the traffic halt so thick is a way
for people to rub up against each other
and when their surgical appliances lock
they stay together
for the rest of the day (what a day)
I go by to check a slide and I say
that painting's not so blue

where's Lana Turner
she's out eating
and Garbo's backstage at the Met
everyone's taking their coat off
so they can show a rib-cage to the rib-watchers
and the park's full of dancers with their tights and shoes

in little bags
 who are often mistaken for worker-outers at the West Side Y
 why not
 the Pittsburgh Pirates shout because they won
 and in a sense we're all winning
 we're alive

the apartment was vacated by a gay couple
 who moved to the country for fun
 they moved a day too soon
 even the stabbings are helping the population explosion
 though in the wrong country
 and all those liars have left the UN
 the Seagram Building's no longer rivaled in interest
 not that we need liquor (we just like it)

and the little box is out on the sidewalk
 next to the delicatessen
 so the old man can sit on it and drink beer
 and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day
 while the sun is still shining

oh god it's wonderful
 to get out of bed
 and drink too much coffee
 and smoke too many cigarettes
 and love you so much

Included in a volume called *Lunch Poems*, "Steps" follows O'Hara's movements (and thoughts) during his lunch hour. The poem is unpunctuated, made of what we'd call run-on sentences, as if to convey O'Hara's velocity as he goes about his city life. I guess we could call it a "narrative of feeling," a phrase that my teacher, Helen Vendler, used to describe the lyric poem in general.

Not all these Lunch Poems (often written very quickly on his office typewriter when he returned from lunch) are about joyful feelings. "The Day Lady Died" is his elegy for Billie Holiday, known as "Lady Day." In this poem, stopped in his tracks by the headline announcing her death from a drug overdose, O'Hara remembers what might have been the last time he heard her sing. According to his friend, the poet Kenneth Koch, who was with him that evening, she wasn't well even then, and thus could only "whisper":

THE DAY LADY DIED

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
 three days after Bastille day, yes

it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
 because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
 at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
 and I don't know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
 and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
 an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
 in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank
 and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
 doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
 and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
 for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
 think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
 Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
 of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
 after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
 Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
 then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
 and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
 casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
 of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
 leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
 while she whispered a song along the keyboard
 to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

One of the innovations O'Hara introduced was the rendering of brand names, store names, names (first names) of friends or even his bank teller!—mixed together with famous authors' names, modern and ancient. The poem suggests that daily things (in retrospect) are lit by an impending disaster. (Here's exactly where I was, and what I was doing, when the Towers were hit etc.) But notice that O'Hara is stopped dead—stopped on his way into the john, that is—by the power of Holiday's whispered voice, and, just as important, this is enshrined in a memory—as though he's been catapulted out of the busy rush of city lunch hour to an unforgettable moment when her singing made time seem to stop.

In "Steps" O'Hara concludes by declaring his love; in "The Day Lady Died" he suggests his feelings by telling us the effect Holiday's singing had on his body, forgetting to pee, or even to breathe.

Writing an I-Do-This-I-Do-That Poem

To give students a taste for writing this sort of poem (and to help them understand that poetry can be written in colloquial language), you can suggest that they try a poem like O'Hara's. His method is simple: think of a moment of feeling that you've had that day, and make that the ending of the poem. Then go back and write all the details you can think of that led up to this moment. Encourage students to put in the names of friends, the titles of things that matter to them, and local place names—just as O'Hara did. Tell them to write quickly, the way O'Hara did during his lunch hour, though still putting their poems into lines (as much or as little in a line as they want).

Perhaps this assignment (which of course can be done every single day of a person's life!) might be better for the afternoon than the morning, since by afternoon one has had time to have more feelings? If you're working in the morning, I suppose it would be sensible to allow the students to write about the day before. But discourage them from going back further in time, since they're not likely to be able to supply such a rich collection of seeming trivia.

This poem can be written in 10 or 15 minutes—in fact, it should be written quickly to allow accident to help, the way the abstract expressionist painters O'Hara loved used the splashing and dripping of paint. Then allow time for anyone who wishes to read his or her poem aloud to the group. However, especially because these are poems about feeling, allow the student *not* to read. Even those who don't read can talk about whether the small narrative details they selected, seemingly at random, seem to prefigure the feeling they're leading up to . . . the way "Miss Stillwagon, first name Linda I once heard," could just be random fact, or a name that suggests a hearse.

Some General Advice

I strongly suggest that you, as teacher, must write this kind of poem at least once, but preferably a number of times, before you'll be able to tell them to do it with any confidence. You can tell them you've tried the assignment yourself, and, if you want, give them a general idea of the feelings you found yourself identifying, or the events you recorded.

Should you actually read your poem to them? Up to you. But if your poem is very good you may intimidate them. And if it's not, what you have gained? (I don't usually share my own poems when I'm teaching. I will here, though, to illustrate how different they can be from the models they were mimicking. Mimicking another poet's work doesn't mean you'll sound like her. Most likely, especially if you've been writing a while, you'll still sound like yourself.) If you found something hard about writing this poem the first or even second time you tried it, you can report that too.

Most important, if you're able to write another I-Do-This-I-Do-That poem while they are writing theirs (rather than staring at them, or correcting papers) this may help them

write, since so much of teaching isn't what we say, but how we act, and by writing with them you'll be showing them that writing is something you yourself love to do, not merely something you make *them* do, and, also, that there's nothing sacred about the moment of composition. You're willing to try at any time.

