



I Never Told Anybody

Four Poetry Writing Ideas

by Kenneth Koch

Teachers & Writers Collaborative has just brought back into print Kenneth Koch's classic book, I Never Told Anybody, in which he tells how he and Kate Farrell taught poetry writing to old people in a nursing home. The excerpts below describe four poetry writing classes, first with students' poems, then Koch's commentary.—Editor.

Quiet

The quietest time I ever remember in my life
Was when they took off my leg.

Another quiet time is when you're with someone you like
And you're making love,

And when I hit the number and won eight hundred dollars
That was quiet, very quiet.

—Sam Rainey

Sitting alone in a church is the quietest moment in my life.
It's so quiet that you can hear your breathing
And your own heart beating.
When you go back home you feel very relieved and happy.

—Mary Tkalec

I like to be off by myself.
I never liked a lot of noise.
I was quiet in my childhood, just sitting is quiet.
And nobody around to do a lot of talking.
I used to go off by myself.
Daisies and violets and wild roses are quiet
If I saw them along the road.

—Florence Wagner

I always was quiet
And my mother always had to send my sisters into the room
To see what made me so quiet.

—Fred Richardson

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I love it when it's quiet.
Lonely hour in the night it's so quiet
That often I think of things when I was a child.
I think of things my grandmother taught me.
To be honest, thoughtful and to love everybody.
Never to hold malice.

—Mary L. Jackson

Mary Zahorjko.
A quiet name.

—Mary Zahorjko

When I was a little boy and got beaten
It was quiet afterwards.

—George Johnson

Waking up at night looking at the clock.
Waiting for it to go off.
It's the longest quietest time watching the clock go.
Not a sound—just the tick of the clock.

—Rose MacMillan

I used to be off by myself.
Anything that doesn't answer you back is quiet.
Clocks, watches, anything.
I repaired them
And put them together and that was it.

—Harry Siegel

Plowboy

The quietest thing in my life was after plowing acres of corn
Then overlooking the work I did and seeing if my row was
straight.
I was up on the hill with nobody but me then
And no birds making a sound.
Usually after plowing, crows come and pluck the seeds out of
the ground.
But this time there were no crows.

—William Ross

The quietest night I remember
Was going out deep-sea fishing.
Me and my friend were way out on a rowboat fishing.
We caught a lot of fish.
All the stars were shining.
The ocean was quiet.
The wind was quiet.
And we were quiet.
And the fish were biting.

—Leroy Burton

The poetry idea was to write a poem about the quietest times, or the quietest things, you can think of. You can mention different kinds of quietness in every line or so, or you can make the whole poem about one thing.

I read aloud some poems to give ideas as to how quietness was part of poetry and to suggest various kinds of quietness: the quietness of a scene one sees, the quiet of a room, the quiet of being with people when no one speaks. And the quiet of nature, and the silence one may feel in the presence of something that seems beautiful or important. The poems I read that speak of these kinds of quiet are all short, and I had time to talk about each one: D. H. Lawrence's "The White Horse," William Carlos Williams's "Nantucket," and a haiku by Ryota. This was the first time I read others' poems to the class. I was happy to see how much they got from them. "The White Horse" and the Ryota poem, in particular, seemed to influence both the mood and the music of our students' work.

The White Horse

The youth walks up to the white horse to put its halter on
and the horse looks at him in silence.
They are so silent they are in another world.

Lawrence's poem suggests a way to make a poem about one brief incident and also makes silence seem a sort of magical thing, at least mysterious. The repeating sounds of "silence silent" seem part of what makes the poem so final and quiet. The haiku is mostly a little list of silent things, with a surprising conclusion:

No one spoke—
the host, the guests,
the white chrysanthemums.

I read this twice (the students liked it), and along with my localized version of it (No one spoke— / Kate, Suzanne / the white chairs) it seemed to help students to make poems of lists of quiet things. It also, with its strangely silent chrysanthemums, suggested the mystery of a quiet time. Williams' poem is also mainly a list, of the things in the room of a Nantucket inn—like the other two short poems, it has a strong and surprising last line—

Nantucket

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow
changed by white curtains—
Smell of cleanliness—
Sunshine of late afternoon—
On the glass tray
a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which
a key is lying—And the
immaculate white bed

I said, “Here are some poems about quietness by some other poets.” I didn’t speak of those poets with reverence nor stress distinctions between my students’ own work and that of the poets I read. This isn’t bad for the students’ judgment but, rather, helps them to see what is good both in their own work and in that of other poets. If a poem by D. H. Lawrence is of another species from the students’, they are separated by a barrier of “poetic class” from what a great poet writes; they feel (and, I believe, are) less able to come up to what the other has done. Reading poems aloud to students, of which I did a good deal after this, was the best way to help them know poetic literature, since most had physical problems that made it hard for them to read.

Though the quietness idea suggested strong feelings somewhat more than the idea of using colors did, it didn’t ask for them directly. Quietness seems no more important in itself than colors are. There is no strong position to take. The deep emotions silence is connected to are come on by surprise—emotions of times when one was all alone—feeling happy, peaceful, afraid, or overwhelmed.

