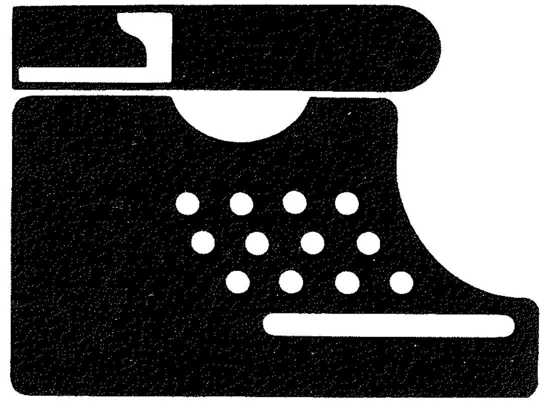
Teachers & Writers



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Repeating Lines

by Jim Berger

POETIC FORM IS OFTEN THE RESULT OF SOME sort of repetition that creates a pattern. Rhyme is the repetition of end sounds of words; alliteration is the repetition of beginning sounds; syllabic poetry repeats the number of syllables per line; poetry in stanzas uses the stanza as the repeated unit; and often there are repeated lines, such as the refrains in ballads and songs. Even "open" poetry or free verse often contains repeated words or phrases, or has a consistency in the line lengths and the ways the lines are broken. In the broadest sense, you can even consider ordinary units of syntax to be forms of repetition. Think of the simple sentence: subject / verb / object. When this pattern is disturbed, the effect of the same words becomes completely different.

Repetition and pattern are part of what draws a reader into and leads him through a poem, and the deliberate use of repetition can be used by teachers and beginning writers to create simple but quite effective poems.

Repetition creates a pattern, and an established pattern creates an expectation. The writer then has a choice: continue the pattern or break it; give the reader what he expects (which is a pleasurable result), or give him a surprise (which is equally or even more pleasurable). It's the same in sports. Let's say in basketball, you have the ball, you drive to the right and score. Next time you have the ball, you drive to the right again and score. You've established a pattern and created an expectation in the defender. So, the next time you get the ball, what do you do? Fake right and drive left. Of course, in basketball, it's no fun to be faked out, but in reading poetry it is. It may be that that moment of indeterminacy, when the pattern may or may not be broken, is one of poetry's greatest pleasures.

There are many poems that can illustrate this. The simplest are nursery rhymes:

London Bridge is falling down
Falling down
Falling down
London Bridge is falling down. . .

OK, what next? Will it continue to repeat forever and ever? That would be pretty boring. Of course not: My fair lady! And notice that even the game children play to this song makes a distinction between the repetition and the break from the repetition. It's during the "My fair lady" line that the child gets captured in the bridge.

An African lullaby of the Akan tribe has a similar effect:

Someone would like to have you as her child
but you are mine.
Someone would like to rear you on a costly mat
but you are mine.
Someone would like to place you on a camel blanket
but you are mine.

By now the pattern is clearly established. So now it changes.

I have to rear you on a torn old mat.

It's a small but distinct change that definitely breaks the repetition. And this is a very important line for the meaning of the poem. It identifies the speaker and puts what's gone before in a new perspective. The poem then concludes by

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repeating the beginning, a soothing ending appropriate for a lullaby:

> Someone would like to have you as her child
> but you are mine.

It's important to realize that this repetition/change idea is not just a formal conceit. The line that breaks the repetition will often contain a critical shift of meaning as well. Generally, however, I do present the idea to younger students more as a formal idea; as they play with the form, the mutations of meaning seem to generate themselves.

I tried a variation on this form myself and it came out like this:

Modern Incantation

> Can't you be quiet even for a minute?
> You baby crying, water dripping,
> voice on the telephone,
> can't you be quiet even for a minute?
> You buzz of an electric appliance,
> you tapping of rain, you vibration,
> I'm going nuts! Can't you be
> quiet?

The form here is almost identical to that of the Akan lullaby. There are two instances of "Can't you be quiet even for a minute?", each followed by a list of three things that should be quiet. (You might notice that these noises become increasingly abstract and all-encompassing, progressing from a baby crying to a vibration). Then the repetition is broken: "I'm going nuts!", which is the emotional climax of the poem, functioning in the same way as the single non-repeated line in the lullaby and in "London Bridge." And the poem ends with a repetition of the first line, but only a half repetition—and with an unusual line break—because I didn't want the sort of soothing closure of the lullaby, but something more abrupt and in keeping with the hysterical tone of this poem.

Experimenting with form does not preclude writing meaningful poetry. The mind is always full of meaning and feeling, and these will inevitably break through into the poem. In fact, when you take your mind off the meaning a little bit and concentrate more on the game of the poem, sometimes, paradoxically, the meaning comes through even more strongly.