Admittedly, some students may be stuck for ideas, and you may need to walk around and help them get started. Did you have a strong feeling today? How about yesterday? But if you do in-class writing frequently, they will come to trust the process and get started without any fuss. I once got a positive teaching evaluation because the observer was impressed by the way my students just took out their notebooks and started writing their poems "as if they'd done it every day." (Of course, they *had*.)

2. Metaphor

Words for feelings quickly wear out. As we've seen in the first assignment, O'Hara can bring the worn out word love to life by using details:

oh god it's wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee
and smoke too many cigarettes
and love you so much

Not only do we get a convincing little film clip of the poet in the morning, but also the excess of coffee and cigarettes can serve as a metaphor for the rush of love, so the tired old word springs back to life.

Metaphor is the chief weapon in the arsenal poets use to evoke feeling. And poets who use it well, like Tranströmer, Pablo Neruda, or Yehuda Amichai can be read with pleasure by poets all over the world. Stunning metaphors are easy to import. To give students an inspirational dose of metaphor you might begin with Neruda who is like a metaphor fountain, or maybe a geyser. Here is his famous poem about socks, one of his "odes to simple things," *Odas Elementales*.

As the story goes, Neruda was a senator, and traveled around Chile giving speeches to the locals. At one event a woman, who'd been knitting while he spoke, rewarded him with a pair of homemade socks.

ODE TO MY SOCKS

Mara Mori brought me
a pair
of socks
which she knitted herself

with her shepherd's hands,
two socks as soft
as rabbits.
I slipped my feet
into them
as though into
two
cases
knitted
with threads of
twilight
and goatskin.
Violent socks,
my feet were
two fish made
of wool,
two long sharks
sea blue, shot
through
by one golden thread,
two immense blackbirds,
two cannons:
my feet
were honored
in this way
by
these
heavenly
socks.
They were
so handsome
for the first time
my feet seemed to me
unacceptable
like two decrepit
firemen, firemen
unworthy
of that woven
fire,
of those glowing
socks.

Nevertheless
I resisted
the sharp temptation
to save them somewhere

as schoolboys
 keep
 fireflies,
 as learned men
 collect
 sacred texts,
 I resisted
 the mad impulse
 to put them
 into a golden
 cage
 and each day give them
 birdseed
 and pieces of pink melon.
 Like explorers
 in the jungle who hand
 over the very rare
 green deer
 to the spit
 and eat it
 with remorse,
 I stretched out
 my feet
 and pulled on
 the magnificent
 socks
 and then my shoes.

The moral
 of my ode is this:
 beauty is twice
 beauty
 and what is good is doubly
 good
 when it is a matter of two socks
 made of wool
 in winter.

Robert Bly translates this ode by staying faithful to the line breaks Neruda used: short lines to emphasize, perhaps, the simplicity of his subject and of his language. What dazzles here isn't the verbal surface, but the astonishing metaphors. Who would ever look at one's feet and think,

two decrepit
 firemen, firemen

unworthy
of that woven
fire,
of those glowing
socks[?]

In reading this poem over with students, let them tell you which metaphors are their favorites, and why. I love the metaphor above because feet are nothing like firemen at all, and yet suddenly they are.

We can think of metaphor as a linking of two dissimilar things. But a teacher of mine, Irving Massey, advanced the opposite idea, that metaphor is actually a splitting: we stare at something and it splits into something else, and the metaphor vibrates like a tuning fork.

One obvious way to use Neruda's poem would be to ask the students to write odes to simple things. Neruda has many of these: odes to salt, to fish, to watermelon. Of course, one could assign such an ode, telling students to write their own odes, using lots of metaphors, short lines, and simple language. But years ago, when Robert Bly came to speak here at Framingham, he gave us a different idea of how to try to produce the "leaping poetry" that Neruda exemplifies.

I asked him if we could all write something together, and if he would give us an in-class writing assignment. He got up abruptly, left the room, and came back carrying a bread board he'd taken from the food science lab down the hall.

He stood it up on our table like a tombstone. "Here," he said. "I want you to spend twenty minutes writing about what it looks like. Then I want you to spend twenty minutes writing about how it makes you feel. Then I want you to spend twenty minutes writing about how it's your mother or your father."

He said this with such authority—with such Bly-like conviction—that we all obeyed. Remarkably, I have found that after writing for twenty minutes about how something looks, it's not ridiculous to begin to write about how it makes you feel. And after twenty minutes of that, it's perfectly possible to write about how the object is your mother or your father.

However, it's not that pleasant to stare at a breadboard for long, so I use fruits and vegetables. I tell the students their "homework" is to cruise the supermarket aisles waiting for some fruit or vegetable to call out to them, and buy it. (I don't explain what I mean by that.)

Having something real, and complicated, made by a mysterious but brilliant designer, to stare at can give students the experience of how the mind will "split," making an object seem like something unlike itself. By reading some Neruda before we embark, we

prepare to mimic the kind of mental leaps we're looking for. It can feel pretty crazy staring at lemon for an hour, but if everyone around you is doing something similar . . .