Leroy’s poem, about the beautiful quiet fishing trip, when he “caught a lot of fish. / All the stars were shining. / The ocean was quiet” was dictated quickly and surely. He had found his subject and what he would say before we came to take the poem down. But most of the students hadn’t yet separated making up a poem from mere conversation. Hearing someone talk very rapidly and randomly about something, we might stop her, as Kate stopped Mary Tkalec, who was talking this time about how quiet it was in church. Kate said, “Yes, that’s right, churches are quiet. How do you want me to write that down in your poem?” Mary said, “You write it down, you can express it better than I can,” but Kate said, “No, it’s your poem, and I like the way you’re telling it to me” and “What should I write down?” When it was clear that what was said was being taken down as a line, the student was more concentrated.

Some students did not ramble, but instead could find nothing to say until we talked to them a little. George Johnson said, “I can’t think of anything . . . not today.” Sometimes this meant a student really felt too bad to talk, but usually it meant he lacked confidence and had a false idea of the kind of thing he was being asked for. One has to talk and make the situation clear. Talk about quiet and one’s own experience of it, for example. One of George’s difficulties was that he tried to think of something with no noise whatsoever and couldn’t. Kate was with him and said that indeed everything did have some noise and that quiet was probably a matter of contrast; she remembered the quiet of walking home from piano lessons when it was just getting dark. George said, “Yes, that’s right.” Kate said, “I know everything has some noise, but just remember the quietest thing you can.” And he remembered the silence after he “got beaten,” that was all, but he was very happy with it when Kate read it back to him and when I read it to the class. The people we taught weren’t used to the kind of respectfully determined interest in their imaginings and perceptions that we had. It seems possible they weren’t used to being listened

to that much at all. So it was understandable that we had, at first, to talk, to convince, to reassure, to explain. The dramatic effect of Sam Rainey’s poem was due not only to the poetry idea and the poems I read aloud but also to Kate’s continuing to ask for one more quiet time. Encouraged to go on, he wrote about three times in his life he hadn’t before thought of as being connected.

Simultaneous Events

Looking for a Home

Leroy Burton is getting ready for a party.
Gerald Ford is looking for a home for the people of Vietnam
because they need a home.
They fought hard in this battle but they lost it.
I can see Johns with a bottle in his pocket on the corner right
now.
Even panhandling for another bottle.
There’s a man dancing very fast with a pin-striped suit on
with the girl in the pink dress.
And, boy, are they swinging.
I see Louis Jordan playing his Mighty Harp.
He’s playing “Flying Home.”

—Leroy Burton

The projectionist used to play punch ball.
The bartender is serving drinks to men and women.
The model is modeling a wedding gown.
The best man’s name is Jack, he’s in his late thirties.
The name of the movie is *The Gold Rush*.
Loew’s Avenue B was where the American Nursing Home is
standing right now.

—Harry Siegel

A man is going up the ladder, and he has something in his
arms.
The birds are so glad to meet each other, chattering on a limb.
The man was carrying a ladder, and he had something with
ashes in it.
The man stopped to write a letter.
I looked down and it was so beautiful on the ground, it was
summer.
The crow passed by and he was hollering.
A bird came by and stopped and lit on the limb and started to
whistle.

—Nadya Catalfano

The Day

Kay Medford is making a picture.
Lunches in chic restaurants.
Dresses are being fitted and worn.
Engagements broken.
No explanation.

Gardens are being made ready for the summer.
Muriel Young is preparing for a trip to San Francisco.

—*Helen Lesser*

The man in the sweater factory is working on yarn.
The truck driver is stopped at the red light and rolling a
smoke.
The fire escape is gray and rusty.
The mother has three children playing in the yard.
The dog wants to drink water in the morning.
At night everyone tries to do something for themselves.

—*Nadya Catalfano*

Trouble

Farmers are breaking up the soil in the farm country
Planting new seeds right now
Getting ready for harvest time
A lot of people are painting their houses
Outside and inside.
My aunt and all her children are doing spring cleaning.
All the girls are putting up preserves
And candy apples peaches cherries apricots
Putting them in jars for the winter.
And the old man puts them in the food cellar.
In court, all kinds of trials are going on
From baby mistreatment and theft
To drugs and what have you.
This is happening all over the world
And not only in the City of New York.
Right now, for instance, people are killing one another.
Father against father, sister against sister.
That's the turmoil the world is in.

—*William Ross*

Commuting

Many people at this time are commuting from Grand Central
Station to Stamford, Connecticut, every day.
The stockbroker is investing his stock.
People are enjoying their jobs on Wall Street.
A lot of women are shopping on a day like this for the
merchandise advertised in the *Herald Tribune*.
And Sylvia is taking a delicious walk.
But the commuting is what interests me most.

—*Elsie Dikeman*

I went in the woods and there was a nest for some big birds.
I put a swing on the old birch tree, the tree where the young
ones could go and wouldn't fly away.
I took old money from my bank and put it in the candy
machine.
I took a piece of wire to get the chocolate out of the machine
without money.
At night, we put a fishhook in the river, and in the morning
there would be two or three fish.

We were going to make a flower garden in my yard.
At night we stole the flowers from our neighbors and planted
them in the garden.

—*Carl Koch*

In the Clay Mountains

I've seen them in the lake, fishing,
And in the clay mountains,
And when the fish come along
Their heads get caught in the nets
Until the men in their rowboats come along
And take out the fish and then sell them to the market

—*Fred Richardson*

Out for a Ride

I was taking a ride
As I usually do
To see the sights
And I landed uptown
In the Forties
I noticed
Most of the people
Were all happy
Enjoying themselves
Sometimes I'd meet people
And have something to eat
And drink
And talk about old times
And things that happened
That time
And pass the day like that
It was a relief
To get away
From the regular drill of the day
For a change.