Another poem that shows this simple pattern well is Federico Garcia Lorca's "Silly Song" ("Cancion Tonta"), translated by Harriet de Onis:

> Mama
> I wish I was silver
>
> Son
> You'd be very cold
>
> Mama
> I wish I was water
>
> Son
> You'd be very cold
>
> Mama
> Embroider me on your pillow
>
> That, yes
> Right away!

Here, the breaking of the repetition ends the poem and creates that terribly eerie, unsettling, though also somewhat comic feeling. I also like to read this poem in Spanish to the students, even if none of them understands the language, to show that the pattern of repetition and surprise are apparent even in the mostly unintelligible sounds:

> Mama
> Yo quiero ser de plata
>
> Hijo
> Tendras mucho frio
>
> Mama
> Yo quiero ser de agua
>
> Hijo
> Tendras mucho frio
>
> Mama
> Bordame en tu almohada
>
> Eso si
> Ahora mismo!

I've used these ideas and techniques with students at the United Nations International School in New York, when I was a student teacher in a fourth grade there, when I taught third grade at the International School Moshi in Moshi, Tanzania, and more recently to elementary and high school students at the Usdan Center for the Creative and Performing Arts in Huntington, N.Y., and at PS 29 and PS 31 in the Bronx as a member of Teachers & Writers Collaborative. During these residencies I emphasized how repetition can be found in all sorts of areas: music, sports, painting, history, architecture, botany, you name it; and how the element of surprise and breaking the repetition is important. After reading each example poem, we discussed which lines were repeated (and which ones almost repeated), which were not repeated at all, and which acted as the surprise in the poem. Of course, we also talked about what the poems meant, who the speakers were and what they were saying and feeling. And we tried to see how the surprise—the break in the repetition—related to the poem's emotional content.

And then the assignment: write a poem that uses repeating lines and that at some point breaks the repetition and creates a surprise. It's often easiest to first think up the line that will repeat; then you have something to go back to when you're stuck. The repeating line should, of course, be a good one: mysterious, funny, beautiful, terrifying, or all of these combined. It's very important to have a good repeating line. And a good surprise line. As for the subject? Whatever the writer wants. As the examples here should illustrate, poems in this form can be on any subject. The students can do variations on the examples if they can't think of anything better to begin with.

If the results seem too mechanical at first, a bit *too* repetitious, just let the students keep writing; at least they're picking up the form. It may be that the surprise isn't surprising enough; or that the repetitions lack any internal variation, or are being used too often without any change at all—even within each repetition there can be small surprises. And if the student doesn't follow the form exactly, but comes up with a good poem, then all the better.

Here are some of the poems my students wrote.

The Brain

The brain is made of squshy
mush with veins of intelligence
and veins of blood. It's
divided into 3 different
parts with intelligence of
every kind. The brain is made
of squshy mush connected
in the head. The brain is made
of squshy mush, but I warn you
if you are a doctor not
to fool around with it.

—Tom, age 10, U.N.I.S.

Maybe

I love you, maybe,
or maybe not.
This is true life, maybe,
or maybe not.
You've hurt me, baby,
that's not a maybe.
We're "lovers," maybe,
or maybe not.
We're enemies maybe,
but I hope not.
You're Romeo, maybe,
or maybe not.
I'm Juliet, maybe,
but you know I'm not.
Get real, baby.
This ain't Camelot.
Are you my knight, baby?
I think not.
I love you, maybe,
or maybe not.

—Shannon, age 15, Usdan

Discussions of a Class

Trees, she said.
Words, hair,
thought, she said.
Describe, she said,
short, starting, she said.
Talking, fighting, creature,
she said.
These all can be words of a
poem, she said.

They are all concentrating,
observing.
It is all silent now.
Yet there seems to be a bit of
confusion.

—Rolinda, age 13, Usdan

Me What Not

I not to eat
a shark not in water
I not to sleep
a dog not to bark
I not to ride a bike
a paint with no color
I not to draw
a tree without bark
I without chocolate
pants that do not cover.

—Josh, age 9, Usdan

At the Beach

On the beach with the hot hot sun.
On the beach with the radio on.
On the beach running in the waves.
I will put suntan lotion on my legs.

—Karen, age 8, PS 29

Mom I am big as a cat
Mom I am a zebra girl
Mom I am a peach people,
eat me, Mom.
Mom I am a bone, dogs eat me.
Mom I am a bow, girls wear me.
Mom I am a mule, I go to the zoo.
Mom I am a snake, I look like a plant.
Mom I am a clean mop.
Mom I am a school, the children come there.
Mom I am a bumpy girl.
Mom I am a frog, I live in the water.
Mom I am a tree.
Mom I am a hop hop frog.
Mom I am a letter, they put me in a box.
Mom I am a book writing.
Mom I am a rat cats eat.
Mom I am a lion.
Mom I am a movie screen.
Mom I am a feel world.
Mom I am a kiss girl.
Mom I am a girl of you.
Mom I am a library.