POTATOES

In the middle of the coldest winter in a hundred years
 The supermarket is running a sale on potatoes:
 Sacks of potatoes, looking like sacks of stones—
 Stones that bore you in summer, when you find them loose on the road
 Too fat to skim, too heavy to throw far,
 Worth picking up only to be sure they're not potatoes . . .
 Each sack has a little window, like the grating in a cell door
 And pressed against the gratings the potatoes look like faces—
 Dirty people bunched up in darkness, and not allowed in the supermarket.

This one seems pear-shaped, or no-shaped.
 Turn it over, it has a kind of belly button—some scars, a few eyes.
 Or it looks like a skull.
 I bite its damp and grainy insides
 And it tastes like nothing.
 Like earth.

It's not potatoes I want, it's my mother—
 My mother who used to boil me potatoes, roast me potatoes, stab my potatoes
 with special aluminum nails for faster cooking.
 My mother, with all her theories about potatoes, about eating, about children,
 and about me
 Is gone, snow covering her like a sheet.
 But in my dreams things grow warmer—
 And my mother comes back to make me a meal again
 Out of her new body.

3. Details

Having said that brilliant metaphors make a poem easy to translate—that metaphors carry the poet's emotion to us, even in a foreign language—it's also worth saying that poems can be written *without* metaphors. Here's a poem by Li Po that reaches us very powerfully from China, thanks to a brilliant translator, Ezra Pound, even over a span of 1,300 years.

THE RIVER MERCHANT'S WIFE: A LETTER

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
 I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
 You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
 You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
 I never laughed, being bashful.
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
 I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
 Forever and forever and forever.
 Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
 You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
 And you have been gone five months.
 The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
 Too deep to clear them away!
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the West garden;
 They hurt me. I grow older.
 If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
 Please let me know beforehand,
 And I will come out to meet you
 As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

By Rihaku

This may be one of the greatest poems Ezra Pound ever wrote, if not the greatest. Of course, it's a translation. But translating from the Chinese requires an uncommon amount of interpretation, given the structure of the language. Pound uses the Japanese name for Li Po. And, of course, it's not Li Po who is speaking here anyway, but a young

woman. So through a wonderful confluence of talent, a Chinese poet from the Tang dynasty, and an American poet from the 20th century, the plight of a woman (who would probably not have spoken to us of her plight, but only to her beloved husband) comes down to us through time, like a message returning from outer space.

Adopting a persona can be healthy for many reasons: poets (like adolescents) can seem obsessed with their own inner lives. One way to use this poem would be to ask students to form pairs: an interviewer and a subject. It's the job of the interviewer to make a poem out of the words of the subject, but not merely as a passive secretary. The interviewer is going to be taking down a poem of address. Let's imagine Li Po wrote his poem that way. "To whom would you like to address this poem?" he asks.

The subject replies, "to my husband."

"How did you meet him?"

"We were very young."

The woman may not be a poet, though in China, of course, every educated person wrote poetry regularly. Even so she may need to be prodded to give details.

"How young?" asks the interviewer.

"I'm not sure. But I know it was while my hair was still cut straight across my forehead."

The interviewer (our poet) knows he has the very detail he needs to begin the poem, using the picture of the little girl with the straight-cut bangs.

"When my hair was still cut straight across my forehead," he writes. And then he asks, "Where were you? Can you remember?"

"Yes. I'd be playing about the front gate, pulling flowers"

Now he has the second line of his poem.

He doesn't write down everything she says, only the details and expressions that strike his ear as being the next thing he needs in making the poem. It is, after all, *his* poem, not hers. Still, this "interviewing" process is what a trained writer will do when writing all by himself. Li Po, I'm fairly sure, did not need to interview the river merchant's wife. He interviewed his own mind to find and select the details. Further, it's unlikely that a woman would have shared her story as openly with a stranger as she would have with her husband.

In fairness, even though I'm presenting "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" as a poem made of details, but not metaphors, it does, of course, suggest metaphors:

You dragged your feet when you went out.

By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,

Too deep to clear them away!

That's a good detail, but also suggests that the "gate" to her inner self, or even to her sexual self, is covered over, untrampled. And, indeed, if the interviewer feels that the poem he is making from the subject's words is too "prosaic," it's fine for him to ask the subject herself to make a metaphor deliberately, so long as it's all in her words, not his. Also, reassure students, who will not be used to interviewing, that most people can be

stopped, even in mid sentence, if you need to catch up, and will resume what they were saying with no difficulty, as if they can be put on “pause.”

But using this poem as a prompt for making a poem up out of someone’s speech tends to lead students to underestimate the degree of its artfulness. The Li Po (and Pound) poem manages to give the entire arc of a life—from childhood through old age—in clear stages, like a compressed novel. It’s moving because speaker never overtly states how she feels, but only implies it. She doesn’t say, “I miss you so much!” to her husband, but only

If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

Her restraint makes her request more heartbreaking. I like to ask students how far away they think Cho-fu-Sa is. I ask them how far they would go if a boyfriend or girlfriend was on the way back from a long stay abroad.? And what young person, separated from a boyfriend or girlfriend, doesn’t know the feeling of growing prematurely old?

This poem exists in other translations, by the way. Pound’s decision not to translate the literal meaning of place names is correct, I think. But other translators feel that the resonance of the original meaning of these names is an important part of the poem. (Cho-fu-Sa has been translated as “Long Wind Sands.”)

One way to let the students judge Pound’s translation is to give them a couple of the other translations so they can discover for themselves how many subtle decisions he made, while sticking pretty close to the consensus about the meaning of the poem.

