



Poetry Everywhere

by Jack Collom & Sheryl Noethe

My Philosophy of Teaching Poetry in the Classroom

by Sheryl Noethe

Ever since the fifth grade, writing has been my better world, a refuge and solace where my imagination is king. This is the opportunity we as teachers of poetry have in the classroom. We can offer this sustenance, this self-creation, to children, making their lives richer and happier and giving them more alternatives. Writing is a grip on existence, an empowerment, and a way to listen to the inner truth of the self. The poet enters a dialogue with all previous poets, singers, and writers. You keep great company.

When I read a poem to the class I read it as though it were the most important and only poem in the world. I use the opportunity to hook the students up to the heart of the poet. I use the poem as a force to pull our imaginations into the associative world of words and ideas. I read the poem aloud and make it real for them. Inadvertently, something rare happens when we begin to anticipate

hearing a poem; we settle into a dreamy concentration, to sit back and hear the poem in a sort of reverie. Ask the class to daydream and let their minds fill with the images that the poet gives them. Put the world on HOLD for a while and pay attention to your inner life by letting the poem inside.

Eventually you will find a different poem for everyone. If you persist in selecting and then learning wonderful poems to read aloud to the class, you will find that different students will respond to different poems, finally connecting with an idea or phrase that touches them, and they will appreciate that singular thing that poetry does so well. "Ah!" the mind says,

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Poets JACK COLLOM and SHERYL NOETHE have taught writing to students of all ages for a combined total of 40 years. The articles in this issue are adapted from their new book *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community*, published by T&W (280 pp.). See back cover of this issue.

“wonderful!” Besides the inherent miracle of the poem, imagine teaching a subject in which no one can fail, in which the student will achieve some success and then crave more! Turn a child’s identity into a respected position—a writer—and have him or her know there is nothing like success. Your job as a teacher is to tell every student what is right about his or her work. This calls for wit, compassion, and a huge frame of reference! Relationships develop with the exchange of history and imagination. Trust and empathy are aroused when you hear someone else’s words echo your own feelings, in surprising ways and common ways, and you cannot stay strangers. When you point out to your students where they are at their best in their work—the funniest or the most imaginative or the truest to their visions—you give them success and they in return give you their trust. They write in the only way beautiful things are created—from the heart, without censorship or fear. That’s when you get the poetry.

Tips on Leading Poetry Sessions

by Jack Collom & Sheryl Noethe

In our experience as visiting poets, these suggestions all work and are all important to successful sessions. But there’s plenty of room for individual styles to modify or even to go against some of the following ideas. We don’t mean to be dictatorial. For example, we say, “Never tire of pounding home to your class the happy use of *details*, as opposed to generalities.” This doesn’t mean that a poem should sound like a seed catalogue. It’s just that it’s good to get kids writing intimately of what they know—and this certainly includes their wildest dreams and their imagination of the moment as well as the color of their pet dogs’ eyes. Dream is made of detail too. If the students work in an atmosphere of easeful energy, they’re likely to “be themselves” in their poems, in ways that will surprise even them.

Our hint categories are organized around the actual classroom “hour”:

1. Preparation
2. Manner of presentation and general tips
3. The session itself
 - a. Lead-in
 - b. Writing time
 - c. Reading the students’ work aloud
4. Afterwards
5. Remarks on the poetry of it

1. Preparation

- Planning can be thorough or not, according to the teacher’s style. It usually works best when the main points to be made, examples to give, and *timing* of the session have been carefully worked out beforehand, but some poets and teachers do well “winging it.” All teachers should be alert to unexpected and serendipitous veerings off from the plan.
- You might try making up poems yourself according to the exercise you’ve chosen—if possible, just before the session.

This may provide you with good example poems, and certainly helps get you “into” the writing.

- Try things different ways at different times (for example, combine two exercises, or try an entirely new warmup). Let the students know why you are taking a new tack.
- Avoid too much brainstorming, which leads the kids to regurgitate information and to use the same chalkboard vocabulary.

2. Manner of Presentation and General Tips

- Be yourself. You needn’t and shouldn’t show reverence for poetry by means of an artificially dignified atmosphere.
- *Energy* is the key—but it shouldn’t be forced. It can be “quiet” energy.
- Don’t overexplain (as *we* tend to do).
- Avoid abstractions. When you speak in concrete terms, it helps bring out better poems. However, stressing “detail,” “imagination,” and “originality” repeatedly will tend to unify these ideas with their examples in the poems.
- Read poetry aloud with energy, expressiveness, and rhythm (this can be the variable rhythm of everyday speech). For example, read or tell the Greek myths as if they happened this morning.
- It’s helpful to admit your own errors, blankouts, and ignorance. This helps create an open mood in the classroom.
- Sometimes a little edge of sarcasm or sharpness in a general sea of kindness and warmth will help the students realize “We’re really trying to do something here.” It’s not goof-off time.
- At any time, you can, if inspired, simply read or recite a good poem aloud to the class—and that poem needn’t have an obvious connection to what you’re doing.
- Maintain cheer and confidence if a student reacts negatively. Try to avoid confrontations; often the best approach is to ignore that student for the moment and concentrate on the rest of the class. Your positive attitude and the peer influence of the majority’s participation will probably bring the recalcitrant student along.
- A brisk pace is good, energizing, as long as you’re willing to be flexible and slow down when the situation needs it.