—*Tom O'Neil*

Panamanians

Everybody's cooking.
Everybody's walking and having a good time.
In Panama they are dancing in the streets by the millions.
The men they dance and they get drunk and carry on.
The children are going to church and singing in the choir.
The Panamanians are dancing and singing and carrying on.

—*Miriam Sullivan*

A Poem That Doesn't Rhyme

Second-story workers are robbing people.
A drunk is going into a ballroom.
All churchgoers look alike: they've got that pious look.
Everything is going on in Coney Island.
There's no other place quite like it.

—*Eric Carlson*

Kevin and Billy are eating tuna fish sandwiches and Southern Fried Chicken.
Night is like popcorn popping, or getting the butter from Grandma.
The woman on the porch is filling a dish with homemade taffy candy.
My mother is pickling Norwegian Salt Berries.

—Margaret Whittaker

My aunt lives in Yonkers.
She has a house.
She has a turkey and other animals.
A lady in Italy has a farm.
They grow vegetables.
The lady goes visiting.
She goes to see her daughter.

—Carmela Pagluca

We're cleaning the house, the windows, the floors.
I saw the Africans swimming in the river.
I see a beautiful ship coming from the Atlantic Ocean.
In Jamaica and the West Indies we're all playing cricket.
I'm going to Hollywood to get a drink of wine.
We're having a big wedding in Brazil.
It's coming spring now and the bears are coming out of the jungle to an open place in the sun.

—Mary L. Jackson

The poetry idea was to write a poem about a lot of things going on at the same time. In every line tell about a different thing that's happening. The things can be happening in New York City (or wherever you happen to be) or all over the world. You can pretend you have some power which lets you be everywhere and see everything that's happening at once. Write about the things as if you are really seeing them happen. Usually in a poem, as in ordinary life, we concentrate on one thing that's happening to ourselves. But even while we do that, we're aware that many different things are going on, inside us and outside. Just think of what's probably going on in New York City while we're here in the poetry class—firemen are rescuing somebody, a woman is having a baby, someone is falling in love, kids are playing baseball, an artist is painting a picture, a doctor is walking through a hospital, a man is let out of prison, a secretary gets her first job. Think about all that and write a poem. Put new things in every line and also be as specific as you can—don't talk about "people" but about "two men in gray overcoats" or "a mother in a blue dress and her five-year-old daughter with long brown hair." Whenever possible, use people's names. The idea was suggested by Whitman, particularly by the long diverse lists in "Song of Myself." After I explained the idea, I read the great list in Part 15 of "Song of Myself," which begins :

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft.
The carpenter dresses his plank . . . the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp.
The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner . . .
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready . . .

This was the second time I used poetry as the main inspiration for the writing. In Whitman's freewheeling, disconnected, diverse, and strangely unified list I saw various new possibilities for the students' poetry. One was a feeling for writing in a nonsequential way, about a lot of things going on outside and inside oneself—just naming them and listing, not making any connections, not being obliged to find the relevance of an event to one's theme or feeling, but to bring it in just for its own sake, because it is there. It was another way, as poems about being the ocean and talking to the moon were, of escaping from the usual idea of oneself—in this case, oneself as someone who sees only a few things at a time and is in any case concerned with only a few. Writing like Whitman, the students could be ubiquitous and godlike, as if the air were speaking, everywhere at once, concerned with everything at once. It was a change of idea about what was relevant that I wished them to get and of what fitted into a poem. I commented on certain of Whitman's lines in which he seems really to be present, seeing and responding to what he describes. I suggested the students do that too—

The regatta is spread on the bay . . . how the white sails sparkle! . . .

I said again, "Imagine you can see what is happening all over the world at this very moment, or all over the country, or all over the city of New York." I had them begin by telling me some lines for a collaboration—

A man in a top hat is going to church
People are cooking dinner for a big party in Ozone Park
And they're going to have a big dance tonight
Charlie Chaplin is getting drunk he sits in the saloon . . .

Dictating their poems, some students wanted to tell stories, anecdotes about their past that the Whitman passage had brought to mind, and in a few cases where that impulse was very strong, we let that be the poem. But they were missing the experience of simultaneity of things happening, and whenever we could, we found ways to help people put a different event in every line, and with as many details as possible. When they did, there were admirable Whitmanlike effects—the beauty of precise details which made things really "seen"—"a man dancing very fast with a pin-striped suit on"—and the kind of magical life and excitement that came from surprising transitions—"Second-story workers are robbing people. / A drunk is going into a ballroom. . . ."

There was something about regarding each line as an entirely new thing that helped Nadya to make a strangely disconnected and beautiful evocation of a scene. Her poem which begins “A man is going up the ladder” suggested to me another kind of poem to ask people to write, Whitmanlike but all about a single scene or event.

One way to help someone put a new event in every line is to suggest that he think of a new country or part of the world in every line and say what is happening there—as Kate did with Mary L. Jackson.

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Talking to the Moon or Stars

Oh beautiful moon
So bright
This night
I wish I were where you are
Oh beautiful moon when you're not there
I wonder and wonder where
Oh how I love you harvest moon
So beautiful and so bright
I remember when I was a little girl and I had to go to sleep
I put out the candle
But we still had you
Shining in
So bright

—Mary L. Jackson

Oh beautiful moon
I used to talk for miles and miles
Twelve miles
In your beautiful light
Even early in the morning
Your light is still out
And I still walk in it

—Miriam Sullivan

Oh moon and stars
I loved to watch you
When I was a child
I would watch you through my little window
And wonder and worry
What would happen if you got hurt
And next time I'd say
“Oh you're still living!”
To see you hanging up there
Sliding in the sky.
I was happy.
I used to watch you
Through the trees
Then you went down the hills

Until you disappeared
Then I was sad
I wondered again if you'd come again.