“THE RIVER MERCHANT’S WIFE”

Back when I first fell in love with Chinese poetry,
and believed my love for my girlfriend would last beyond death,
I read “The River Merchant’s Wife”—

a poem so touching it made me want to learn Chinese—
to be able to say so simply some crushing truth
about time and change.

My girlfriend was leaving for college in Ohio,
a long trip down a river that flowed one way,
while I had to stay at home to grow sad,
as the monkeys made sorrowful noises overhead
in the jungle of my adolescence—

sad, but not wise enough to be plain-spoken,
nor as uncomplaining as the river merchant's wife,
translated from a language of single syllables,

though the single syllable of love, as I understood it back then,
was stuck in my head like a tiny brass bell
playing its solo in my stupefied mind.

Now perhaps it seems a bit mad—
her desire to mix her ashes with another's
“forever, and forever, and forever.”

But I still know the feeling. The disbelief
all over again at the thought of parting—

from my wife, I mean. She whom I would gladly go out to meet
as far as Cho-fu-Sa.

The Assignment

I'd use “The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter” to give students practice in writing a persona poem. By deliberately impersonating someone else, as Li Po does, the students will be exercising their powers of empathy. As well, they'll begin to form a habit of mind about writing: that all writing personifies a speaker, someone who isn't exactly (or isn't at all) the human being who did the writing. (I like to refer to the “I” in the poems the students write as “the speaker,” since the point of discussing them isn't to critique the character of the student herself, but only to improve the poem. If the poet learns something about herself in the process, that's a bonus.) Tell the students to make the poem mainly from details about this person's life, rarely stating feelings overtly, or even relying too much on metaphor.

THE MATHEMATICIAN'S WIDOW

While they were growing, you were their true mother.
You would set aside your work at any moment
while I struggled to be a good scientist.
Your field of algebra had already closed,
no more discoveries possible to get you promoted.
So you had time for the garden, and for your orchids,
while I struggled to keep my status at the lab.
You amassed a large wall of records,
then later, with little regret, a wall of CDs,
and could sit patiently listening to the younger one's violin.
When you died, our daughters accused me of having neglected you,
as though I'd let you grow fat those last years.

Once you shaved off your dark beard,
 your face grew babyish with an extra chin.
 I saw the antacid pills on the bedside table
 but you were not my child. Go to the doctor!
 By the time you died, it was too late.
 Now the girls are women, and we still quarrel.
 You are not here to listen to the younger one's concerts.
 Rather than go alone, I take a new friend.
 He is younger than I am, and very fit.
 He gave me a waterproof watch to encourage my swimming.
 I am not afraid he will die before me,
 and feel I too will live a long time.
 When I see the old pictures where your beard is dark
 I dream the two of us still climb together
 the way we did before, collecting edible plants.
 But you gave that up to be a devoted mother.
 As angry as the girls are, I am angry at you,
 until I think how happy you were, after all,
 serving others—your students and the girls.
 At your memorial so many spoke well of you,
 more than will speak of me in my old age.
 Do you know our younger one is expecting a baby now?
 She's still playing concerts. With her large belly
 she looks more like you than ever, after you shaved your beard,
 and the sweetness in her face as she accompanies her teacher
 reminds me of yours. I sit beside my friend
 whose arm is hard, and whose hand is rough
 as he clenches mine, squeezing out the time.
 He knows very little about music.

4. The Whole Brain

Bly once said about Tomas Tranströmer, “His images come from widely separated sources in the psyche. His poems are a sort of railway station where trains that have come enormous distances stand briefly in the same building.” Often the Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski (b. 1945), seems to display that same quality.

SELF-PORTRAIT

Between the computer, a pencil, and a typewriter
 half my day passes. One day it will be half a century.
 I live in strange cities and sometimes talk
 with strangers about matters strange to me.
 I listen to music a lot: Bach, Mahler, Chopin, Shostakovich.

I see three elements in music: weakness, power, and pain.
 The fourth has no name.
 I read poets, living and dead, who teach me
 tenacity, faith, and pride. I try to understand
 the great philosophers--but usually catch just
 scraps of their precious thoughts.
 I like to take long walks on Paris streets
 and watch my fellow creatures, quickened by envy,
 anger, desire; to trace a silver coin
 passing from hand to hand as it slowly
 loses its round shape (the emperor's profile is erased).
 Beside me trees expressing nothing
 but a green, indifferent perfection.
 Black birds pace the fields,
 waiting patiently like Spanish widows.
 I'm no longer young, but someone else is always older.
 I like deep sleep, when I cease to exist,
 and fast bike rides on country roads when poplars and houses
 dissolve like cumuli on sunny days.
 Sometimes in museums the paintings speak to me
 and irony suddenly vanishes.
 I love gazing at my wife's face.
 Every Sunday I call my father.
 Every other week I meet with friends,
 thus proving my fidelity.
 My country freed itself from one evil. I wish
 another liberation would follow.
 Could I help in this? I don't know.
 I'm truly not a child of the ocean,
 as Antonio Machado wrote about himself,
 but a child of air, mint and cello
 and not all the ways of the high world
 cross paths with the life that--so far--
 belongs to me.