3. The Session Itself

A. Lead-in

- A good division of time is one-third lead-in, one-third writing time, one-third reading their pieces aloud (with either you or them as readers), with quick comments.
- Read many examples aloud (and then simply tell students not to copy). Point out the “poetic goodies” in the example poems,

especially when they channel the students' attention in the direction you want. To focus attention on language, you can ask students for their favorite words in what they've just heard.

- Get them involved orally by means of questions (based on, or related to, examples) and by working out sample poems or lead-in information on the board with them.
- Often it's counterproductive to let them use the names of other students in their writings. If necessary, simply advise them not to, unless they're positive no embarrassment would result. Allow no cheap shots.
- If they want to use titles, have them write them *after* their poems are done. A title can be a word or phrase from a poem, or be something related to the poem's subject, or be *anything at all*—even something seemingly unrelated, or playfully wacko. Titles work as parts of poems, and students should consider how a title idea affects the reader's take on the poem. Titles give a perspective to every word in a poem.
- It helps the flow of their writing if they start writing right after the sample poems are read.
- Let your students know it's okay to close their eyes and think, visualize, let the poem swim in.

B. Writing Time

- Let students talk quietly while they're writing. If any of them seem to be too off-task, you might advise them to "get that verbal energy down on paper before it blows away."
- While they write, you can walk around the classroom and help them with their questions. Sometimes toss in added hints or nudges to the class at large—sometimes just quietly let them write.
- Early or midway in the writing time, you can ask anyone who's just written something good if you may read it to the class, and do so. This often inspires and encourages the other kids.
- If you're not too busy, write with them. Jot something on the board. Perhaps read funny sample lines to the class as they occur to you. If they're doing collaborations, join in.
- Stress the idea that they should reread their work before handing it in. We *all* sometimes omit words inadvertently. And an instant revision is likely to be good since one is still in the flow and feeling of the poem.

C. Reading the Students' Work Aloud

- If the kids don't want their names read aloud, respect this, but in time try to lead them out of their shyness—as long as it doesn't deter them from writing freely.
- It's a definite plus if students practice reading their poems aloud, especially older kids. But use your discretion—the virtues of the poems may get lost in poor renditions. If the students do read, urge pizzazz. Tell them to read "so the termite egg embedded in the far wall can hear it," or something. It's

okay if some of them volunteer to read and others don't.

- It's best not to criticize student work when it's first read; respond with cheer to each kid's piece. Discrimination can be exercised by selective intensity of praise. They'll note this and learn from it. Never give false praise. Be as concrete as you can in each bit of praise. Repeat good words or phrases they've written. You can often praise rhythm or energy or spirit or originality when it's hard to find anything else to praise. But don't let your comments get so long as to impede the flow of their work. A hearty "All right!" will often suffice.
- When students read collaborative poems aloud, try having them do choral readings—divide the class in various ways (blue eyes, brown; even or odd rows). Have them read in different voices—scared, baby, laryngitic, as The Principal, etc.

4. Afterwards

- Typing up student poems preserves and honors them and makes them available to others. We strongly recommend typing up a selection. Kids love to see their work "in print."
- When typing up, correct spelling routinely (unless it has some special charm) but take grammar on a case-by-case basis. Poetry is always creating its own voice, so "correctness" is relative. In regard to punctuation, suggest—but don't insist—that it be consistent within a given poem.
- Often it's hard to tell whether a student piece is written with linebreaks or not. If there's time, you can check with the author. Otherwise, look each piece over before typing and decide the apparent intent, then type accordingly. Sometimes, even if the paper's width seems to have dictated the shape, the poem will "feel right," and you should type the poem up the way the student wrote it.
- If a poem or piece is off-task but good (interesting), take it.
- In any case, student poems should be kept and can then be typed up, put on bulletin boards, published schoolwide, sent to pen pals, individually published by the students themselves, and distributed in the community.