—Mary Tkalec

Oh moon
You are vast
And your color is silver
You see so much
All-seeing
But you never speak
You light the way for weary travelers
Brightening the way for lovers

—Helen Lesser

Oh star
Will you twinkle warmly
And shine brightly
This evening?
So then I know you are traveling
Among your friends.

—Margaret Whittaker

I wish I was up there with you
Talking to you
And waiting for the people to come at night
To give them light.

—Carmela Pagluca

Kaleidoscope

I feel your vastness
Whenever I look at you
And your beautiful choice of colors
Some colors wouldn't look well
But the colors that we do see are exactly right.

—Elsie Dikeman

The Moonwatcher

Oh moon, how I want every time that you appear
To just stand there and look at you with eyes glued with
wonder and awe—
You're so far, far away
But still you appear so bright
Like I was right near you.
When I was young
I used to even talk to the moon myself
About my romances
Because I believed in you.

—Rose MacMillan

Stars and Moon

You are so far away
You shine like diamonds in the night
You make me think of a time
When I was young and sitting with my boyfriend—
We were holding hands and planning our future
And wishing that the years would go back.

—Fannie Feldstein

Bringing Out the Moon

I'm always looking at you
Wondering if you're 3/4, 1/2, 1/4 or full
And whether you've got that circle around you
Which will bring rain.
And when you're clear, you're nice, you're bright
You're shining with the stars and the sky which is blue
And the stars are twinkling right down on you.

—Harry Siegel

Talking to the Moon

What a beautiful moon
Dear Moon
I dream of you

—George Johnson

Stars, you must shine brighter so I can find my way quicker
I want to go where I can meet you
And tell you my story
Stars, you are bright
I wish I could be with you
So I could be bright like you
I think I want to outshine you
How beautiful you are

—Nadya Catalfano

The poetry idea was to write a poem in which you are talking to the moon or to a star or to many stars. To inspire this poem I read and discussed Keats's sonnet "Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art":

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

I suggested to the class that like Keats they talk seriously to the moon or stars, say how they felt about the heavenly body they spoke to, what they liked about it, what it reminded them of, whether they would like to resemble it in some way. I spent more time on the Keats poem than I had on any other poem I had read them before. I wanted our students to feel the beauty (and the influence) not only of its theme but also of its mood, its tone, and its language. The sonnet was a rather extravagant poem to use in the workshop, in being so purely youthful, sensual, and romantic—but extravagant choices had worked well so far. This lesson offered the new rhetorical device of talking directly to nature, as Keats does to the star, Shelley to the West Wind, Byron to the sea, and other poets to other things.

I read the sonnet aloud and talked about it. I talked about its beginning with directly addressing the star and asked them to imagine the scene, the poet in the fields or the street outside, or at his window, thinking about his love, then imagining the star had some quality he wanted. He wanted to be like it, shining steadily, always there, in the same place, always bright. Where he wanted to be was not in the sky, however, but next to his love, with his head on her breast—forever. I said what a strange comparison the whole thing was. And what a nice springlike atmosphere the poem had. Had they ever seriously talked to a star or to the moon? How lovely and sensuous the language was—"Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast." Is there anything a star was, or the moon was, that they would really like to be?

In taking down poems we sometimes had to remind people that they should talk to the heavenly body and not talk *about* it. "Talk to me," Kate or I would say; "I am the moon." There was a striking change when they did, not only in the few words that were different but in the whole mood of what they said, in the tone, in the things they afterward found to say. For example, a descriptive statement about the moon such as "It is a long way from here" becomes "You are a long way from here." This new version is full of suggestions of loving people, of missing them, of all sorts of personal things, and its being so quite naturally affects the mood of what one writes.

For me, as far as teaching goes, the most dramatic thing about this class was my finding that I could use great poetry directly to inspire my students to write. And to write wonderfully well. I didn't have to bring the moon into the nursing home, just Keats's sonnet. The extreme Romantic youthfulness of Keats's sonnet caused no problem. My students expressed youthful feelings easily, and feelings from childhood. In feeling and imagination, there seems to be a way in which a person is all the ages he or she has been.

I Never Told Anybody

Leair

I once had a secret love but I never told anybody
I once ran away but I never told anybody
Once when I was walking down the street I saw a man running
with a gun in his hand
But I never told anybody
Once I found a pocketbook, I was a little girl, and I never told
anybody
I planted a rosebush at the corner of my house
Every month it had a different-colored rose—a white one, a
pink one, a red one—
And I never told anybody

—Mary L. Jackson

There are things I've even hid from myself
And they're pretty hard to find
My next-to-oldest son, Charles,
He bought me some things. I'm ashamed to say
I'd put it in the bottom drawer of the commode
And that worried me all night.
Until the next day, when I found it.
You are the only one I've ever told.