Ordinarily, I don't think it's a good idea to assign specific topics for poems. But is a
 "self-portrait" really a topic?—since, one could argue, the lyric poem is almost always
 about some version of oneself. To say, "Write a self-portrait," is, in some ways, no more
 restrictive than to say, "Write a poem."

Zagajewski's self-portrait, with its seeming non-sequiturs and randomness, seems to
 suggest that portraying oneself (huge task!) can only be done with random pencil
 strokes. After all, with an infinity of things to say about oneself, why not pluck
 information from here and there, without any thematic coherence?

But what Zagajewski has done is to establish an image of himself by finding a number of reference points, the way face identification software makes a handful of crucial measurements, and can then find your face among thousands of others. Few of us would think to include all these reference points in so brief a sketch of ourselves, and yet our “identity” is defined pretty accurately by the relationships Zagajewski describes.

My attention was called to this by Linda Pastan (b. 1932) in her homage to this poem of Zagajewski’s, a really good example of the “mockingbird” process at work:

SELF-PORTRAIT

After Adam Zagajewski

I am child to no one, mother to a few,
 wife for the long haul.
 On fall days I am happy
 with my dying brethren, the leaves,
 but in spring my head aches
 from the flowery scents.
 My husband fills a room with Mozart
 which I turn off, embracing
 the silence as if it were an empty page
 waiting for me alone to fill it.
 He digs in the black earth
 with his bare hands. I scrub it
 from the creases of his skin, longing
 for the kind of perfection
 that happens in books.
 My house is my only heaven.
 A red dog sleeps at my feet, dreaming
 of the manic wings of flushed birds.
 As the road shortens ahead of me
 I look over my shoulder
 to where it curves back
 to childhood, its white line
 bisecting the real and the imagined
 the way the ridgepole of the spine
 divides the two parts of the body, leaving
 the soft belly in the center
 vulnerable to anything.
 As for my country, it blunders along
 as well intentioned as Eve choosing
 cider and windfalls, oblivious
 to the famine soon to come.
 I stir pots, bury my face in books, or hold

a telephone to my ear as if its cord
 were the umbilicus of the world
 whose voices still whisper to me
 even after they have left their bodies.

Notice that it isn't only Zagajewski's task of self-portraiture that inspires Pastan, but also the reference points. What is the speaker's relationship with identity, mortality, music, reading, art, country, and world? And not only that, what kinds of statements does the speaker use? Simple facts, aspirations, weird info, intimacies, descriptions, big generalizations? I have made a chart, using these two lists as the X and Y axes, and filled in the resulting grid with pieces of Zagajewski's poem. I believe that one could use this same grid for Pastan's poem, showing how she's paid tribute to Zagajewski's method, not just his subject matter. [See chart A.]

I confess that as many times as I filled in this chart with my own material, I found it difficult to write a general self-portrait. Hence, I gave myself and the students the option of creating a portrait of themselves in a particular place, or at a particular activity. (I wrote a portrait of myself taking my son to the dentist.) Filling in as many of the boxes in the grid as possible (not all, of course) encourages the students to bring in a wide range of references. Not only will the speaker be saying, "This is who I am," but also, "This is what I think about my identity, mortality, music, reading, art, country and world." And also, just as interesting, the ways of saying things will have to vary: intimate statements, "I love gazing at my wife's face" shifting to weird ones, "a child of air, mint, and cello."

SELF PORTRAIT AT THE DENTIST

I am the father of a disabled son
 who is now thirty-five. Among his problems,
 an extraordinary sensitivity to pain.
 I accompany him into the treatment room
 and can see his open mouth, spotlighted,
 bright blood on his teeth.
 Even nitrous oxide doesn't help,
 though he sees the dentist he saw as a child.
 We need a world full of people who are kind.
 I wish I could alleviate suffering
 by receiving some practical training.
 Or put in my ear plugs
 so deep grand piano chords
 resound in my ears and I swell with beauty
 as it billows inside me . . .
 When my son was born
 there was a poem the pediatrician liked
 and gave out to his patients
 to comfort fathers. Could I write

such a poem? A middle-sized graybeard,
with a voice a little on the high side,
trying to speak gently to the world
that needs so much care,
as it floats like a single-celled organism
in a vast bath of darkness . . .
I'm hardly the astronaut I thought I'd be,
rooted here near my son,
still on his back in that chair.
I'd rather think about the old sloop
that I've cared for: after many hours
of scraping and cleaning, we can set forth
with no thoughts of maintenance.
Perfect sailing days when she heels,
then steers herself, and I stand on the bow
beyond the vast curve of the genoa
to look back at the churning wake
that will never perturb the sea . . .
Will my son ever be on his own?
Yesterday I heard him
touch typing, about a hundred words a minute,
very loud, on an old typewriter—
some bird, it turns out, trying to find
a home behind one of the shutters.
And in other fantasies he's driving
a city bus, and will have a steady paycheck
and a good pension. As for my country,
it's kinder than you'd think
given all the Social Darwinist rhetoric lately.
For example, it provides him with food stamps,
and gives him a bit extra, too,
paying *him* taxes, just as the dentist
is kind beyond any professional obligation,
and the hygienist too, who modestly states,
"You can hold my hand, and stare
right at me, if you want. I know
I'm not much to look at . . ."
But she is!—with her brown eyes
behind her tortoise shell glasses,
meeting his gaze the way the world
tends to meet it, without turning away.