5. Remarks on the Poetry of It

- Give your students a sense of options when they write. Make it clear to them that *they* are the authors of their poems, the ones who will make decisions concerning tone, voice, rhythm, etc. And remember, in many cases kids will invent their own variations on the exercises and poetic forms you give them. (See "Student-invented Styles" below.)
- When you choose adult poems to read in class, as much as possible try not to censor shocking imagery, harshness, negativity, "weirdness," low-class language, and so forth.
- In many cases you can advise students to write like they talk, to base their writings on natural speech patterns. You can demonstrate in many concrete ways how "real speech" is rich

in rhythm, metaphor, etc. Pick an example off the classroom wall, or out of their mouths. (Repeating a common sentence several times can show surprising syncopation.)

- Tell your students that their poems don't all have to be "important" or about a Big Idea. Real significance is everywhere and, in poetry, often arrives on its own.
- Encourage experiment. Praise it when it comes.
- Emphasize language. It's their working material; it's a living thing, full of surprises. When the focus is on language, the personal will shine through.
- Approve playfulness—as a way of learning and exploring. Students benefit immensely when encouraged to play with language.
- Speak of the mechanics of poetry as naturally as you'd speak of fixing a broken shoelace (though with a greater sense of options!). "You've rhymed up here but not down here. That makes this word stand out, but do you really want it to?"

Student-invented Styles

by Jack Collom

Some students invent their own styles, and regularly use them in their writing (see examples below). We recommend that you heartily encourage this phenomenon. Usually, they'll expand their repertory in due time on their own. As with painters, who practice "problems" over and over, the experience will get them deeper into their material (language); this is all to the good.

If you feel, however, that a student is keeping himself or herself from making important developments or is using a "one-shot" gimmick in every piece—or if the student's style overwhelms or homogenizes all content—gently suggest other ways of writing *in addition to* (not instead of) the invented style.

A few observations:

- Miscellaneous, one-time-only devices (such as Theo Vanderschaaf's poem below, that creatively blends the immediate scene with something overheard) should be praised—tell students how and why their pieces work.
- Be on the lookout for works that may not succeed *in toto*, but contain fragments that may stand up as good short pieces on their own. Practicing poets often arrive at their poems by extracting such nuggets.
- Also be on the lookout for out-and-out experiments (such as the piece below by Beckey Fritz). They usually show (at the very least) a commendable thrust toward originality.
- Also look for off-task pieces—pieces that don't meet the guidelines of a certain writing exercise, but are good nonetheless (e.g., the lures and haiku poems by students below, which don't satisfy the prescribed word or syllable count).
- The same can be said about the "misuses" of grammar, and even, at times, misspellings or odd punctuation. If students

are deliberately breaking the rules, it shows that they understand them. Be sure you are not "correcting" a feel for using words differently—which is, after all, part of the constant refreshment of language that good poetry gives us.

This poem was written at a poetry reading in response to a poem on the extinction of the passenger pigeon:

Reading

Reading Reading Reading
the vast waterfall of words
Poetry is like the huge
cluster of passenger pigeons
When the guns fire the
words shoot at the audience
The pigeons fall the audience
claps.
When the people eat the
pigeons the audience will take
a break
When the pigeons have
their babies the audience
will come back
The reading starts the shooting
starts
Then the shooting and reading
end but we keep clapping.

—Theo Vanderschaaf, 5th grade

Following are some short poems that violate the lure or haiku form but are nonetheless little gems:

A black stallion is black
And a sun is yellow and
It is all fancy.

—Derek Linger, 2nd grade

Every morning I see
a green and white pickup truck
that never moves.

—Dennis Coles, 11th grade

One day the sky became the sun and the class became
pictures.

—Jeremy Fairchild, 2nd grade

Once I was sneaking up on a thing.
I didn't know what it was, but
all at once it bursted into rainbows and little floods.

—Jimmy Hobbs, 2nd grade

The next poem was written in response to a chant poem assignment:

One car two car go three
car go go go four car go
five car go down the road
we go

—Beckey Fritz, 2nd grade

The following poem is metered and rhymed, but the *style* is quite idiosyncratically developed—the galloping rhythm, high spirits, and walloping vocabulary. Praise such to the skies, while gently suggesting additional ways of writing.