—Fred Richardson

I never told about the time
I put ten pounds of salt in my mother's sugar barrel.
That particular barrel
Is the barrel she used to make pastries from.
I never told anyone
But she knew it was me
Because I was her naughty boy.
Always doing something wrong.
The reason I never told her
Is because when she hits me
She never knows when to stop.
When I was twenty-five years old
I told her who put the salt in her sugar barrel.
She gave me what-for.
Her mouth was worse than any whiplash in the world.
She's a woman weighing a hundred seventy-five pounds.
Her arm is as big and round as an oak tree.
What a woman!
When it comes to a good whipping
She was the champ.
Because I was always into something.
Once she washed my sister's bloomers.
And put them on the line to dry.
I put a handful of tadpoles
Into the leg of the bloomer
Because the bloomers looked so funny
Flapping in the wind. Because, at the time she was bigger than
I.
She tried to take my mother's place.
When it came to whipping
I could fight her back.
But not my mother.

I got even with her by putting tadpoles in her bloomers.
I never told anyone this.
After she got married,
Oh how I missed my beautiful sister.
I never knew at the time I was jealous of her.
Not because she whipped me
But because she was more beautiful than I.
She whipped me because she loved me.
I'm glad she did.
Because she tamed me off a lot.
I'm still a little mischievous
With people that I love
Especially Casey.
I still have a lot of little boy in me yet.

—William Ross

I always told my mother everything
When she was alive
I never held anything back
From anybody
There are feelings, about what aches me
I never tell anyone
They're always asking me
"What's the matter?"
Because they always see me sigh
And not speaking
And I always say "Nothing."

—Harry Siegel

I never told anybody how beautiful the ocean was
I never told my father that I used to go bathing
Because he'd scold me, he'd be afraid I'd drown
I never told anybody the things I used to do at school
But I'm telling them now.

—Carmela Pagluca

Gambling Luck

I'd just gotten married in 1930
And I had a job and worked all week
Got paid Saturday night
And I stopped off at the clubroom
And lost my whole week's salary
I wasn't making but eighteen dollars a week, doing pressing,
No food, no rent paid
And so my mother-in-law gave me a nickel to get me a packet
of smoking tobacco
And I walked down on the corner with a friend of mine
And started playing coon can for a nickel
And I won forty cents
I left and went on the railroad men's section
So I got into a skin game
And I won seventy dollars with that forty cents
And I went home and bought food
Paid the rent
Took my wife out to the movies
And my old mother-in-law and wife and all wanted to know
where I got the money

And I never told anyone
But everybody was happy

—*Leroy Burton*

It's hard for me to tell something I never told
Because I tell everyone everything
I have no secrets
I'm open and aboveboard
I don't keep any secrets
What I've never told anyone is that money is beautiful
The way it's designed and green
Experts are in the line to make it look beautiful
So people won't give it away
Or spend it foolishly
But money is also the source of all the trouble in this world
Money is trouble
People that don't have any money are troubled about it
And people that have money
Are troubled someone will take it away from them
So there's trouble all around
There's always been this trouble
All the wars are over money gained
That's what I never told anyone.

—*Eric Carlson*

Hill

I never told anybody that I drove away in a buggy
I never told anybody that I fell all the way downstairs—
I'm still crippled today
I never told anybody that I made a lot of pickles
I never told anybody that I sent a letter to the President
I never told anybody that I was in an airplane just flying
around the field

—*Mary L. Jackson*

I've never told anyone this but
I used to go swimming
I never told anyone that I used to go to the store
Because I might go too far
That's what I never told anyone

—*George Johnson*

Poems

I never told anybody what a grand person Miss Kate Farrell
really is
If it weren't for her I wouldn't come to poetry class
I never told Rainey how I felt about Miss Farrell
Because he's competition to me here
I don't know where he gets his jive poetry from
I never told Casey about how I felt about Miss Farrell because
she wouldn't understand
I never told Casey about my old love affairs because she
wouldn't understand that either
I never told Susan how much I missed her since she left to
take care of her business

I never told Barbara Mittelmark what a beautiful substitute
she is

And that's facts
Anyway, I never tell anybody about my personal feelings
Only to those I really admire
I would never tell Rainey my feelings about Miss Farrell
Like I said, he's my competition
He can't fight me, he's not big enough
I never told Casey that I love her very much
She thinks it's infatuation
I can't tell her that she doesn't know the meaning of the word
I never told Casey what a wonderful person she is
I never told my dad that I pushed my sister in the pond when
we went fishing
I never told Mother that I dumped a whole can of worms down
her back and ran like hell because she was bigger than I
I never told my grandmother that I put turpentine in a horse's
backside because I was going to church, the old horse got
stubborn and wouldn't move

—*William Ross*

I never told anybody I used to be knock-kneed
I was knock-kneed until I was twenty years old
I never told anybody about the time I wrecked my uncle's car
I took it and wrecked it and never told anybody
I never told anybody about my seventh-grade teacher
I loved her and I dreamed about her every night
I never told anybody about a girl at home
We ran away to North Carolina and stayed there for three
weeks
They wanted me to marry her and I wouldn't
I never told my wife how much money I made
But now I can tell it.

—*Sam Rainey*

I never told anybody that I wanted to go to school
I never told anybody I was the only child
I never told anybody that I didn't know whether it was good
or not that I was growing older
I never told anybody that I tried to be good to people.

—*Laura Bradshaw*

I've never told anyone this but
My father used to take me to a dance
For the Knights of Columbus
And I wanted people to ask me to dance
But when they did, I'd say no
Because I'd be afraid, or shy
I was shy then I was afraid people would laugh at me
I've never told anyone this.

—*Margaret Whittaker*

I'm sitting here and wondering
How many are going to ask me to dance tonight
I wonder should I dance
Because maybe they won't laugh at me
And I could have fun

The steps don't seem to have changed too much
I could still wiggle my feet, I guess
Maybe someone will notice me keeping time with my feet
And will take the hint that I would like to dance.