5. Form

I heard recently that it's hard to change one's behavior without changing one's location. It seems as though the brain is designed to conserve processing capacity by embedding patterns of behavior into various locations. So, for example, when climbing into a car it's not necessary to think very hard, or even consciously about opening or closing the door, or fastening a seatbelt.

I wonder if that's why poets write in forms. The musical rhythm, and even the organization of a poem becomes subsumed into its formal environment, so that the poet's energy can be concentrated on filling the form, not on creating the form, as one must when writing in free verse.

Form can be liberating. Yet it will be hard for students to accept this. And, in fact, they will often shudder and consider you a traitor or a tyrant if you tell them they must write using certain rules. Isn't poetry supposed to be simply creative?

Though free verse is the dominant poetic practice in America (beginning with Whitman, or maybe even with Emerson) one could argue that even when American poets use forms, they tend to rebel against strictness (Emily Dickinson's use of slant rhymes, for example). With some exceptions, my own bias is in favor of forms that are somewhat stealthy: poems too expertly fitted to forms often sound too artful to me, and make me think the poet is showing off rather than actually trying to say something. When such poems are done brilliantly they win everyone over, of course.)

Two forms everyone will want to try will be sonnets and sestinas. Sonnets are like little boxes that fill more quickly than you expect. Rarely can you say everything you have in mind, and that's probably why poets often write sonnet sequences, using the thoughts left over to write more sonnets. Making sonnets is like weaving pot holders: they don't take long and you know exactly when they're done.

The best argument I've seen for the contemporary sonnet has been made by Tony Barnstone in an article in *Cortland Review* available still on the Web. Among other things, he advocates an experimental approach to rhyme because "it broadens the palette of possibility, allows the sonnet to have more natural diction." He shows, for example, how he was able to cast the words of World War II veterans into sonnets. Hearing these poems, the listener is only subliminally aware of the rhymes, but even so the sonnet form seems to impose a compact eloquence on ordinary speech.

REVERSAL AT THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

The lookout yelled hell-divers and I saw
 three black planes plunging towards my head. We shot
 a frantic burst from the guns but it was
 too late. Their bombs were off. I knew to toss

my body to the deck and quickly crawl
 behind rolled mattresses we used to keep
 safe from the shrapnel. Like a dark sky lark
 diving to snatch a fly, from a high peak
 above the cloud-cover, the next plane came
 screaming. A flash, strange blast of warm air, then
 a startling quiet. We'd been tricked. They'd hid
 high up and sent planes skimming low to make
 us waste a flight. Then we were in the net,
 fueled planes on deck, nothing to do but die.

(Japanese Sailor, Aircraft Carrier Akagi)

The reason you probably won't hear the rhymes, or even see them, is because Barnstone is using what he calls "reverse rhyme."

In "Reversal at the Battle of Midway," the rhyme game was to have the rhyme word of each pair be either the phonetic or the alphabetic reverse of each other (thus, "saw/was" and "keep/peak"). So, in the case of the example discussed above ("fire"), the reverse rhyme would be "rife," and for "laugh," the reverse rhyme would be "fall."

"A Manifesto On The Contemporary Sonnet: A Personal Aesthetics ,"
 Cortland Review website.

To encourage the use of "stealth rhyme" you might first consider this free verse poem by John Logan (1923-1987).

THREE MOVES

Three moves in sixth months and I remain
 the same.

Two homes made two friends.

The third leaves me with myself again.

(We hardly speak.)

Here I am with tame ducks

and my neighbors' boats,

only this electric heat

against the April damp.

I have a friend named Frank--

the only one who ever dares to call

and ask me, "How's your soul?"

I hadn't thought about it for a while,

and was ashamed to say I didn't know.

I have no priest for now.

Who

will forgive me then. Will you
 Tame birds and my neighbors' boats.
 The ducks honk about the floats . . .
 They walk dead drunk onto the land and grounds,
 iridescent blue and black and green and brown.
 They live on swill
 our aged houseboats spill.
 But still they are beautiful.
 Look! The duck with its unlikely beak
 has stopped to pick
 and pull
 at the potted daffodil.
 Then again they sway home
 to dream
 bright gardens of fish in the early night.
 Oh these ducks are all right.
 They will survive.
 But I am sorry I do not often see them climb.
 Poor sons-a-bitching ducks.
 You're all fucked up.
 What do you do that for?
 Why don't you hover near the sun anymore?
 Afraid you'll melt?
 These foolish ducks lack a sense of guilt,
 and so all their multi-thousand-mile range
 is too short for the hope of change.

Logan recreates the reeling tipsiness of his new and uncertain life by using rhymes that are perfect (and obvious) and others that are stealthy (like “spill” and “beautiful” or “beak” and “pick”) as well as lines of very different lengths. I like to give this poem to students and let them find the secret rhymes. The poem, of course, has a winning frankness, as if it’s struggling to make itself into order, but hasn’t quite succeeded, just as the poet is struggling to get control of his life. Though the school board may not agree, I think it’s healthy for students to see a rhymed poem that, at times, sounds like speech in a bar room—and, at other times, lyrically descriptive and even theological.

The Sonnet Assignment

Ask students to write about anything they want, but try not to write a sonnet that sounds fake or forced, by 1) using some consonance, assonance, and slant rhymes (as Logan does) and 2) using lots of enjambment (to bury the rhymes).