—Yolanda, age 8, PS 31

Daddy, do you want to play football?
No son, I'm busy.
Daddy, do you want to play baseball?
No son, I said I'm busy.
Daddy, do you want to study?
Yes son.
Mommy, Daddy doesn't want to play with me.
Robert.
Yes dear.
Play with Darryll.
OK dear.
Let's go play, son.
I don't want to play. I'm looking at TV.

—Darryll, age 9, PS 31

Short Lines & Long Lines

by Jim Berger

WHEN YOU'RE WRITING A STORY OR AN ESSAY, it doesn't matter where you end your lines. You just start at the left-hand margin and write until you get near the right-hand edge of the paper, then go down to the next line and do it again. Ordinary punctuation marks and syntax tell the reader where to pause, where the units of meaning begin and end, and so forth. But in poetry it's crucial where each line ends, and with what word it ends and the next one begins, for the lengths of the lines and the choices of end words determine the flow and rhythm of the poem and give added emphasis to particular words. For the poet, line length is like an extra form of punctuation that further clarifies both the poem's sound and its meaning. It's partly this extra subtlety and detail in the organization of sound and meaning that make poetry what it is, and different from prose.

A poem written in short lines, where the sentence is divided into smaller units, tends to have a quicker, choppier rhythm. The frequent jumps of the eye are repeated in the mind.

Just try
talking
as if you were
writing a
short
line poem.

It gives a certain excitement, a newness, to what you're saying. A new rhythm makes you listen more carefully. Inherent in short-line poems are beautiful possibilities of music and dance, raindrops, machinery, gunfire, traffic jams, anxiety, speed, hesitation, and breathlessness.

Another thing about short lines is that they provide a continual series of small surprises. Each line contains a small, discrete chunk of information, and you cannot discover the next chunk until you jump down to the next line. I like to introduce students to this idea by writing a short-line poem on the board a single line at a time and asking the students to guess what will come in the next line. Certain William Carlos Williams poems, although widely used for other types of writing assignments, are also perfect for this:

I have eaten
(Infinite possibilities: "the ice cream, the bread, the hamburger, the banana"—
the poem, of course, says):
the plums
(What next? "They tasted good, they were sweet, they were juicy. . . ." No, sorry, not so fast; these short-line poems like to tell just a *little* bit at a time.)
that were in
(In what? "The store! the refrigerator! the car!"
Very close, very close.)
the icebox
(And I'll give you the next line.):
and which
("Were good! were delicious!" Hold on, hold on; this poem goes along *very* slowly.)
you were probably
("Wanting to eat yourself!" Hey, good guess!)
saving
(See, he *still* won't tell you everything! "To eat yourself, to eat for lunch.")
for breakfast
(Hurray! At last, the end of the sentence; that was one sentence divided into all those lines.)
forgive me
("For eating your plums? I'll buy you new plums?
I didn't know they were yours.")
they were delicious
("And wonderful! I loved them! Best plums I ever had. . . ."
Good ideas, but he still goes slowly):
so sweet
(OK, last line coming, make it a good one—
"And fantastic, and so juicy, thanks for your plums.")
and so cold
(!)

Although the rhythm is quick and choppy, the real joy of a short-line poem is actually in its infinitessimal hesitations, its slow drawing out, its gradual revelation. With every line, the poem creates expectations and delivers small surprises. The surprise in each line—even if it's just a small one—is what I try to emphasize to the students.

But there's another thing to notice. There are certain words that, when placed at the end of a line, inevitably lead you immediately to the next one. For instance, all prepositions do this. A line ends with *to*. . . well, to what? to where? to whom? You've got to go to the next line to find out. It's the same with *in* or *for* or *toward.* The preposition will naturally seek its object. The articles *the* and *a* also lead you on to the next line. So do verbs. "She rode": rode where? rode what? Conjunctions also serve the same purpose, as do other sorts of words in different circumstances. All these words, at the end of a line, impel you to proceed immediately in order to arrive at the completion of the statement. So, when you end a line with one of these "impelling" words, you give the reader a slightly confusing, but delicious, double message. The syntax instructs him to proceed, but the end of the line insists that he hesitate. The result is that what finally arrives in the following line receives additional emphasis because of that hesitation and tension.

There are other words that have the opposite effect at the ends of lines. They bring you to a stop, culminate, conclude. Nouns do this well, especially as the objects of the verbs or prepositions that led the reader to them:

The monster opened
the casket.

When a noun as the subject of the sentence ends the line, it will more likely propel you to the next one:

The casket
had been opened!

Adjectives and adverbs can be conclusive, although under other circumstances they can impel you forward, as in:

The green
leaves slowly,
slowly changed.

And here a verb is the concluding word.

It's possible to see which end words impel and which conclude in the Williams poem about the plums. I go through this with the students line by line as before, this time trying to decide which lines lead you on to the next, and which bring you to a stop.