—Margaret Whittaker

I told my students, “Write a poem which is entirely about things you never told anybody. A poem of secrets. A good idea is to start every line, or every other line, with the words ‘I never told anybody,’ and each time put in a different thing you never told. If you want to, use something like a refrain, too, a repeated thing you say two or three times in the poem, like ‘But I’m telling it now’ or ‘But now I’m saying it.’ The secrets don’t have to be important ones, but can just be things you never talked about because they seemed unimportant or silly or because they made you feel embarrassed or shy. No matter how honest one is, there are always things one never tells anyone, there is always a secret way of thinking about things and looking at things that one keeps to oneself.”

The subject, insofar as it was secret feelings, was what they had been writing about from the start: how they felt when they touched a piece of velvet, when they listened to Vivaldi, what they would say to the moon or stars—none of these is part of ordinary conversation or of what one would usually tell anybody. In poetry, secrets can be public and private at the same time.

I talked about some kinds of things one never tells anybody, asked them for examples, gave some of my own. Also, since I thought that their poetry gave examples of various kinds of things one usually never told, I read to them some of their earlier poems. It was the first time I used their own poems to help them get ideas, as I’d used Whitman, Keats, and other poets before. It was a good thing to do.

Taking down the poems, Kate Farrell (my co-teacher) and I kept asking that every line or so begin with “I never told anybody.” Some students resisted the idea, saying they were honest and open and had always told everything. We said again that the secrets didn’t have to be “important” but could be any sort of private, silly, seemingly unimportant things. We gave examples of our own—I never told anybody that I thought I could go inside the radio and sing with the people there. I never told anybody that I talked to my cocker spaniel, Cokey, about my troubles with girls. The most hesitant students ended up writing about things they hadn’t told anyone.

Kate and I had been thinking about how to help students individually with their poetry, and we had a few particular things in mind. We wanted to ask Elsie Dikeman to try writing a bit more freely and without such strong prose connections, to talk to Leroy Burton about the endings of his poems, to get Sam Rainey to write longer poems, to help Margaret Whittaker make her poetry less prosy and more dramatic. These last two things we were able to do. Kate, with Sam, noticed that, as he often did, after a few good

ideas he became a little nervous and didn’t want to write any more. Having decided that was just what would be good for him to do, though, she persisted, telling him it could be unimportant things, and telling him things that she herself had never told anybody. Reinspired by thinking about secret loves, Sam added seven lines to his poem.

I suggested to Margaret Whittaker that she rewrite her poem about having been shy at a dance as if she were at the dance now and make the poem a kind of talking to herself about her feelings as if in the present. A feeling for writing this way stayed with her in the next class, when she took the part of a rose in a poetic dialogue with Sam Rainey (a violet)—

I feel soft and delicate sitting here watching everything . . .

I thought of it especially for Margaret, but it seems to me now a good thing to try with many students, perhaps even to use in some way as an idea for the whole class—writing about a past experience as if it were taking place right now.



PLUGS

Kenneth Koch’s essay is excerpted from his book *I Never Told Anybody*, which T&W has just reissued. See p. 16 (mailing cover) for more information.

The indefatigable Koch has also published a new collection entitled *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays, and Other Work*, pieces that span nearly 40 years and elucidate, in a most entertaining manner, Koch’s literary aesthetics. The genius of this book is that it not only makes us think about the art of poetry, it makes reading and writing poetry seem as attractive and rewarding as they really are. Published by the University of Michigan in its “Poets on Poetry” series, *The Art of Poetry* is available in a 216-page paperback edition for \$14.

Peggy Kaye has followed her *Games for Reading*, *Games for Math*, and *Games for Learning* with yet another delightful book, *Games for Writing*. Although its audience is teachers and parents of children in grades K–3, Kaye’s presentation is so bright and appealing that even the most jaded reviewer at T&W ended up reading the book for sheer pleasure and imagining the fun of adapting the book’s activities to suit older students. Published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, the 228-page paperback edition is priced at \$13.

What Matters and 100 Words

Two Poetry Writing Ideas

by Judyth Collin

WHILE WORKING TOWARD AN M.A. IN POETRY, I have been teaching poetry in the schools. What follows below are my journal entries for poetry classes I conducted with fourth and fifth graders at Anthony Chabot Elementary School in Oakland, California, located in a middle-class neighborhood with a balanced ethnic mix of students. The journals describe two poetry writing ideas, What Matters and 100 Words.

JANUARY 3: WHAT MATTERS (PREPARATION)

What matters? Tomorrow I begin my workshops, and I've decided to use as a model a poem/letter from a friend. I wrote him a simple letter asking "What matters?" He wrote back with a list of things that matter, including dogs that roll in the sand, a landlady who allows you to cut her yellow roses, and good humor in bad weather. I think this assignment might work as a first poem, just to get the kids in the mood for concrete images and details. Not just "love" or "my friends." But what exactly do you like to do with your friends, or how does love matter? When you've skinned your knee and your mother kisses it? A movement may matter or a color may matter, but where is the color and what is it doing? Small objects may matter, like a pencil in a cup; a sound may matter, like foghorns on the bay at midnight. I also have my own poem about what matters, a rhythm poem with a beat and a sound, so I'll read that to them also, and I think we'll also talk about matter itself. What is it? A hole with stars flying through it. Particle waves both the same and different, existent and nonexistent. Or maybe that's another workshop I'm thinking about doing on the universe as a whole.