I've written many sonnets. I find that the form helps give me courage, makes me think I can dare to try to write about things that might otherwise overwhelm me—by making at least a small start.

INSCRUTABLE

She says he's become inscrutable. So she forces the issue
 On Friday night, which gives her the rest of the weekend
 To cry. And her hand is shaking. Like a tissue
 She is coming apart. This is the deep end
 Where I don't trust myself to swim. Why can't I
 Advise her? She throws her head back in her chair
 So I can see her white throat. "I asked him to lie
 And tell me there was still hope. We were in bed. He stared
 At the ceiling a long time. Finally he said . . ."
 The usual things. For the first time all year it's snowing
 And I can see her after New Year's Eve, dead
 Tired despite the returning light. And in Spring
 In love again? I suppose it's all part of the ebb and flow
 Of friends. We cling. They come and go.

You will find, when you try this yourself, that rhyming (or a near- rhyming) may pull unpredictable words out of you. ("Issue" draws out "tissue," for example.) This gentle forcing can help when writing about a grave subject about which you're in danger of sounding soppy. It introduces a game element, a tiny degree of levity that dries the poem out. It's a good idea to write many sonnets, until the form feels comfortable, until you can feel the form happening as you write.

The easiest sonnet form to attempt is the Shakespearean sonnet, where you experience many moments of freedom. For example, you can write anything you want for lines 1 and 2 and your first rhyme isn't required till lines 3 and 4. Then for lines 5 and 6 you're exempted from rhyme again, just as you are for lines 9 and 10. Admittedly, the final couplet, which must "sew up" the poem in some way, can be tough. Using a half-rhyme (snowing/ Spring), or burying some rhymes in the middle of the line (Spring/ cling) can sometimes help keep the rhyme from sounding forced. It's also a good idea to mark the rhymes (abab, cdcd etc) as you write, and number the lines, so you don't lose track.

Then there's the issue of line length. Conventional sonnets are in iambic pentameter. The trick here is to keep the iambic lines from sounding sing-songy, something Shakespeare does very well, of course, in his blank verse. Ask the students to scan some iambic lines, and then ask them to mark the actual accents—that is, where the accents would fall if you're reading the line as if you were speaking it: "When in disGRACE with FORTune and men's EYES," though you may hear it differently. But no one in his right mind would say "When IN disGRACE with FORTune AND men's EYES."

I like to count five accents per line when I'm writing sonnets, though the accents I hear wouldn't necessarily be the ones you'd hear. Still counting is of the essence of sonnet writing, and writing in forms in general. And counting imposes a certain restraint that colors the poem and, paradoxically, frees it.

The Sestina Assignment

In some ways, the sestina is the opposite of the sonnet. Of course, it's not about rhyming in any way, it's about weaving a set of six end words (that is, the words that end each line) in a repeating pattern throughout six stanzas, and then repeating them all again in the final three lines. Here's the formula:

1. ABCDEF
2. FAEBDC
3. CFDABE
4. ECBFAD
5. DEACFB
6. BDFECA
7. ECA or ACE (but must also include BDF somewhere within the lines)

This makes for 39 lines. If the sonnet is over just when you feel you're getting started, writing a sestina you typically run out of thoughts way before you're finished. And that's why writing a sestina is interesting: because it pulls thoughts out of you that you didn't even know you had, as you desperately try to complete it.

Here too, you want to enjamb (break the lines in the middle of phrases) and in other ways try to keep the sestina from sounding too much like a boring death march—usually by trying to use the six words in as many different ways as you can.

An example of a modern sestina, and one that often appeals to students, would be George Draper's poem about hockey.

RINK KEEPER'S SESTINA: HOCKEY, HOCKEY

Call me Zamboni. Nights my job is hockey.
 I make the ice and watch the kids take slapshots
 At each other. They act like Esposito,
 As tough in the slot as Phil, as wild with fury
 In fights. Their coaches tell me this is pleasure.
 But it isn't pleasure. What it is, is Hockey.

Now let me tell you what I mean by Hockey.
 I mean the fights. I mean young kids in fury,
 And all those coaches yelling for more slapshots.
 I tell you, blood is spilled here. This is pleasure?

It seems to me the coaches should teach hockey,
Not how to act like Schultz or Esposito.

Look, I have nothing against Phil Esposito.
He's one of the greats, no question, it's a pleasure
To watch him play. My point is, why teach fury?
If I know life (at least if I know hockey),
Then fury's here to stay. We don't need Hockey
To tell us that, we don't need fights or slapshots.

Like yesterday. I heard a coach yell, "Slapshots!
Take slapshots, son! You think Phil Esposito
Hangs back And hit! And hit again! That's hockey!"
But he was wrong. The kid was ten. That's Hockey.
You could tell the boy admired his coach's fury.
It won't be long before he hits with pleasure.

Sure, I'm no saint. I know. I've gotten pleasure
from fury, too, like any man. And hockey
At times gets changed around in me to Hockey.
I've yelled for blood at Boston Garden. Slapshots?
They're thrilled me. I've seen men clobber Esposito
And loved it when he hit them back with fury.

But you know what? Before these days of fury,
When indoor rinks were just a gleam in Hockey
Fanatics' eyes, there was no greater pleasure
Than winter mornings. Black ice. (Esposito
Knew days like this as a boy.) Some friends. No slapshots,
But a clear, cold sky. Choose teams. Drop the puck. Play hockey.

