# Lost Joy

Foreign land | imprisoned me | beneath you
live through | freedom my joy

you're | carefree | roaming the busy streets
motionless | thoughts lost in time

unconcerned | where your | travel | may take you
with life | love | journey ends

wet pavement | extending distance of | time
exhaustion and tears | forever

*Jakesha*

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# "EVOLVING SOUNDS"

YOU | FACE | YOUR | TRUE | COLORS
| EXPOSE | | DULL | SHADES

YOU HAVE | A | PATHWAY | OF | LITE
| MANY | RAILROADS | | DARKNESS

BRINGING | YOU SOMEPLACE | UNEXPECTED
losing | | PREDICTABLE

YOU | SEPERATE | YOURSELF | BECAUSE
| INCLUDE | EVERYONE |

YOU | ARE THE | CONSTANT | ONE
THEY | | DIVERSE | ONES

*vr0ci0 rf*

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# Dead End Interior

You deeply | left | me in the | dead end.
| went beyond | | interior.

You | lead | me | to | an unfamiliar | building.
Instead | confuse | | through | ancient | vacant mind.

You never | stand alone | in the darkness | of each side
| to say a peep | | of doom

there | YOU | guide | me to | a long corner,
| force | | take a destructive

path to escape.

*Martin*

# Inventing New Forms

## Three Experiments for Teaching Poets

A M A N D A   L E I G H   L I C H T E N S T E I N

I CONFESS: I STARTED TO DREAD READING MY STUDENTS' POEMS. I abandoned them in the trunk of my car until the next class. I heaped them in piles on my desk. I ignored them. I wanted to blame my students' lack of imagination for making their poems so unsurprising. But I knew it was really about me returning to the same poems, poets, and forms. What first felt exhilarating was now disastrously predictable—maybe not to my new students, but to me as a returning poet. I needed a jolt of fresh ideas.

I gave my "old faithfuls" some serious thought. I always ask students to write poems about memory and place, family and identity. Brainard's "I remember" list poem is a teaching poet's salvation. I used to begin nearly every residency with George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm from" sensory poem. We all have our favorites that seem to "work" every time. I'm not against returning to the poems that perpetually transport and illuminate. These poetry exercises are fantastically alive and accessible to young poets. I was craving new forms, though—new experiments to push my students to create poems that challenged or maybe even transcended their literary limits. And I knew I had to push my own limits if I expected illumination instead of drudgery.

As I pulled together new experimental structures, I thought about what I really wanted my students to experience in a poetry workshop: the significance of wondering and feeling, the imagination as a kind of energy, the desire for connection through language. I wanted my students to feel their worlds and their lives. With that in mind, I ventured into some new poetry territory, renewing my curiosity about poetic language by turning to structures and forms that invite experimentation with language. I doubt whether these structures are completely new to every teaching poet but they were new enough to me—and it made me realize how crucial it is for us as educators to insist on curiosity at the center of our practice as teachers and writers.

### Experiment #1: A Personal Dictionary of Terms

Flip open the dictionary to any random word. Does it reflect your personal experience with that word? Probably not. Dictionaries often express the most impersonal definitions; no matter how authoritative they are, these definitions still don't account for the subjectivity of human experience.

Take the word "father," for instance: it is defined most basically as "male parent." Now think of your own father. Isn't he so much more than that? My father's frostbitten toes do not appear in the dictionary. My father's endless laughter does not appear in the dictionary. My father's ethereal piano hands do not appear in the dictionary.

Our associations with words and language are rooted in our experiences with those words. Each of us has a personal dictionary of terms translating words within a given language to make sense to us as individuals. Any single word can lead to infinite meanings, stories, associations, neologisms, and experiences.

Introducing a "personal dictionary of terms" requires a search for the most personal connection to universal words. We wear words like new skins when we crawl inside them and make them our own. I start by asking everyone to generate lists of random, everyday words: objects, ideas, concepts, places, and kinds of people. Soon we have a board full of familiar words—father, bee, window—ready for personal dictionary definitions. I ask everyone to choose five words of personal interest—a word with strong associations, memories, or meanings, or a word that stirs strong feelings or questions.