JANUARY 5: WHAT MATTERS (THE CLASS)

Trying What Matters in the first class, I thought, Jeez, are they just not getting this, or what? Like they couldn't even

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begin to think in concrete images. I decided I'm going to have to gear down for that class, allow them more time to think and write. It's weird how an entire class can have a certain feel to it, and this class definitely felt like it was in slow motion.

The second class, though, was terrific, and caught on right away. I passed out a model poem based on a letter from a friend, and then read them my own poem, which I had written to serve as an example:

What Matters?

What matters? Who matters? Does it matter?
What is matter?

Does the wind matter to the trees?
Does a crumb matter to the ant?
Does the tire matter to the truck?
Does love matter to me?

Time space matter is one continuum . . .
What matter matter matters most?
What matter matter matters least?

Does a penny matter to the bank?
Does lint matter to the light?
Does red matter to a rose?
Does love matter to me?

What's a matter? Who's a matter?
Is there anything the matter?
Matter splattered all over my face.
Matter hattered all over my head.
Matter tattered all over my bones.
Matter shattered all over my heart.
Does it matter?

We then wrote a group poem on the board before writing our own. When one kid contributed the line, "Runaway chickens in Illinois matter," I cracked up. And then his classmate said, "Yeah, he's obsessed with chickens." Then I laughed really hard. Next time I go into that class, I'm going to investigate this further. Does he stalk chickens? Does he eat chicken all the time? Does he have pet chickens? Does he dream about chickens? I don't know, crazy stuff, but I like the off-the-wall flavor, I think the kids catch on to my humor.

This class also had a couple of reluctant writers. I spent extra time with both of them. One didn't want to write because he said he just liked to draw. When I asked him to come up with five images that matter, write them, and then draw them for me, he did. The other kid said, "I'm not good at this." I hunkered down with him, prodding him with questions: What's a smell that matters? What about a color? How about something you can see? As he answered, I took dictation. He managed to come up with about six images. I exclaimed, "You are good at this! Look what you did!" He smiled a little, but I don't think he quite believed me. He's already marked himself as a failure. I'm always careful to tell the kids that it's impossible to write a wrong poem, and that I don't care about spelling. I just comment on the things I like, and say, "Great, terrific, good," with a few urgings to use more details.

What Matters

Does the field of sunflowers matter?
The splash as I jump in a pool matters
The smell of the egg salad for my sandwich matters
The lead in my pencil matters
It all matters
It matters helping others
The winning goal matters
All the love in my family matters
The wanting of a dog matters
It matters the way I think
The rain out on the yard matters
The noise in the classroom matters
Do clean rooms matter?

—Erin Goldsmith, 4th grade

What Matters

Does it matter if my bladder is going to get cut on a platter in Alaska?
Does it matter if my window will be shattered by a ball in my house?
Does it matter if people will chatter on the street?
Does it matter if chickens will run away in Illinois?
Does it matter if a lot of cheese will not be eaten at midnight?
Does it matter that I caught the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl in Miami?
Does it matter? Yes it matters. Yes it does matter if I will lose my bladder in Alaska.

—Ross Allen, 4th grade

What Matters

sitting in a corner eating ice cream matters
hearing the rain pitter patter on my window matters
spinning in circles and falling on the ground matters
finishing all of my homework at night matters
watching the sunset from my porch matters
seeing a good movie matters

going fishing with my dad matters
helping my mom bake matters
telling good jokes matters

—Lia Goldman, 4th grade

What Matters

crystal clear water off the coast of Bermuda on a summer day matters
lots of money in my wallet matters
fire dancing on a log in a fireplace matters
the burning sun setting over the San Francisco bay matters
syrup swimming on top of a golden waffle matters
throwing a baseball at the Oakland Coliseum matters
a grain of sand blowing in the wind on the coast of Bermuda matters
every second in time matters
the black shoes I wear matter
reading your favorite book over and over matters
the wind twisting in a disastrous tornado matters
my brown braid tail wisping in the wind matters
the numbers I push on a calculator matter
the state of Rhode Island matters
every wave in the ocean matters

—Ross Cussen, 4th grade

What Matters

it matters to see an angel that has fallen
to look up a dark mystic tree it matters
or to see a stampede of wild white horses, it matters
to see the silent tick sitting on top
like he was losing, it matters
to feel the mist of winter, it matters
or smell the fragrance of a green forest that has just been snowed on, it matters
but my question is does matter really matter

—Jens ten Broeck, 5th grade

Ain't That

dynamite in the stove matters
the ball attracted to you matters
peace matters
I matter, you matter
gooey matter
sticky matter
that matter this matter
every matter matters
killer toilet paper coming from you matters
beavers in the red tree matter
the dead goblin king at your feet matters
the bear teeth matter
you with piranhas in your bath matter
ground zero matters

—Matt Cox, 5th grade

JANUARY 23: 100 WORDS

Words. I brought in words this week. I wanted to yank all my classes out of the everyday rut and into the surreal. I started by reading odes by Neruda, and the words flowed out into the room like “petals of smoke” (a metaphor he uses for birds). I read “Birdwatching Ode,” “Ode to a Watch at Night,” “Ode to Tomatoes,” and “Ode to the Storm.” The students were quiet. These poems have a way of turning me into liquid, and make me want to flow in the veins of the stars, to seep into the leaves and stones.