Yes, before big Hockey (sorry, Esposito),
Before the fury and all the blazing slapshots,
We had great pleasure outdoors playing hockey.

Notice how Draper is able to recreate, often with his short sentences, a kind of emphatic tone of pronouncement, like someone who's threatening to poke you in the chest. It's easy to read this poem aloud and sound convincingly as if you care about hockey. And then the lyrical sweep, starting with, "there was no greater pleasure," seems to bare the soul of the speaker, and reveals that the poem is really about the sacredness of child's play corrupted by competitiveness and big money.

The poem is a tour de force of sestina writing, too, because two of the six end words are actually "hockey" increasing even further the obsessional quality of the speaker's complaint and fervent wish.

Tell the students to think of a topic they're obsessed with. Then write down six words, and try to get as much distance between the words as possible (as Draper does with "fury" and "pleasure"). Tell them, as they're writing, not to be afraid of the moment when they think they have absolutely nothing more to say, but to keep on going and discover they have more to say than they thought.

AGING, JOY, WATER, CHILDREN, LOVE, AND ILLNESS SESTINA

I've told them it's a good form for obsessives. Love for example may preoccupy you, like a long illness or a splinter you can't extract, or a joy so huge it's like standing next to a blimp. They are children in this art, circling the big square seminar table. I'm aging, wearing out my seat. In recent years, they've been flowing through here as fast as water.

Oh sometimes, if the shade is up, I see a sky as blue as water over their heads, while their heads are bowed in writing. I love the quiet then in the room. I can almost hear them aging--- something they like, still, since to them it's growth, not an illness. As I get older, they look like adults recently fashioned from the children in some fifth grade class, their child-faces sheer joy

as they assume their beauty and distinction. Well, I know for them there isn't much joy in school, they'd all rather be in or on the water with iPods, towels, surfboards, digging in the sand like children, though I'm sure if I asked them they'd say they love the course. After they're absent they even show me little notes for non-serious illnesses like mono and strep, nothing like the grave things they'll get when they're really aging.

So it's fun for me because as I'm aging they keep appearing here like bubbles out of a spring. Earth's joy in its own improvisation. More kids! More kids! For better or ill. None any more necessary or unnecessary than the rest of us. Made from water and a few cents worth of minerals, and full of love for the sweet forms of each other, something that leads to the begetting of new children

though not just yet! No, here their heads are bent like children taking a spelling test, their hair hanging down like curtains so you can't guess their ages,

Their book satchels, soda cans, candy bar wrappers, the sprawl of Xeroxed
 papers I love
 to hand out (so I can know I'm giving them something--- oh joy!---
 even if it's only paper). Yes they could be underwater
 they're concentrating so silently, as though the illness

of distractibility has been cured for everyone forever, that illness
 that drowns out all but the obvious meaning of words. Well, children
 aren't fooled by the obvious. They know the words are waiting like water
 to be played with. If I look up now I can see the sky is aging
 into the color of blue snow. But the windows are wide open. And
 they seem to enjoy
 writing while wearing their bright coats, not bothered by cold, safely
 in love

with the winter that won't mean (for them) illness or aging
 but amazing changes as the ice melts to water, and their thoughts turn
 into waves of joy
 as they turn away from being children, and find their own new words
 to tell us how angry they are, how much they love.

Envoi

One or more of these assignments will I hope give you a start in teaching poetry via imitation. Now that you've seen how I've been doing it, you can adapt this method and create your own assignments using poems that are included in the curriculum you'll be teaching. Read the poems asking, What's the assignment here? Then assign it to yourself, to check that it can be done. Then use this creative writing assignment to help teach the canonical literature.

For a look at how a brilliant poet and teacher does this, see Kenneth Koch, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children*. Using poems by Blake, Herrick, Donne, Shakespeare, Whitman, and others likely to be taught in high school (but unlikely to be taught in elementary school!) Koch demonstrates how (even for children as young of 4th grade) imitating the methods of great poets brings the children closer to the poems, and releases startling creativity and imagination, tapping into their inherent love of play.

—Alan Feldman
 January 2012

	identity	mortality	music	reading and art	country	world
<i>simple facts</i>	Between the computer, a pencil, and a typewriter, half my day passes . . . every Sunday I call my father.	One day it will be half a century . . . I am no longer young	I listen to Bach, Mahler, Chopin etc.	I read poets, living and dead . . . great philosophers		
<i>aspirations</i>				I try to understand the great philosophers.	I wish another liberation would happen.	
<i>weird info</i>	a child of air, mint and cello	someone is always older	three elements in music: weakness, power, and pain. The fourth has no name.	in museums the paintings speak to me and irony suddenly vanishes		I am truly not a child of the ocean
<i>intimate statements</i>	I love gazing at my wife's face	I like deep sleep, when I cease to exist.			Could I help in this? I don't know.	
<i>description</i>	I like fast bike rides	Black birds pace the fields, waiting patiently, like Spanish widows.			the emperor's profile is erased	fellow creatures, quickened by envy, anger, desire
<i>big general statements</i>	I live in strange cities and sometimes talk to strangers about matters strange to me				My country freed itself from evil	Not all the ways of the high world cross paths with the life . . . that belongs to me.

	identity	mortality	music	reading and art	country	world
<i>simple facts</i>						
<i>aspirations</i>						
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