Snüs

It splitters, it splatters, it plops on your dome.
 It challenges lifestyles (a house ain't a home!)
 It breathes with resistance, it slides down your cheek.
 Gathers moss like a rolling stone, subtle and weak.
 You're doomed to the Limelight; it stirs in your breast.
 It hollows you out and builds you a nest.
 The pipelines decay till they're nothing but rot.
 The sewage, the spillage . . . all steaming and hot.
 It's not what it seems like. It's nothing at all.
 He straddles the goal-posts and strolls the South Hall.
 A western scenario, waxlike and mean.
 A "Regis Millette": ripe, sticky, and green.
 Alphabetical order—they call you by name.
 It snaps like a twig and then nothing's the same.
 The surge of the aftermath shaves off your bones.
 They stiffen, they're swollen—monotonous tones.
 A spank it shall give ye if caught unawares.
 You'll hustle and bump and cavort down the stairs.
 A prize will be given in lieu of perspective.
 Her father's a nuisance—an "armchair detective."
 Blimey! The Blarney Stone up and surpassed,
 and all of my houseguests were taken aghast.
 It dribbles, it slobbers, wipes off of good leather.
 A monogrammed tea-towel, let's pray for good weather!
 These symptoms I've seen until death do us part.
 My 98-dollar receipt from K-Mart!
 If wooing the musketeer made her a whore
 she should ask for a job as cashier in a store.
 Anything different to boost her morale.
 It appears that the musketeer wasn't her pal.
 As a matter of fact, he retreats from the past.
 Read all about it! (I doubt it will last.)
 Perhaps the peculiar and odd goings-on
 contribute success to the mule and the fawn.
 But speckled or spotted, because or in spite,
 let's now dim the lantern and sleep for the night.

—Pam Nelson, *high school*

Here's an experiment using three-word lines:

I hear can
 voice will I
 ignored long ago
 out my mouth
 like a dance
 from flowing rain
 drops get wet
 me underneath pain
 fire, yet fire
 to the grass
 of home land
 snows can set
 mists new beyond
 light shall set
 free that I
 seek to find
 once cry trapped

in golden beams
 set off new
 of old destruction
 mine blaze fresh
 throughout my hands
 can see I
 two cry trapped
 fields with o'er
 ceiling cracked pink
 fingers search black
 peanut butter crackers
 three cry cracked
 oh cello god
 can see I
 face all face
 through the once
 one cry trapped
 murmur, nonny, murmur
 close the door
 my mother said
 you'll get cold
 eyes were red
 can't you see?
 I screamed aloud
 I turned away
 lost my cloud

—Darla Anderson, *high school*

This last example inventively blends content and form:

There's always two sides to everything
 There's always two sides to everything
 war, peace, sheepskin, fleece
 war, peace, sheepskin, fleece
 tame or wild, kid or child
 tame or wild, kid or child
 two sides to everything
 two sides to everything
 watches, clocks, straight or on the rocks
 watches, clocks, straight or on the rocks
 sides to everything
 sides to everything
 beard or mustache, charge or cash
 beard or mustache, charge or cash
 to everything
 to everything
 live, die, coast or fly
 live, die, coast or fly
 everything
 everything

—Chip Coors, *7th grade*

Five Poetry Assignments

by Sheryl Noethe & Jack Collom

"Fourteener" Poems

Ask your students to write a sentence, any sentence. Then ask them to restate it in thirteen different ways.

This restating can go in many directions. It can involve slight permutations in wording, so that the poem becomes an experiment in repetition and rhythm. Or it can expand upon images that lie behind the first sentence. It can also "change" the original sentence by emphasizing any one of the five senses.

Any sentence we might say or write is, out of context, really a form of shorthand for a vast network of feelings, experiences, and contradictions. For example, even the bland sentence "I drove my car to the store" could suggest endless ways of seeing that experience:

I whipped my battered blue Buick to B & B's for a can of Beluga caviar.

I rode my rocket to the moon.

The store to drove I my Chevrolet.

The distributor parcelled out firepower to the points.

She'd screamed at me, "Get a pint of real cream!"

I drove my car to the store under the circle of seductive blue.

I caressed my car to the slightly opened yellow door.

I, with dreams of Indian rubies tightening my fingers, drove my car to the store.

Everything except the car and me disappeared behind me.

I had eleven cents and a mile's worth of gas.

I floated toward the center of the American whirlpool.

The bricks got larger as they approached my face.

My hand and foot did slick mechanical dances as I rode the wave of metal.

Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* tells a simple anecdote in ninety-nine different ways. You should advise your students that they can explore a single approach or they can mix approaches, according to feel.

Read a couple of student examples to the class. Ask students to write. Collect and read.

The cat slunk through the darkness.

It crept through the darkness.

The darkness the cat snuck through wasn't illuminated by any moonlight.

No moonlight reflected in the silver eyes of the cat.

The cat stares, unblinking, at the black silhouettes against black.

The cat slinks through the continuous shadow, unilluminated by moonlight.

Without a sound, the cat's paws softly fall as it creeps along.

The cat stalks its unknown prey in the darkness.

The darkness conceals the prey from the stalking cat.

The darkness conceals the cat from the hiding prey.

The prey is as silent as the cat creeping through the darkness.

Creeping through the darkness, the cat passes a deeply shadowed recess, unilluminated by moonlight.

The prey is still as stone as the stalking cat passes in the darkness.

The cat slinks through the darkness and its silver eyes pass on.

—Vickie Aldous, 11th grade

Jane, tripping, falls on Spot.

Spot, the shaggy dog, suddenly feels the comparatively large weight of Jane, as the latter falls upon the former.