After the reading, I handed out a list of 100 words (see figure on page 14), telling the students to keep it face down on their desks until I counted to three, when they were to turn it over and quickly circle ten words. The guidelines were these: 1) the students could change the tense or number of any word on the list; 2) they could combine the words in fresh new ways; 3) they could include any other words in their poems; and 4) the words they circled absolutely had to be included.

I try to discourage narrative tales, but the left brain wants to make straight linear sense of things, instead of a zany chartreuse zigzag. Again we wrote a group poem on the board before writing individually. I wrote ten words from the list and asked for suggestions as to how to combine the words. Then I asked for title suggestions as well. During the actual writing, some kids managed just to make a list of rather surreal combos, using the word *of* between the words (something like the way Kenneth Koch’s students did in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* when they wrote “A Swan of Bees” poems, or the way surrealist poet André Breton did in his poem “Free Union”). I hope to build on this idea in the next lesson. Other kids came up with strong images: “the sunshine felt like a kiss,” “the tiger hammered its way through the trees,” “a shadow is like a dark pale tiger it sizzles,” and “at midnight the tiger of darkness leaps out at me.” The word *tiger* appealed to many of the kids. They *do* have tiger energy, and many of them are like caged tigers, made to copy or do math when they would much rather be roaming the night of their imagination.

After writing, I always leave time to hear the kids read their poems, and to those who are shy, I say that as far as I know, no one has ever died from reading a poem aloud.

One Million Storms

one million streaks of darkness
are flashes of lightning
one million raindrops are like streaks of lace
one million streaks of lightning
are like thin diamonds quarreling

—Peter Swaney, 4th grade

Shadows

your shadow ripples in
as you go into a pool

your shadow melting as night does

—Michael Lock, 4th grade

Whispers

I swallow all of the giggling whispers around
me I can try to dance
away all of the whispers below me
I must splash through
all of the ringing whispers
I twirl through all of the lacy whispers
the ringing of whispers
through my ear as I
twirl through the bowl around me
the gate is now open
all ringing whispers
are
out

—Erin Goldsmith, 4th grade

The Moon

the moon fell on the sky the sky fell
on the hill the hill fell on the bell I
swallowed them all and I opened
the door it was yellow and blue and wet

—Nick Howlett-Brier, 4th grade

In the Mist

In the mist I could hear the sizzle
of piano keys hot from someone’s fingers

In the darkness of a pool of mist
steam rose from the ripple in the grand cave

In the mist I could eye the moon
and make it twirl in the sky

In the mist the gate will keep
me from the leap of joy

In the midnight sky I will
never see the piano

—Kyle Weaver, 4th grade

Purple Morning

In the morning when the air is all artichoke
and the purple bone tumbles on the ground

and the splinter gets stuck on your tongue
and you get a kiss in the eye and see a ribbon that can fly then
you know
it’s a purple morning

—David Kilian, 4th grade

One Hundred Words (More or Less)

carnival	finger	snow
midnight	fire	eye
rocket	purple	mind
green	streak	splinter
tornado	fool	whirl
submarine	ripple	wind
lace	book	whisper
bellow	cinder	ribbon
sizzle	kiss	swallow
mirror	rain	bowl
sycamore	sigh	tiger
million	wave	bone
thunder	river	twist
elevator	puddle	cloud
emerald	dance	doze
moon	wet	ring
rush	bell	velvet
lightning	leaf	splash
lilac	bubble	scarlet
burn	artichoke	water
cement	red	time
tangle	hammer	shake
yellow	stone	jigsaw
light	circle	apron
hurricane	music	tremble
pale	violin	spiral
dark	umbrella	clang
dance	tongue	door
hill	hiss	gust
scatter	snap	glitter
morning	fish	chant
starfish	curl	desert
twirl	flash	string
narrow	twist	spider
piano	window	trumpet
blue	listen	open
parade	paper	paint
wolf	drum	money
rock	glass	sleep
icicle	balloon	
stream	poem	

Fellow poet-teacher Carol Dorf gave me a list of 100 words, which I have revised so much over the years that not one of the original words remains. The list continues to change. This current one consists of concrete nouns, colors, and vivid verbs. Some of the words were chosen mainly for their sound.

Poems Are

poems are a narrow dark
hammer a wave of bubbles
a wind of snow and a flash
of paint

—Gabriel Rojas, 5th grade

Midnight

midnight is
an island of
blue fire
at midnight the
scatter of mist
and cinders sizzle out
like swallowing a gust
of trembling whispers
a purple kiss makes
your pride ripple
inside from the cold
for the twirls of a scarlet
tongue have thrashed him

—Thora Eberts, 5th grade

Money Money Money and More Money

Million dollar money
in the midnight shadow
I watch the money
the money pool that is
a pool of money
money rippling through the air
a stream of money
it's a dream of money
a rushing river of money
the glittering of the cool money sea
whirling and twirling just for me
a sky filled with money
I sleep in money
I smell money
I smell grand green money

—Spring Champion, 5th grade

I Can Sizzle

I can sizzle you you and you
I can sizzle your scream anytime
I can sizzle and stop a hurricane
I'll sizzle your tongue when you talk about me
I can sizzle red paint and eat it for breakfast
I'll hit with a hammer and sizzle it
I'll sizzle a rock and give it to my son
I can sizzle a tiger for lunch
I can swallow a sizzled elephant

I'll replace my eye with a sizzled eye
I can sizzle a wolf and sell it

—Jarrett Sanders, 5th grade

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