I have eaten
(Could be either; in the context, probably it pushes you along.)
the plums
(Definitely a conclusion, though the next line shows it's not a dead stop.)
which were in
(Definitely impels you.)
the icebox
(Conclusion—stops you.)
and which
(Go on. . . .)
you were probably
(Go on again. . . .)
saving
(Still pushes you on, and with just a single word, like a pivot.)
for breakfast
(Finally the conclusion.)
forgive me
(Stop.)
they were delicious
(Stop.)
so sweet
(Go on. . . .)
and so cold
(The End.)

When you build and build and then at last conclude, you can create an incredible amount of tension in what appears on the surface to be a very simple poem. And it comes from knowing how to handle the short lines. A short-line poem

like this is not, as some people may still believe, just cut-up prose.

If there's time, and if I think the class attention span can stand it, I like to run through another short-line poem quickly, maybe another by Williams.

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot.

What a beautiful, still moment this poem creates. The hesitations and impulsions of the poem perfectly mirror those of the cat.

When it's time for the students to start writing, I simply tell them to write a poem in short lines, about anything, and each line should contain a small surprise, and some lines should push you on to the next, while others should stop you.

Long Lines

Long lines are more oceanic. They wash over you like waves, one after another, each of them full of shells and sand and fish and surfboards, pieces of wrecks and bodies of sailors. The long line is more conclusive and inclusive than the partial, subdivided short line. If short lines are like quick pants, long lines resemble great, deep breaths.

That's how I present long lines to students at first, as units of breath. I tell them, "Take a deep breath, then as you exhale, make up your line. When you take a new breath, start a new line." Sometimes the long line will resemble a long sentence; other times it will look like a short paragraph. I try to demonstrate extemporaneously: I take a dramatic deep breath, then try to exhale some words that sound like poetry: "Outside it's raining and I suspect that the roof is leaking. Oh no! It's falling on that boy's head! Quick, get a towel!" I show by my voice and gesture that I've run out of breath, so I take a great new breath and resume. "There, that's better. Lightning and thunder! The chalkboard is a cradle for a whale and all the different pairs of shoes have lost their feet and are smearing the desks with mud." It's just an example to demonstrate the procedure.

Then I have the students make up a few of their own and write them down, since they may be too shy to compose them spontaneously out loud. But I do want them to read the lines aloud. It can be a kind of game to see who can make up the longest line that can be read in a single breath.

It may be necessary to show students how to arrange long lines on the page. Since each line of the poem will very likely go beyond the physical line of the paper, the student should continue his or her poetic line on the next physical line by leaving a small indentation. This will show that it's still the same line being continued. The next new poetic line will begin at the margin again. It helps to illustrate this on the chalkboard.

Teaching long-line poems doesn't require the detailed examination of the form that teaching short-line poems does, at least at the introductory level. Writing a poem with long lines takes a bit more patience and endurance, and requires more than just the inspiration to crystalize an instant: the writer has to have something to write about. So what I stress in long-line poems—after the breath unit—is the subject matter or genre. The two broad types that seem to fit best with long-line poems are the catalog and the narrative.

Perhaps the greatest narratives in history are in long-line poems—Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—and we are fortunate to have excellent English translations, one by Richmond Lattimore and another by Robert Fitzgerald. I read a few lines aloud, perhaps from a battle scene in the *Iliad.* The action and gore usually get a response. I've found it best to paraphrase somewhat, especially with younger students; here is my paraphrase from Fitzgerald's *Iliad*, Book 17:

Then the son of Telamon, magnificent Ajax, whirled about
  and broke
Into the group of Trojans that had circled the dead soldier
  Patroklus,
Thinking now to drag the body away to their town and make
  the people proud of them.
And the famous son of Lethos, named Hippothos, tying his
  swordbelt
around Patroklus' ankles, pulled the body backward on the
  battle field.
But fate and death came to him, no one could stop it.
Ajax leaped through the crowd and struck Hippothos' metal
  helmet with his spear,
And the helmet crumbled, smashed by the great spear in the
  huge hand.
His brains burst, all in blood, out of the wound. On the spot
His life died out in him, and from his hands
He let Patroklus' foot fall to the ground
As he fell forward headfirst onto the body.
And he would never be able to repay his parents for taking
  care of him
Since his life was cut short by the spear of Ajax.

The expansiveness of the form lets the poet tell as much as he wants. He can go into the minutest detail, then suddenly move to something else, which is why long-line poems are a particularly good narrative form for writers who don't yet have a feel for the prose paragraph. Long lines also tend to generate a forward motion, so that the poems stretch out vertically as well as horizontally. The long lines give the sense of a procession or parade, which is another metaphor to use with the students: the floats, balloons, marching bands, clowns, and so on advancing with a steady pace but with great variety along an avenue. That could even be the subject for a long-line poem. Speed and excitement erupt within the overall gradualness.