The shoelace of Jane's white, new left shoe becomes stuck under the white, new left shoe of Dick.

Jane's left foot cannot take its place as Jane's weight shifts forward, expecting a support.

The unfortunate old dog does not anticipate the stumbling person. Most of Jane's very considerable mass will impact the small body of Spot.

It will snap fragile bones and tear small tendons inside Spot's body.

The very considerable mass of Jane causes Spot to emit several loud, high-pitched noises, which awaken the old neighbor, who was sleeping.

Jane's fall onto Spot is caused by her carelessly tied shoelace.

The next day Spot is buried, but his tail sticks up, out of the grave.

The blood never washes out of Jane's clothes.

Jane falls on Spot.

Jane's stumble causes Spot's death.

—Micah Prange, 10th grade

Summer is gold.

Is summer gold?

Golden is the summertime.

Hazy waves of molten gold.

Heated by the summer sunshine.

The golden summer sunshine heat.

The lazy vague seductive heat.

The golden forgetful don't-care haze.

The laughing gold.

The golden laughter.

The seductive molten golden heat.

The gold that reaches out and wraps around you.

The golden heat that turns your body gold.

Enticing summer gold.

—Katrina Dalrymple, 10th grade

Haibun

Haibun is a Japanese form that combines prose and poetry. A narrative or description is interspersed with haiku poems that arise from and illuminate the prose. Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (excerpted below) is a classic example. Subjects such as travel and nature are "naturals" for haibun.

Explain haibun to the class and read them an example passage or two. Some points:

- It's usually best to call for loose haiku—no syllable count, just free little three-liners in the haiku spirit.
- Emphasize the down-to-image aspect—no generalized writing. Haiku captures a *moment*. (A preliminary haiku session might be helpful.)
- You can use prose pieces the students have already written and "pepper" them with haiku.
- Emphasize that the haiku should add or change something—not just sum up what's already there. The haiku can well be offbeat, unexpected, a "twist" or a passing fancy.

Try one out on the board. Read a paragraph of prose aloud (twice) and then, with the class, compose a haiku to follow it. Here is an example (on Civilian Conservation Corps workers):

Entertainment for both kinds of camps was basically the same. After-work hours were generally spent playing cards, mainly penny ante gambling. During the summer the men also practiced baseball. Charles Kane noted, "Each camp had a field someplace close by, where they could have baseball. . . ."

CRACK! Bat hits ball
roadbuilder runs bases
dust rises, swirls

Ask the students to write. They can write their haiku on a separate sheet and use circled numbers to show where they fit into the prose.

This exercise is particularly good for a later revision session—mostly getting down to image and "making it new."

from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

(NOTE: *Haiku* are three-line poems; this translator has chosen to make four-line English versions.)

I went behind the temple to see the remains of the Priest Buccho's hermitage. It was a tiny hut propped against the base of a huge rock. I felt as if I were in the presence of the Priest Genmyo's cell or the Priest Houn's retreat. I hung on a wooden pillar of the cottage the following poem which I wrote impromptu.

Even the woodpeckers
Have left it untouched,
This tiny cottage
In a summer grove.

Taking leave of my friend in Kurobane, I started for the Murder Stone, so called because it killed birds and insects that approached it. I was riding a horse my friend had lent me, when the farmer who led the horse asked me to compose a poem for him. His request came to me as a pleasant surprise.

Turn the head of your horse
Sideways across the field,
To let me hear
The cry of a cuckoo.

—*Basho* (translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa)

Highway 93 South

Mountain's shadow falls
Old cowboy and new girlfriend
Roll past in red truck.

Every weekend I drive between Salmon and Missoula, about 140 miles. The most interesting part of the trip is crossing Lost Trail Pass, where the state line runs between Idaho and Montana. It is a high winding road surrounded by endless trees and snow-covered slopes where the mountains make their own weather. The rest of the trip always surprises me, however, and every time I make the

trip something miraculous happens. Wild animals appear as the river courses alongside us, revealing

A line of fishers
in blue coats. Legs and elbows.
Herons! Ten of them.

So I continue watching the road, craning my neck. Farther on, near Darby,

Five mountain sheep stand
curving horn and winged shoulder
turn like silk and fly.

Once, at the top of the pass, a fox stepped out of the forest and walked up to my parked car to gaze into my eyes as she lifted one paw, then the other, a slow march in place.

My lost pup is here
Green and black eyes of forests
Recognizing me.

I feel a relationship with the wildlife that steps out onto the side of the road to look into my eyes. I got the idea the fox and the mountain sheep had a message, a secret, for me.

Driving pass
Elk appears. I shout, suddenly,
Hear my father's voice.

