A Net for Words

Using the Lune to Jump-Start the Essay

MELANIE MARIA GOODREAUX

New York hustle
2000 word article faces me
magic trick proof

Bite-sized word banks
Build poems, essays, stories, various
Save me now

From poetry to
essay, start with eleven words
Step by step

I hope my self-proclaimed magic trick will save me. It would be shameful after teaching writing for twelve years throughout the hustling boroughs of New York City, that I be found like the phony Wizard of Oz with his emerald-green curtain cast away, just a little man with a big hustle and nothing to show for it. A writing deadline is an emergency, and I'm supposed to be a writer. My students are also facing an emergency: the date of their ELA test is upon them, after weeks of grueling preparation. In the mind of a tender, growing, awkward pre-teenager, this qualifies as an emergency. In fact, nearly everything does: their latest Facebook posts, their raging hormones, their pimples, their Big Mac diets, buzzing and beeping iPhones, Androids, and their teetering self-confidence. With all else that bips and bops and borrows space in the minds of the young, having to write succinctly in complete sentences with a limited set of language skills in response to a passage about some random, ancient scientist or musician can be an overwhelming task. "Now you want me to identify the main idea? Can I text it to you? What's going to happen if I can't really write my way through this test?"

The magic trick I've been doling out to the stressed-out masses of young writers dealing with writing "emergencies" is the "lune" exercise. It has proven to be like the last-minute trinkets passed out by The Great Oz that helped the seekers to figure out that what they really "needed" already existed deep inside of themselves. The Great Oz didn't really need to shell out anything more from behind the green curtain, Dorothy and her companions already had what they needed. The lune shows you that the words already exist inside of you to create that paragraph, that story, that essay. The 2000 words will come, but they will come eleven words at a time. The lune is made up

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of the words that fight their way to being born from all the chaos we have in our busy minds. The lune says, "If you build it, it will come."

The lune, a simplification of haiku created in the 1960s by an American poet named Robert Kelly, is a three-line poem, with three words in the first line, five words in the second line, and three words in the third line. In their book *Poetry Everywhere* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2007), Jack Collom and Sheryl Noethe write that "in counting words rather than syllables, the lune is more flexible than its ancestor the haiku," and describe it as "just eleven words, arranged 3/5/3; anything goes." The subject and mood of the poem can be many things, but must be focused: Collom says a lune creates an image that is like looking through a crack. I added another restriction to the form with my high school students at Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem. They could use any eleven words, except *a, an, the, nice, pretty, good, bad, ugly,* or *very*.

These students had been charged with writing college application essays that would identify a "social problem" that affects teenagers. Their essays also had to describe how they themselves would be part of the solution. I was hoping the lune would help them out of the slump they'd gotten into after two years of essay writing based on strict outlines—an approach used at many schools—had resulted in essays that were formulaic and dull. At this point, I had stacks of their writing to read, and much of it was bland, flavorless, rigid, dry, impersonal, and had big problems with grammar and structure. Our group from Teachers & Writers Collaborative was there to help these students become more creative and personal in their writing. We were there to "spruce things up" and turn some of the students' ramshackle beginnings into their golden tickets for the golden gates of college. At that point, most of these extremely bright students all sounded like the same programmed robot trying to get into the same college with the same starter sentences:

"The social problem I would like to identify is (fill in the blank) _____. Blank is bad and terrible to society.

I will help to rid our world of
_____(fill in the blank)
by (fill in with some more boring blanks)
_____.

These kids needed a jump-start, so, I offered them the lune. Yes, I know. The lune is a poem. Yes, I know, the English teacher collaborating with me would write me off as "hippy-dippy" for stealing valuable time if I really tried to pull this off with her "serious, college-bound" students. But my plan was that the lunes they wrote would morph into a word bank which would be used to create images, and that those images would beget more images, more words, more sentences, until their essays were done, more colorful and better written than ever before.

Get to point.
You are losing your way.
What's your point?

The point is, it worked. Any teacher who doubted my method was converted to the lunacy of my luneisms and continued to use these tiny, bite-sized poems to build essays and more developed writings. This method worked because it simplified what was too big to think about into a manageable form. The lune captured the monster of an essay and tied it up, eleven words at a time, until the monster was putty in the young writer's hands. For the social-issue essays, I'd get lunes like this written with the whole class:

Head down, ashamed
Belly hidden, stacks of homework
What will happen?

Together, we would recreate a better beginning to a social-issue essay by taking the words and images of the lune poem, and using them to enhance our sentences:

She walked around with her head held down in shame. Her growing belly was hidden by a backpack filled with stacks of homework to do. What will happen to this pregnant teenager? She is like a score of other young teenaged women in America who find themselves pregnant and in need of resources and guidance. . . .

The lune brought forth the young writers' own eloquence and personal voices by allowing them to break free of the monotonous, pre-programed voice they'd slipped into after years of formulaic writing instruction. Every time a young writer would get stuck, my suggestion was to start writing lunes of the words that were scrambling through their minds and to use these words to create verbal images associated with whatever they needed to write about. The "words" for these pictures would provide the specifics they needed to start writing in an interesting way about their topic.

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I found that this exercise worked equally well with younger students. At PS 4X, I had a group of young writers who needed to write "historical fiction" stories.