Once everyone selects their words, we read a few "real" dictionary definitions. I ask everyone to note the tone and mood of these definitions, including the "authoritative" language of dictionaries and the structural components of each definition as a kind of poetic form. Then I share a few of my own personal definitions and ask the class for some of theirs. It's fascinating to see the different and nuanced associations the students can generate for a given word, such as father, window, spoon, or glass.

Before everyone writes, I stress the idea of hyper-personal to counter the static, impersonal (and sometimes cold!) dictionary definition style. Adding this hyper-specificity to the "authoritative" structure of definitions creates poetically potent and compressed definitions of the life contained within that word.

In the following definitions, written by Emmy B., a seventh-grader in an after-school writing workshop at Greeley Elementary School in Chicago, you'll find an entire family history bound up in the words "father," and "mother."

> **father:** *(noun)*. **1.** the man who got through life with a TV and crackers that he never shares. **2.** the man who made me afraid of love and drove my mom to tears night after night. **3.** the man who I thank God can't hurt me with his fists anymore—but still he has his hurtful words. **4.** the man who wrecked my mom's life. **5.** the boy who has no heart or soul—or love. **6.** the man who never leaves home, unless it's to work or complain, or to hurt us even more. **7.** the guy that broke all of our hearts forever.

> **mother:** *(noun)*. **1.** the woman who cares so much it hurts. **2.** a tired ghost that comes and goes, always returning after midnight. **3.** a dead dream. **4.** a broken heart. **5.** hollowness that was once hope. **6.** the green car that parks in front of the apartment, letting out a tired soul that goes straight to bed. **7.** the woman who let them cut her open for me, who needs me. **8.** the only thing I want back more than home. **9.** a wrinkled face with perfect hands.

Each definition leaves room for neologistic experimentation and design. Each definition honors the personal histories inside that single word. Each definition peers into the complexity of experience embedded in a single word.

## Experiment #2: Takes

How do we get at the truth of a particular experience? Sometimes a memory feels so complex that it seems impossible to capture in writing. I ask young poets to write about specific moments, but I don't always know how to help them figure out what to say first, especially when our experiences often defy linear sequence. We each have our own "take" on a moment, but there are as many takes on a situation as there are people involved.

This rang most true in my own life as a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Early one morning, a university political activist named Stephen Muruli had been set on fire in his dorm room. The next day, the *Daily Nation* reported that a student had mysteriously "died in a campus fire." University students demanded an autopsy and an investigation, but their demands were met with the strictest punishments by former President Moi and his regime. Over the radio waves, Moi ordered students to flee the university or else "face fatal consequence." University students fled to the countryside or hid out in dormitories throughout campus. Several students demonstrated violently on the streets, causing clashes among students, armed police officers, and innocent bystanders. I remember standing on the roof of my dormitory watching police throwing tear-gas bombs as university students walked at a clipped pace to the bus depot in the center of town.

As a confused witness, I attempted to locate myself in this struggle—to define and understand my own perspective in such a layered and complex conflict, by writing a series of "takes":

> **stephen muruli dies in campus fire**
> **headline in the** *daily nation***, nairobi, kenya, 1996**
>
> **take one:**
> stephen muruli dies in campus fire
>
> **take two:**
> stephen muruli's body is set on fire
>
> **take three:**
> there is no such man as stephen muruli
>
> **take four:**
> stephen muruli is my son
> stephen muruli is my *son*
> stephen muruli was set on fire in his dorm room on November 18,
> 1996

**take five:**
all students must flee university
or else face fatal consequence
(and we do, with suitcases balanced on our heads)

**take six:**
we are sending men on horses we are sending men on horses with gas
we are sending men on horses with gas and guns we are sending men
on horses with gas and guns and they have orders to kill

**take seven:**
stephen muruli deserved to die, he was a threat to the nation
stephen muruli deserved to die, he was a threat to democracy
stephen muruli deserved to die, he was a threat to Kenya

**take eight:**
stephen muruli deserves an autopsy to determine cause of death
branches and chains and bricks and bones on the streets of this city
until we know the truth

**take nine:**
books burn rocks ricochet glass scatters old man selling fruit beaten
to pulp lies limp on campus dormitory steps mass exodus of intellect
away from the city or within to hide beneath the wiry skeleton of bed-
posts

**take ten:**
*stephen muruli dies in campus fire*

Exploring memory as a series of "takes" helped me make peace with an experi-
ence that was way larger and more complex than just my solitary understanding of it.
Just as a filmmaker demands multiple "takes" on a particular scene, I encourage my stu-
dents to capture multiple "takes"—except with this form, the poet keeps every take. All
"takes" exist and share space within a single poem, allowing us to see how these per-
spectives might co-exist with one another. By learning to "take" and "re-take" a single
moment from various angles and perspectives, we leave room for contradiction and
complexity. Was it like this or like that? Did I feel like this or like that? This form
reminds us that a single memory is bound up in multiple understandings of that mem-
ory.