—*Sheryl Noethe*

(*On early school buses*)

Ida Egge said, "Charles 'Dutch' Marshall also owned a truck/bus in about 1940. Dutch had a black Chevy truck with a wooden box in back with an emergency door in it, with a hole cut in the roof for the chimney of the wood stove—so us kids wouldn't freeze in the winter. He picked up the kids from about Baker on down to Salmon making a loop on the old highway and around the old back road."

Teeth chatter, children shiver
fire pops, cracks, and clatters
wood and canvas creak

Dr. Frossard, who did not grow up around Salmon, remembered his older brother riding in a school bus "like a crude station wagon, wood-framed, brown in color, with an exhaust pipe running from front to back, to provide heat." He also remembered students having to go home instead of to school because they had fallen and burned themselves on this exhaust pipe.

Bumping into heat
child screams, flesh burns,
brakes screech—oh—cold snow

Don Stenersen had the impression that these early conveyances were makeshift at best. They were privately owned and served other daytime purposes on the farm or commercially after delivering students. Sometimes a different vehicle would transport the kids home at night. These early machines helped speed the development of the modern motor coach.

Motor coughs, sputters
coming to life
—off goes the yellow wonder

—Annisa Stenersen, 11th grade

On Poetry

This is a good final exercise in a series of workshops. Tell your students that since they are now practicing experts of poetry, today you're all going to write poems about poetry.

You can do this exercise in many ways. The important points seem to be to urge originality and to offer the students a lot of options, so that the remarks they write on poetry are themselves poems. The type of poem is not important; they can write in any form they like, or in a variety of forms.

Tell them *not* to rely on general terms ("Poetry is nice," "Poetry is boring") but to make poetry into something alive, something that moves, something they can see-hear-touch. Or encourage them to make a story with poetry as its main character—poetry as a creature that knocks on the door or something. Emphasize comparison as a good way to go ("Poetry is like—" in a chant string). Also, let them know that they are free to include, if appropriate, negative feelings about poetry—it can be or seem tiresome, difficult, upsetting, as well as exciting.

Read them a *large variety* of student works about poetry, and then tell them to forget all that and write their own.

Collect and read.

Poetry is like a lake full of glares of the stars.
The texture makes me like a beautiful woman.
I like that when I dream.
I always dream of the lake I see before my eyes.
Oh-oh-oh-oh I love lakes like that.
Maybe it'll be a magic lake or stars.
When you think of lakes or rivers or swimming pools or oceans
be careful of the ocean if you dream of there.
I can't stand when I drowned in the lake.

The lake said, "Oh, did she have to die?"

I can't stand people who die.

The lake spits me out and I come back to life.

Oh I am beautiful when I get out of the lake.
He dresses me up beautiful.
How can I repay?

—Katie Helm, 2nd grade

I'm a fearless bounty hunter and I'm hunting down part of a dangerous gang called poems. I have already captured some of the men. I'm hunting for the men named words, letters, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. I found them, my thoughts are surrounding them, there's too many of them, they're trying to escape where they will be safe on my paper, too many words trying to escape onto my paper, they're scattering in my head, too many words, too many

letters, they're overtaking me, there's too many words, too many, too many, too many.

—Aaron Thompson, 7th grade

Poetry is frying in the oven, toasting in the toaster, even smoke coming out to the clean fresh air, because really air is an ocean of our yes yes yes.

Poetry is like a Wonderful Mistress Dream Blowing against the window in the moonlight and the tumbleweeds outside roaring with fear and the wind gliding and screeching. And the shingles on the roof flapping and the trees with pinecones gleaming with fear.

—Shawnee Black, 4th grade

Poetry is like wind blowing you away
and rain hitting you on the head and riding
horses in the rain and snow.
Roping cattle in the mud
and throwing hay in the thunder
and lightning.

—Mark Tracy, 5th grade

Poetry is a squirrel running across the fence teasing your dog.
Your dog will never catch it but he tries anyway with all his heart.

Poetry is like someone leaning back in their chair then falling backwards and cracking their head open.

Poetry is like a shotgun blowing away the side of your head.
It's like a pit bull tearing away your throat.
You tell it to sit but it keeps thrashing and thrashing and thrashing and thrashing and thrashing.
Poetry is all-colored and turned around and overlapping.

—Mike Swanson, 6th grade

Poetry is a bowl of thought whizzing through the air, crash.

—Ben Gould, 4th grade

Poetry Confusion

You stir and stir my emotions.
Sure they all come out on paper,
But what's the use if no one can
Experience or even image them?
Sometimes you get me so confused
All I can do is take a bubblebath,
While other times I can write all
Night. Why are you so difficult
But so easy, so complex but simplified,
So unique but common? Wait a
Minute, this sounds like me.

—Tiffany O'Dell, high school

Poetry is like the alphabet talking all at once.