To inspire them, I asked their teachers to pick out video clips of highly dramatic moments in history. Ms. Chaikin and Mr. Vargas showed their students clips about the Middle Passage and about John F. Kennedy's assassination. We froze the screen on certain scenes and had the students jot down the first eleven words that captured those images. One student wrote an entire fictional account about a slave rebellion by building his vision and story from this lune:

Slaves, take over,
Master, ship, capture, detained, fright,
British, army, control

In the dialogue this student created, he used words and images generated from his lune for his main character, a slave named "Rick," who rebels and scavenges the slave ship for its weapons. This slave finds the courage to "take over" after being "frightened." The clip we showed, however, did not depict a rebellion. It was just a clip that showed the horrible conditions of slaves chained in Middle Passage boats. The lune this boy wrote was inspired by the clip and gave him some direction for the story he wanted to write:

We all put aside our fears and decided to take control for once. We knew that some of us might die. I hoped I would survive. I thought of my family, my friends, my freedom, my home. Yes, I wanted to go home and be free.

Words come to us in fits and starts, at least that's how they come to me. Sometimes I write from beginning to middle to end, sometimes I jump around. Sometimes two or three words come to me and I sing them like a jingle down the bustling sidewalks of New York just so I don't forget them. Some of my words, most of them, never make it to a page—they just roll around in my thoughts like different colored marbles. I'm lucky when the muse sends me an entire block of solid poetry and I have a place to write it down or type it in.

The lune suits today's young people, who are texting, buzzing, tweeting, posting, blogging, iTouching, iPodding, words, words, words. Quick and easy is familiar to them. They like that the lune is something like a little "to-do list." Despite this proficiency, when these same students have the words "Create a 500-word essay" glaring at them, every word can seem to crawl away out of reach. The words disappear into

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some hiding place and the lune helps to draw them out. The lune says, "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" and then eleven words have the space to appear.

For English language learners, the essay form can be even more intimidating. Nothing feels more difficult than trying to manage language without the necessary skills or words. ELL students can stumble like newborn fawns when having to build sentences and paragraphs in English.

> Caramel-colored skin, black
> silky hair, glasses, Spanish
> comedy, Yo, Miss.

In my class at a middle school in the Bronx, the students tease each other with thick Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Mexican accents. They throw wads of paper and poke fun in a carnival of caramel-colored skin, geeky laughter, and screeching chairs. The initial rowdy, rough and tumble of Juan, Guadalupe, and Maria would include "talking about me" in Spanish while blowing enormous pink bubbles and popping them super loud. None of this is permissible in school. They were not "into" me, at first, one of them would tell me. They couldn't take yet another dose of ELA instruction and they were suspicious of me because I "looked" like I "should" speak Spanish, but didn't and couldn't. They weren't into me until I showed them my lune trick. When I wrote the word "Lunes" on the board, they thought I meant the Spanish word for "Monday." "What's Monday got to do with writing, Miss?" But when they tried writing their thoughts out in lunes, they found, to their surprise, that they could do this. "Yo, Miss—this works," said Guadalupe, "I don't know why, but it helps."

Guadalupe watched the lune act as a net for the words she knew in English. She was originally from the Dominican Republic but now had to read Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*, listen to a passage read aloud about jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, and write a coherent paragraph that answered a question, all in a language still foreign to her. I don't know about you, but I am eons and palabras away from ever writing a paragraph in Spanish. I can only imagine that kind of anxiety causing me to faint on the spot. I asked Guadalupe the reader's response question slowly and told her to breathe. "Just write down whatever eleven words come to your mind in a lune." The lune slowed down the writing process for Guadalupe. The form gives you more time, but uses time wisely. It reminded Guadalupe that her brain was working, that she did know at least eleven words that would point to the answer she had tumbling around in her twelve-year-old mind in English and Spanish. The lune is like a net for fish, I told these ELL students: you catch a few catfish first, then bring a whole score on the boat for the fish fry.

At the Learning Tree School in the Bronx, all of Amece's dreadlocks dangle to the front, as she bends her head, intent on imagining the physical description of the main character in her realistic fiction story.

> Yellow, orange hair
> Earrings clinking and shaking
> Silver jingle bells.

turns into

> Christie's silver earrings were clinking and shaking
> like jingling bells against her brown neck.

"The lune really is great!" says Amece. "It helped me a lot. Even though it's just a few words, I learned how to make those words into sentences." Ms. Juliet, Amece's fourth-grade teacher, reinforces the use of the lune when writing in her other classes. "The lune is an essential tool for prewriting," she says. "All stu-

dents should use it in the planning stage. It really allowed my fourth-graders to think of words that their readers could visualize, taste, smell, and connect with."

What will happen to Amece's character Christie? What sights and feelings will Amece bring forth from the boundlessness of her fourth-grade imagination? We don't know yet. Maybe Amece doesn't know either, but she will find out with just eleven words at a time.

World is big.
Something quick / moment to stop
Lune is small.

If eleven words
squeeze out of the clutter
of my mind...

I can build
the tower of my thoughts.
This way, yeah!

For more information and ideas on using the lune, check out Poetry Everywhere *(Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2007), edited by Jack Collom and Sheryl Noethe; and* The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms *(Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2000). Both are available on Amazon.com and BN.com.*