The other possibility for using long lines is the catalog poem, which is basically a list—but a list with personality, with life. One type of catalog poem focuses on a particular object—a friend, a car, an animal, for instance—and tells everything the poet knows, sees, feels about that thing. One of the great poems of this sort is Christopher Smart's "For I will consider my cat Jeoffrey," which shows wonderful perceptiveness and love for his cat, but then expands from the details of his cat's life to a sense of God's presence in the world. Here is a short excerpt.

> For he will not do destruction if he is well fed, neither will he spit without provocation.
> For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good cat.
> For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon.
> For every house is incompleat without him & a blessing is lacking in the spirit.
> For the Lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt.
> For every family had one cat at least in the bag.
> For the English cats are the best in Europe.

For younger kids the language is hard, but you can probably find a short passage that will make the point. Other good catalog poems are African praise poems.

Another possibility of the catalog poem is to be more universal and list lots of things. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a good example. His narrator is a kind of supernatural being who sees everything, both outside and inside—"tenacious, acquisitive, tireless... and can never be shaken away." His powers of observation are infinite, and so is his power of sympathy. He not only sees, but emotionally enters what he sees.

For younger students, just a few lines, preferably written on the board, will serve as an example. Older students can digest a longer excerpt. Here are some lines from section 8:

> The little one sleeps in its cradle,
> I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand.
> The youngster and the redfaced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
> I peeringly view them from the top.
> The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
> It is so....I witnessed the corpse....there the pistol had fallen.

And so on. With older students, I recommend that you go over the entire passage. You can point out the variety and contrast in the things Whitman sees, and how he moves so quickly among them, like a movie or a ghost; how he tries to include a whole society in his poem, just giving a line or two for each thing, but how there's action in every line; and how he makes you see and hear every event.

John Ashbery's "Into the Dusk Charged Air" is a strange catalog poem you might want to use. It is a four-page list of names of rivers, each with a small description. It begins:

> Far from the Rappahannock, the silent
> Danube moves along toward the sea.
> The brown and green Nile rolls slowly
> Like the Niagara's welling descent.
> Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire
> Near where it joined the Cher.
> The St. Lawrence prods among black stones
> And mud. But the Arno is all stones.
> Wind ruffles the Hudson's
> surface. The Irrawaddy is overflowing.

It seems an impossible task to maintain enough variety, but Ashbery pulls it off. For one thing, the poem as a whole has a structure and variety. There are slow, stately sections and rapid, churning sections; clear and muddy sections; frozen sections and thawing sections. These larger structures you can discuss with older students. For younger ones it's sufficient to think about a poem that lists and describes all the examples of a particular thing—a poem of cars, mountains, streets, highways, stores, buildings, or animals. What's important is to say something particular about each thing. This is a good type of poem to do as a group, in which each student can contribute a line. Also, when each student contributes a line (or two or three), you don't have to deal with writer's cramp, a problem with younger students writing at length in a single sitting.

A final point to be made about line lengths is that the students, having experimented with different lengths in these assignments, have now begun to get a feel for techniques they can use for their own purposes. When reading poetry, they'll have a better idea of what the writer is doing; and even in prose they'll frequently come across the rhythms and techniques of short-line or long-line poetry. (Think of Hemingway's sentences set next to Henry James's.) And in their own writing, they'll have another possibility for expression, both as conscious manipulation and as another avenue along which the unconscious can reveal itself.

I used the short-line poem technique at PS 29 and PS 31 in the Bronx. I used the long-line technique at PS 31 and at the Usdan Center in Huntington, N.Y. Below are some examples of the students' work.

Animals

Birds—free and spiritual, swooping down, going to the bathroom on your head.
Or a camel—slow and spitting on the ground; ignorant and lazy, an annoying movement.
Cats—constantly meowing and purring; graceful and with poise—they move like ballerinas.
These tigers seem to be laughing at you—Ha Ha—I may eat you up—They're truly crazy!
I love the giraffe—he's kind of towering over us—keeping an eye on the trees.
Oh, God, not the cow! What a pitiful sound—Moooooooo! Can't you think of anything better to say?
I think I'm paranoid! Ticks! Ticks! Ticks!
Don't come near me! I hate you!
What a cunning animal—that kangaroo! So close to its baby—always hopping around. Doesn't it ever get tired? Not like that
Rhinoceros—fat and slobbering—dragging its huge putrid body from place to place.
Ah! The adorable little prairie dog—I'm sure all little children would love to have one.
Don't fly away! You idiotic pigeon—Can't you see that I'm going to feed you?
You darling monkey! How do you swing on the trees so easily? Your body seems to be made of rubber bands.
You sweet puppy! Flopping ears and wet nose—so loyal and faithful you are!
Ooh! What a gory feline—this flesh-eating, prey-stalking panther—a regular threat to the human race!
And fish! How innocent and gentle you are! Swimming around lazily all day....