—Kristina Lacognata, 4th grade

“Primitive” Poems

In his anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*, the poet Jerome Rothenberg says there are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. People who don't have the wheel may have a language with more complex grammar than our own; hunters and gatherers without agriculture have vocabularies that distinguish the things of their world down to the finest detail. For example, the Eskimo vocabulary for snow is incredibly precise, with a huge number of words to describe its various qualities and forms. Hopi Indians can, with a flick of the tongue, make subtle and exact verb distinctions to show different kinds of motion. As outsiders, we may consider other people(s) “primitive,” but once we begin to understand their cultures, their intelligence and creativity and complexity become apparent.

These poems are carried by the voice, chanted and sung. The poet becomes what the occasion demands—a dancer, a singer, a musician, or a shaman. Likewise, the form of the poem is open, ready to serve as praise, prayer, or celebration.

This lesson works very well with any class that's studying a “primitive” culture. Students are often put off by (to them) bizarre customs. If they understand how appropriate these customs are within that culture, they will realize it is only to them, as outsiders, that things appear odd or unusual. For instance, the last line of this Bushmen poem is quite startling:

Hunger

Hunger is bad
Hunger is like a lion
Hunger is bad
It makes us eat locust.

But once students know about the life-threatening climate of the Kalahari Desert, they can come to grips with the notion of locust-eating.

Read the example poems to the class, then ask your students to consider and write about their own lives with the same tone. Have them praise nature or describe acts of bravery. Suggest that they try using comparison, repetition, and variation. Remind them of chant poems and odes. For example, the following poem is both a chant and an ode. It's entitled “The War God's Horse Poem” and comes from the Navaho.

I am the Turquoise Woman's son
On top of Belted Mountain beautiful horses
Slim like a weasel

My horse has a hoof like striped agate
His fetlock is like fine eagle plume
His legs are like quick lightning

My horse's body is like an eagle-feathered arrow
My horse has a tail like a trailing black cloud
I put flexible goods on my horse's back

The holy wind blows through his mane
His mane is made of rainbows

My horse's ears are made of round corn
My horse's eyes are made of stars
My horse's head is made of mixed waters
(from the holy waters)
(he never knows thirst)

My horse's teeth are made of white shell
The long rainbow is in his mouth for a bridle
With it I guide him

When my horse neighs
Different-colored sheep follow
I am wealthy from my horse

Before me peaceful
Behind me peaceful
Under me peaceful
Over me peaceful
Around me peaceful
Peaceful voice and when he neighs

I am everlasting and peaceful
I stand for my horse

—Tall Kia ahni

Another sample is this Bushmen poem:

Prayer for Rain

New moon, come out, give water to us
New moon, thunder down water for us
New moon, shake down water for us.

Here is one from the Quechua:

My Sun, the Golden Garden of Your Hair

My sun, the golden garden of your hair
Has begun to flame
And the fire has spread over our cornfields

Already the green ears are parched
Pressed by the presence of your breath
And the last drop of their sweat is wrung from them

Strike us with the rain of your arrows
Open to us the door of your eyes
Oh Sun, source of beneficent light

(translated by W.S. Merwin)

Note the lovely use of metaphor: burning hair, rain of arrows, sweating fields, the doors of the sun's eyes opening.

In the next poem (from the Cherokee), note how the word *listen* begins each of the threats and keeps pulling us back to the beat of the poem:

The Killer

(after A 'yu 'ini)

Careful, my knife drills your soul
listen, whatever-your-name-is
One of the wolf people
Listen I'll grind your saliva into the earth
Listen I'll cover your bones with black flint
Listen I'll cover your bones with feathers
Listen I'll cover your bones with rocks

Because you're going out where it's empty
 Black coffin out on the hill
 Listen the black earth will hide you, will
 find you a black hut
 Out where it's dark, in that country
 Listen I'm bringing a black box for your bones
 A black box
 A grave with black pebbles
 Listen your soul's spilling out
 Listen it's blue

Horse horse your mane like a cloud
 pretty and white
 your tail gently in the wind
 your legs like stilts
 your ears like tepees on solid ground
 your wings like flags
 your eyes like buttons.

—Crystal Davis, 2nd grade

I praise deer and mountains
 I like deer fur I like to eat deer
 I like to watch them run
 I like to look at their tracks
 I like the mountains because
 I like to go sledding and jeep riding
 I like the white tops they got
 when I go sledding
 I like to watch the animals and deer
 run and hide in the mountains and it
 looks like a jigsaw puzzle in the sagebrush
 and grass and the fur and skin
 of the deer is brown
 that looks like the brown ground.

—Joshua Tabor, 2nd grade

Water Poems

Fishing, near-drownings, floods, aquariums, rainstorms, sprinklers, fire plugs, bathtubs, ponds, lakes, streams, oceans, dripping faucets, swimming pools, and swimming holes: whatever the circumstances, everyone has a story about water; it fascinates all of us landlubbers on planet Earth.