Before writing "takes" with students, we read my poem together as a class and
help each other identify the various perspectives. Who are the voices that appear in this
poem? Does every "take" involve a little bit of me? Is it really possible to fully take on
another's perspective? My students are riveted by the political and social implications of
this poem, and readily offer even more perspectives than the ones I included. A fourth-
grader once asked me, "What about the policeman's take? He didn't maybe even want
to be there but he was just doing his job..." And an eighth-grader in another workshop

suggested I add a take directly from Stephen Muruli's perspective. "How come his voice isn't in here, Ms. Amanda?" This form pushes us to widen our circle of awareness, to imagine and encompass the experience of others with whom we share the same moment in time and space.

I start by asking everyone to select a personal or social memory that can be told or understood from a number of different perspectives. It's best to choose a layered, complex place or memory full of different voices and viewpoints—a wedding, a neighborhood, a birth, a conflict, a travel experience, a family event, or a competition. Ask your students to consider their most personal "take" on that memory. What is there to see, hear, touch, remember, and feel about that experience?

Next, ask your students to identify at least three contrasting viewpoints. Encourage them to think of both people and objects that might have experienced the memory differently. This is a great opportunity to talk about contrast and complexity. Write as many different "takes" on the memory as there are perspectives. Think carefully about the way that arranging "takes" in a poem affects the overall perspective of the poet. Each take should be a poetic glimpse into the minds of everyone who shares the same experience. When students read their poems out loud to each other, there is always that one student who prods the other to include a voice that hasn't yet been represented. The form demands a kind of perceptiveness—an inclusivity—that fine-tunes the poet's widening sense of a world larger than just him or herself.

> [I ask my students to] write as many different "takes" on the memory as there are perspectives. . . . Each take should be a poetic glimpse into the minds of everyone who shares the same experience. . . . The form demands a kind of perceptiveness—an inclusivity—that fine-tunes the poet's widening sense of a world larger than just him or herself.

## Experiment #3: Poetic Double Exposures

As a visiting writer at the Museum of Contemporary Photography here in Chicago, I participate every year in a fantastic text and image show for youth called "Talking Back: Chicago Youth Respond." The show is the product of a collaboration between Project AIM (Arts Integration Mentorship) and the Center for Community Arts Partnerships that brings writers, photographers, and Chicago youth together to think deeply about the various connections between text and image. For several months, youth work with professional writers and photographers to produce both writing and images that culminate in a final exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

Last year, photographer Joel Wanek introduced the idea of "double exposures" to his high-school students at Curie High School and invited me to develop a writing exercise to go along with their exploration. I started to think about the poetic equivalent to "double exposures." How do we "double expose" a line, a word, a phrase, or a feeling with written language? To teach this idea of "double exposing" a poetic line, I brought in "Harmony," by Lisa Ampleman, a poem in couplets in a style similar to lyrics:

```
I will      |   sing of   |   random hills, |   their green froth,  |
            |   travel    |                 |   unsentimentally,    |

and you |   will     |   be        |   there.          |
        |   will not |            |   every daisy.    |

From    |   above    |   a forest is  |   silty      |
        |   below    |   the clouds are |   loose    |

wet seaweed |            on  |   sand.  |
stippled chalk |     |      sky.       |

I would  |   waltz with |   you |   in |   any |          forest. |
         |   draw for | |   on| |                      sidewalk. |

I am     |   no Gretel |   with |   no crumbs.       |
         |   a peregrinator.  |   heavy wings.      |

All that's left is |  empty landscape.         |
            |    learning the dialect.   | [1]
```

This poem immediately confused the brilliant bunch of young photographers. "How do you even read this?" they asked. I suggested we try reading it in as many ways as we could find—left to right in couplet lines, up and down in columns, honoring silent beats in sections with no words, or filling in the silence by repeating the line on top. Each reading shed new light on the multiple meanings of words when strung together and arranged in different ways. Some students don't like the surrealist nature of this poem—they want it to "make sense." Others found pleasure in the playfulness of ideas that emerge with line break and syntax experimentation.