—Nicole, age 12, Usdan Center

I saw some water on
a puppy The puppy was
dead The puppy
was in the dirty lot
You are a little
girl I blow a kiss

—Pauline, age 8, PS 29

Guess What?

I looked
in my cousin's
secret book.
It was her
Diary.
She came
in her bedroom,
I closed the
diary fast.
She looked
at me real
strange
and asked
what
was I doing
with her Diary?
I was scared.
Then I said,
Don't worry.
I couldn't
read the
whole
secret.

—Michelle, age 10, PS 31

My Cat

I got a cat
and my cat
died.

God took my
cat. I am going to
beat him up.

You dead.

God said to my
cat
What's up, baby?

I said, What's
up God, you
want to fight me?

God said Yes.

—Albert, age 9, PS 31

My mother
kissed
my father

My cat
is under
the bed

My teacher
is shouting

My dog
had puppies

My friend
is sleeping

The flower
pot is under
the sun

—Aitza, age 9, PS 29

Annoying People

Annoying people comb their hair when it already looks good.
They drive their cars with jerks and short stops and purposely avoid bumps.
They go around singing off key.
They crack their gum during tests.
They always have ink marks on their faces.
Annoying people wear the wrong color lipstick.
They play louder than anyone else in the orchestra and play the wrong notes.
They complain all the time and their sneakers stay perfectly white for about two years.
Their clothes never match and their clothes always match.
Annoying people wear too much perfume and don't shave their legs.
They talk too much in class and suck up to teachers.
They always get high grades on tests and they say that it's not very good.
Annoying people's glasses always fall to the tip of their noses and they don't push them back up.
They waddle when they walk and they never mind their own business.
They wear too much blush.
Annoying people pretend they know how to smoke and don't inhale.
They button up their shirts to the top and then put up their collars. They wear bell bottoms and high heels.
Annoying people swim badly and recite TV commercials.
They stretch out the elastic in their socks.
Annoying people leave a light on when they go to sleep and call during dinner all the time.
Annoying people don't really know their ass from their elbow about a certain subject and then try and tell you what to do.
They speak slowly and whine.
Annoying people tell really bad jokes and then laugh at them. . . alone.

—Samantha, age 15, Usdan Center

A Stormy Night

It was a rain storm. It was raining hard, and I mean hard.
In the sky I saw a hand and a face and another hand
and a leg and another leg
and the body looked like God's.

I asked my mother if I could go outside.
She said, no, it's raining. I said, but. . .
But nothing. I ate my food
and went to bed.

—Kim, age 10, PS 31

There's a fight and she don't get out of there.
She is in danger and she don't get out of there.
They're going to kill her and she don't move from there.
Poor her. She is in danger.
A car is coming, she don't move.
An airplane is landing on the floor.
She don't move from there.
Well, she don't move from there
because nothing that is happening
ain't where she is.

—Magdalena, age 9, PS 31

A Vote of Confidence

by Achille Chavée

Life
The one-way virtue
of a woman who gives herself for free
who loses her name for good
and who survives by defending
the memory of her murderers

A madman predicts at random
and a hundred artists suddenly lucid
with fits of brand-new anger
destroy their so-called masterpieces
a madman predicts at random
and a hundred patient revolutionaries
go back to their touching work
a madman predicts a man goes by
with his very last chance
to find love at last
A madman demands truth
he postulates an upside-down universe
and eating a colorless flower
he follows the river going back upstream

The redistribution of land is taking place
bombs are exploding nearby
railroad tracks are no longer parallel
the imagination takes off at top speed
here everywhere elsewhere and at last
there is a potential dawn
for one and two and so many fervent men

Time is ticking away
is it the end of the whirl
truth in a muslin veil
or hopeless despair
coming back one more time
pushing back the room of the horizon
for another hundred hours
A character incognito
in the ever-present gathering
keeps himself carefully hidden from everyone
he drinks at a table with no glass on it
and in the middle of so many obscure notions
he sees the eagle carrying the lamb away

Time simply stands still
the forces of nature are being reduced
to an old laboratory joke
the trees shed their fake leaves
and buy themselves golden wigs
at the very moment when a simple man
sees his chance nesting
in the ear of a poor and beautiful woman
in the ear of a woman identical
to the one he had been waiting for all his life

ACHILLE CHAVÉE (1906-1969) was a Belgian poet and aphorist. For information about his works, write to Les Amis d'Achille Chavée, 83, rue Arthur-Warocqué, B-7100 La Louvière, Belgium. The selections in this issue, which we believe are the first in English, are translated from Chavée's *Oeuvre: Vol. 1* by NICOLE BALL.

