

## USING METAPHOR TO WRITE ODES TO SIMPLE THINGS

**From:**

*Mockingbird: Exploring Poetry Through Imitation*  
*A Handbook for Student Teachers at Framingham State University*

by [Alan Feldman](#), professor emeritus of English, Framingham State University.  
In this lesson, poet and teacher Alan Feldman describes a lesson inspired by a classroom visit by the poet Robert Bly, in which students are asked to write about an object, moving from a straightforward physical description into the realm of metaphor.

**Grade(s) Taught:** High school and college

**Genre(s) Taught:** Poetry

**Objective:** To use metaphor to see objects in a new way

**Prompt:** Pablo Neruda's "[Ode to My Socks](#)"

### LESSON

Words for feelings quickly wear out. A poet like Frank O'Hara can bring the worn-out word "love" to life by using details, as he does here in the closing lines of his poem "Steps," included in a volume called *Lunch Poems*.

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 [Tomas 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](#)” by Pablo Neruda

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 and discussing this poem 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 poet 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. . .

Here is a poem I wrote, working alongside my students on this assignment.

"Potatoes"

by Alan Feldman

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.

*About the author:*

*Alan Feldman* often writes while his students are writing. His poem “In November,” in Best American Poetry 2011, was written in class during a lesson on one-sentence poems. He has recent work in Southern Review, Yale Review, Ploughshares, TLR: The Literary Review, Cincinnati Review, and Catamaran; and forthcoming in Arroyo, upstreet, Salamander, and Poetry East. For more of his in-class assignments, see [“Mockingbird: Exploring Poetry Through Imitation,”](#) available on his website.