I explain that just as photographers "double expose" an image, we are going to "double expose" a single line of poetry by adding and taking away words. We start by "capturing" a single line of poetry, and then reconfiguring the words to create new meanings and images. Instead of one word or phrase replacing another, we are going to leave a record of our change by letting the double version exist in parallel form.

Even after explaining what we are going to try, some students are still really confused, so I suggest "double exposing" a line of poetry together. In this case, I ask everyone to create a single line of poetry in response to some photographs taken in a previous class, but you can also start with a simple poetic phrase or line about identity, place, or emotions, or borrow an opening phrase from one of Ampleman's lines.

On the board or a large sheet of paper, ask for a volunteer to write a line of poetry.

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[1] "Harmony" by Lisa Ampleman, copyright 2002. Used by permission of the author.

**Example:**

*I am writing to you from the hills of Morocco.*

Now, ask someone to randomly break this line up into four different sections:

I am      writing         to you           from the hills of Morocco.

Next, ask someone to come up to the line and "double expose" it by writing a new line under it, keeping some of the words and changing others:

I am    |writing      |to you         |from the hills of Morocco.|
**You are** |**screaming**    |**your name**    |

After one person comes up to try this, ask everyone to double expose the line in his or her own way. Read these back to the group to give the students a feel for the possibilities. Ask the students whether they like it read up and down:

I am|**You are**|writing|**screaming**|to you|**your name**|from the hills of Morocco...

Or left to right, one line at a time:

I am writing to you from the hills of Morocco.
You are screaming your name from the hills of Morocco.

Once students get a feel for changing the meaning and the message, I ask that they experiment with the idea of poetic double exposures, using content that emerges from their own photographs.

Sergio writes:

Who Am I?

Your|    shoes|   blend|   in with the|       mosaic building.|
    |    feelings|flow|          |   water tower.|

You are| stepping on a|   puddle of water.|
    | walking across|   rain.|

Roaming|       along those|   empty streets.
Striding|       |         lonely paths.

You are| soaking wet|   and|   shivering.|
    drenched       |   in pain.|

Yet, |   you|   show no remorse.|

And        |        hide yourself from others.|
       still|        you're just a reflection.|

And Takesha writes:

Foreign land |        imprisoned me    |        beneath you
Live through |        freedom, my joy  |

You're    |        carefree            |        roaming the busy streets
          |        motionless          |        thoughts lost in time

Unconcerned |        where your        |        travel |    may take you
          |        with life           |        love   |    journey ends

Wet pavement|        extending distance of |    time
          |        exhaustion and tears  |    forever

These poems, written with white ink on black photo paper, are startling as both visual and literary images. The experimental nature of their form confuses and invites the reader to decode and make meaning out of a juxtaposition of words and phrases. We have to return to the words, think twice about their true meanings, and stumble, in a sense, through a maze of feeling. The meaning changes when we read it up and down or left to right. Ultimately, this form gives us insights into the power of revision—not as a way to hide or throw away our mistakes, but to expose one meaning in partnership with other.

## Experimenting with Experiments

Perhaps you're already a renegade poet in the classroom, inventing new experiments every chance you get. I wanted to believe that I was living out that dream, but in reality, I grew too comfortable with reliable forms and favorites, especially when faced with having to meet standards and expectations set beyond (or above) my wild imagination. I don't claim to be the sole "inventor" of these experiments, nor do I insist that this is the only way to play with these structures. I realized, though, that in pushing myself to try new forms, I returned to a kind of delight and joy in teaching that I hadn't felt in years—the kind that boomeranged me back to the heart of this work.

Making meaning out of a chaotic world is a collaborative event, and language lies at the center of this effort. We use words to clarify and illuminate the reasons, fears, desires, and questions that catapult us into action. If young poets believe that they can reinvent or redefine the meaning of words, offer multiple takes on a single experience, or double-expose their experience without abandoning one feeling for another, they will walk away from a workshop knowing the malleability of language. In knowing this and literally practicing it, we offer them the chance to see the world with, in the words of poet Homero Aridjis, "eyes to see otherwise."

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