Adventure comes into our lives
as if virginity could still
catch our ancient hearts
or the bird fleeing its nest

What can we do with adventure?
Tricks?
Pirouettes?
Puns?
Build houses of cards in the air?
ONE MUST BE DIGNIFIED
If I got angry
as I have in the past
if the sun did not rise
as was the case
love would still be possible
yes love love so sad
and we would have my certitude

The man very far away chases a woman
in one of those well-known landscapes
that we carry within us for life
and the snow is stained with a virgin's blood
and the snow is stained with our own blood
What is beauty after all this?
What is a patched-up solution now?
What is easy living now?
Believe me
a little less than nothing
a tunnel under the Channel to blow up London
a waste of time

While the scientist pulverizes a secret
and the wings of doubt breathe an ancient sigh
a poet goes to jail
or walks along a wall
or like the bear in my menagerie
makes them pay for his skin
before letting skinny hunters put it up
for sale

There is a surge of evil instincts
that want to take the floor
ascetism and its ascetic
with ears shaped like urinals
there is fortune
good and bad fortune
there is the revenge of destiny
so to speak
and all the perfect lies
and what under the system of exploitation
of man by man
is pointlessly called freedom
But also there are
fortunately undeniable
reflexes all the reflexes
of the drunken coachman I love
of fear which is a terrible force
of the light silently turning on
of the bomb laughing at the scapulars

Amid a hundred questions being begged
what is your rich head of hair doing?
What does the tempest do as it wonders where to go?
It is forgiven
because it is the very tempest
we had planted in our hearts
it is dreaming
it is dreaming about the avalanche of eternal snow
like the mother cutting her child's throat
in the light of the complexes' burning torch
but that touch of the magic wand
those festive graves
those hypotheses realities
let us reject them with terror
or on second thought no
in the realm of absolute values
which do not exist
let us reject nothing
let us not be love minus man

If we fire our last cartridge
if our lost heart feeds on leaves
our heart which has no other food
to put between its famished teeth
the necessary crimes
all the sacrifices accepted
hatched first in our solitude
will not remain a dead letter
because sunning sickness
our sickness rich in epidemics
this hot beam of the hallucinatory triangle
of dialectics
is the eighth
the last wonder of the world
the Danube peasant
burning with communism
who transmits his burning to us

Yes
your chance
the one they have fooled us with for so long
can go tear its hair out
it's had it
don't worry
the mother of the son of man
will never be pregnant again
and corrupt once more
the women we have loved
don't worry
our arms
furbished by our destiny
our hands our hearts
will not sign a four-power pact
don't worry
the cannibals will play chess
with the bones of colonial empires
don't worry
our dreams will be filmed
the eel will coil around the knife
sexual freedom will be guaranteed
love protected
and all the martyrs from A to Z
will be avenged

June 24, 1938

Poetry Ought to Be Made by Everyone

THE LONG POEM ABOVE, CALLED "A VOTE OF Confidence," was written around 10 P.M. on June 24, 1938. I wrote it in a span of real time hardly greater than what it would take anyone simply to copy it, and under conditions worth relating to those interested in the problem of poetic inspiration and the automatic writing of poetry.

I was, at the time, in a blocked state, for reasons I do not wish to analyze here; it had been going on for more than three months, during which I had been unable to write one single good line, despite repeated attempts, and—still worse—I had been utterly unable to put myself into a state of poetic inspiration.

It is in these circumstances that, on June 24, 1938, at approximately 10 P.M., as I was opening a file, I happened to fall—as if by chance—upon a long series of surrealist games I had practiced more than a month earlier on the evening of May 18 at a cafe called "The Wooden Leg"; it had been rather late at night and since the place was quite unusually empty, I had asked Raymond Dauphin, the owner, to play this game he had never heard of; he liked it immediately, and I thought it would be a good way to kill time while awaiting the arrival of a few friends.

Without any special kind of conscious goal in mind, I began to reread that long series of surrealist games which the reader will find in its entirety following this note.

I had read about ten questions and answers when I suddenly felt a compulsive urge to write and I started the above poem.

I wrote in this way, automatically, everything that came to my pen. When I finished writing, I resumed reading the games at the point I had left off. After another series of ten questions and answers, I took up my pen again under the conditions I have just described, and kept alternating between successive operations of quick reading and automatic writing, until I reached the end of my reading of the games, and until my pen stopped at last.

All this had lasted less than forty minutes.

At the time I paid no attention to this poem, which must be defined as an automatic text since the original draft has not been altered in the slightest.

Only later did I make up my mind to reveal, to the few friends to whom I had showed it, what mechanical device had triggered its birth. I did so because they agreed that the poem had poetic qualities which, in their opinion, were undeniable—poetic qualities I myself would hardly dare to be so positive about.

On my friends' advice (since the poetic value of this text is not irrelevant to the conclusions I want to draw from it) I'm going to take the liberty of talking freely about all this,

which I hope no one will hold against me.

But first, it is important to explain to those people who still don't know anything about it—and wrongly so—exactly what the surrealist game called Dialogue is. Let me say what the simplest of these games consists of: theoretically, one of the players writes down on a piece of paper any question that pops into his head, but keeps it hidden from the other player, who then gives an answer to the question he knows nothing about, in a similarly spontaneous fashion.