We first tried this exercise in a combined first and second grade class, where it generated vast numbers of water-related memories. Every student wanted to tell his or her story. One girl in the class, for example, loved to climb up on the bathroom counter to watch her father shave. She pretended she was shaving too, scraping a finger along her cheek, poking out her upper lip with her tongue, and drawing off the soapsuds. One day she lost her balance and fell, stepping into the toilet. Her father told her to keep her foot in the toilet while he flushed it, which would rinse off her foot. She cried and refused, imagining herself sucked into the sewer and lost. Her father told her that no matter what, no matter how much water, he would

never loosen his grip and she would never be torn from his arms. This example highlights a real fear among younger students (and amuses older ones); it's also an example of how poetry can involve ordinary things, with a twist of surprise.

This exercise needs very little introduction. Keep class discussion brief—you might just list sources of water on the blackboard to jog students' memories and widen their choices.

Or you might read a model poem, such as Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" or Guillaume Apollinaire's "Pont Mirabeau."

The Falls

Water wriggles in the
 song of spirit that falls
 into a beautiful waterfall
 that falls by a seed
 the seed becomes a
 tree of money and some
 people came and with the money
 on the tree they bought a store
 and with the tree in the store
 they made paper and the paper
 went to Mrs. Olson's class
 and one of the papers
 went to Ed's desk
 and he saw Sheryl
 and he wrote a poem
 called "The Falls."

—Ed Bowers, 2nd grade

At the swamp
 I caught a frog
 It had tiger legs.

—Clint Dalrymple, 1st grade

W aves splash
 A t the sky
 T onight
 E veryone looks
 R ainbows
 F alling
 A ngels
 L aughing
 L ullabies.

—Libby Livingston, 2nd grade

If it wouldn't be for the mountains
 we wouldn't have lakes if it weren't
 for the lakes we wouldn't have any water
 if it weren't for the cars how would
 we get to places if it wouldn't be for
 the world where would we live?

—Michael Busby, 2nd grade

Nate was fishing
and I
was a trout.
I looked like a rainbow
going through the water.
I was so beautiful
jumping through the air.
My mom and dad threw their
lines into the water to catch me
but I said NO.

—Nathan Ware, 3rd grade

The Rain of Fragrance

As I walk on the desert a drop of rain comes down but not just any rain the rain of fragrance as I still keep walking I hear voices of singing women and still the smell of fragrance every time I see women pouring buckets of perfume into the air. At last I stop and I disappear into the rain of fragrance.

—Luis Perez, 6th grade

River of No Return

One day I dropped my shoe
in the river. My shoe
disappeared in the mist.
I ran to my mom
and said, Mama Mama
I dropped my shoe in the
river. She said, you naughty
boy, you get that shoe.
But Mama. Now now it's
your fault.
So I went and sat on
the bridge. I watched and watched
and watched. I watched the sun
go down. Some ducks
flew by and fell in
and I floated away
and I found my shoe
in heaven.

—Daryl Mudd, 5th grade



PLUGS

The poet James Schuyler (1923–1991) made no effort to get his “name” around. He didn’t write book reviews, he didn’t judge poetry contests, he didn’t teach in MFA programs, he didn’t take part in colloquiums, he didn’t go to literary parties, he rarely submitted his work to magazines, and, until near the end of his life, he didn’t give readings of his work. He was just a homebody who wrote poetry. This is partly why it has taken a while for it to become apparent how marvelous a poet he is. Now that Farrar, Straus & Giroux has published his *Collected Poems* (425 pp., \$35 hardcover), we can finally appreciate the full measure of his greatness. No one matches Schuyler in his ability to look around and write about what he sees—some flowers, a book—with such directness and clarity and ease that you forget you’re reading “poetry” until it sneaks up on the back of your mind and quietly electrifies you. This handsome edition, which contains all of the poems in Schuyler’s previous books as well as new poems, justifies John Ashbery’s assertion that Schuyler “is simply the best we have.”

At the time of his death in 1985, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino had just finished writing a series of five lectures on literature for the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University. Originally published in hardcover by Harvard, the collected lectures (titled *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*) have recently been brought out in paperback by Vintage International (124 pp., \$10). Calvino focused his “memos” on the qualities of literature he most admired (lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, and multiplicity—a sixth, on consistency, was never completed), and the lectures afford some wonderful (and sometimes magical) insights into Lucretius, Cavalcanti, Dante, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Musil, and Borges, among others. Perhaps the gem of the bunch is the second lecture, “Quickness,” which begins with a legend concerning Charlemagne and a magic ring and goes on to discuss the economy of the folktale, among many other things, in such a brilliant way that it must be read and not retold. A delight for anyone interested in literature.