In the case that concerns us, one of the partners would, in order to avoid any possibility of cheating, write down, in record time, a series of five questions, and the other partner would answer in the same way. After each series of five questions and answers, we would check their content and immediately begin a new series.

An in-depth analysis of these games would no doubt provide much valuable information about the dialectical, unconscious movements that come to light in them.

At certain times, the parallelism, even the concordance of the questions and answers could lead us to believe that each partner sees into the psychic reality of the other, as if it were an open book.

But it is important to emphasize that surrealist games are authentic sources of irrefutable images. To quote André Breton's definition, the most powerful image of this kind is the image that reaches "the highest point of arbitrariness, the image that takes the longest to translate into practical language, either because it conceals an enormous dose of apparent contradiction, or because one of its terms is strangely missing, or because it first appears sensational but then seems to develop weakly (it abruptly closes the angle of its compass), or because it draws from itself a formal, uninteresting justification, or because it is of an hallucinatory order, or because it quite naturally gives a concrete mask to what is in fact abstraction, or because it implies the denial of some elementary physical property, or because it provokes laughter."

In this case, my unconscious took over a set of games that included surrealist images.

You can see how my unconscious simply rejected a certain number of questions and answers it could not or would not use; how some questions and answers got integrated into the poem without even the slightest change in their interrogative structure; how my unconscious appropriated, transformed, and developed certain passages for its own particular purposes.

You can also see that it showed no tendency to reject my partner's questions and answers in order to use only mine; on the contrary, what came out of my partner's rough thoughts became quite naturally its own.

I wish Raymond Dauphin had agreed to my request to at least attempt to write a poem under conditions he could have tried to render identical to those which happend to be there for me.

Since he would have composed it at my request, the poem he would have written would obviously have lacked an undeniable air of necessity. On the other hand, I think that it, too, would not have failed to illustrate the preceding observations.

What I want to show here is how poetic material—and this is true for any secret device responsible for the birth of any other kind of production—has been gathered through games that, when you look closely, are like an abridged version of what is commonly called a human experience; these games let filter through all of my recent preoccupations and locate them in the time contained in the harsh contact of other realities: my partner's preoccupations; and I want to show how this material has been subjected to a long unconscious gestation in order to suddenly appear completely transformed, developed, and mixed inside the automatic poem.

The surrealist method and discipline always seemed shallow to me, but I owe to them the ability to express myself often, regardless of any conscious esthetic or moral preoccupations. Because of that method and discipline, we have all of the poem's original elements, the exact circumstances in which they were assembled, the exact length of their gestation, the particular conditions of the poetic surge, and finally the result, which is the poem itself.

We have everything we need to undertake a good, serious analysis of a text's preconscious life—everything we normally lack.

And when you take a close look at the operations I went through, from the moment I began the games to the moment I wrote the last word of the poem, you can see that schematically they are the exact reproduction of the psychic process invariably involved in every kind of creation.

Isn't this an excellent illustration of how skilled the mind is in drawing—from the external reality it has induced—all the elements that will be likely to combine with its former internal reality so that the elaboration of our personal myth can continue?

"I is another—*Je est un autre*," said Rimbaud. To anyone whose individualistic deformation would cause him to want to separate out from the concrete entity of this poem that which he considers to be mine and that which he considers to be my partner's, we would have to say that his ambition is illegitimate and even impossible to realize; because at this moment, nothing yet in that poem can be considered my own for the simple reason that nothing belongs to anybody.

We are dealing here with one of the tangible manifestations in our minds of the law of universal interaction and interdependence, a law which some people do acknowledge but which a far greater number choose to reject because their acknowledgement would undermine and blow away their idealism, their mysticism, their subjectivism, and, consequently, what they take to be their nice little genius, their silly flirtation with the gods, the pointless vanity of their effort to pass down in history a name that history will not allow to be rescued from oblivion.

But it is not my concern here to indulge in invective of a kind that would make all noble hearts rejoice.

Let me repeat that everyone is in possession of poetic reality. How could it be otherwise, since every man retains enough imagination for us never to despair of his destiny—despite the attempts of so many enemies who plot his ruin and have an interest in keeping him enslaved.

The exteriorization of his poetic reality will depend on the power he uses to "stage" his imagination.

Surrealism wants to deal the last blow to the hundred-headed hydra of poetic slavery and intellectual betrayal by working for a takeover: everyone will take poetic power over himself; surrealism gives us the means to achieve that goal; it gives us the absolute reassurance that such an endeavor is not foolhardy by providing multiple devices that have been widely and successfully tested.

It is from the liberation of the poetic potential each man carries within himself—once revolution has similarly freed him from all exterior constraints—that the day can come when, according to Paul Eluard's prophecy, "Every man will show what the poet has seen."