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Saying What Can't Be Said

Three Startling Poetry Exercises

by Phillip DePoy

IF POETRY IS AN ATTEMPT TO SAY SOMEthing in words that can't be said in words, we must make a deliberate effort to break students of poetry from linear, normal thinking patterns. In order to write poetry, a student must first be escorted out of the frame of the classroom and into the formless ether of inspiration. Here are three particularly good exercises I've developed, along with examples of the resulting work by often reluctant, always surprised students.

Exercise 1

Exercise 1 consists mainly of telling the students to think of a question that has no answer. No question is, of course, wrong, then—but some questions ("How far is it from here to the next galaxy?") actually have possible answers. I encourage students to think of questions of deliberate nonsense ("How far is Up?"). When the students have all written an unanswerable question, I tell them to write an answer to the question. I assure them that, since the question doesn't have an answer, any answer is correct (the answer to "How far is Up?" could just as easily be "blue monkeys" as anything else). The question serves as the title of the poem, and the answer (at least four lines) becomes the body of the poem.

Aside from being tremendous fun, with no possibility of anyone's being wrong, this exercise has produced some remarkable work. Here are some examples from Rabun County, a mountain region of Georgia.

How Far Is Heaven

What does it look like,
what do angels wear?
Ballet clothes—
or suits of bright aluminum?
Do they have wings—
can they fly—
do they die,
bleeding thought?
—*Arlene Rice, 9th grade*

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Arlene had never read Emily Dickinson's "What is Paradise," but the ideas and the structures are similar. This is one type of response to the assignment: to answer an unanswerable question with more questions. The notion, however, that angels don't bleed blood but bleed thought is a transcendent idea that intrigued and delighted both the poet and her audience, exactly the feeling often elicited by good poems.

What Is in the Mind?

In the midst of the hollow,
something scratches as though it were the wind,
beating the door, tearing the soul.

Like a sealed box:
nothing may enter;
nothing may leave.

Like an empty skull
it pulls the sea.
—Rhonda Webb, 10th grade

On a somewhat darker note, Rhonda seems to be trying, in some meditative way, to answer the impossible query. This is a second kind of normative response to the exercise: sincere, often quite profound, introspection leading toward self-awareness or even enlightenment. When Rhonda read her work to the class, she read it as if someone else had written it, and even weeks afterward told me she was still thinking about it—and writing more poetry at home.

What Is Music, That We Should Hear?

A golden note struck
by a falling sphere,
or a window struck
by a shining tear.
The aching sound
between things torn,
or a single note
from a golden horn.
—Dawn Watson, 8th grade

A few students, such as Dawn, know they're in class to write a poem, and that's what they set out to do. These students scarcely need the encouragement of an exercise like this one, but they can use it as a tool to create great work. Every student writes at least something in response to this idea. Some responses are quite odd; many are hilarious, and all seem to succeed in cracking the student's shell, letting out the thing that flies.

Exercise 2

Exercise 2 basically asks the student to describe an impossible object: a one-sided coin, a book with no beginning or ending, a mirror made of the sky. Sometimes the objects are people: a woman with eyes made of the wind, a man who eats air—sometimes the objects are completely fanciful inventions: a machine that runs the sun, an envelope big enough to send the earth through the mail. Once again, of course, no response is "wrong," but a bucket with a hole in the bottom isn't as useful as a bucket full of angels.

Once an object is conceived, it becomes the title, and the description of the object is the body of the poem. As always, following the instructions to this exercise too closely could be detrimental to the poem. This is a basis, not a strict pattern.

An Apple of Air

I see an apple,
it's big and round.
I stared at the apple,
it fell on the ground.

Take it to my wooden chair.
How does it taste?
It's an apple of air!

I loved it so,
but now it's gone,
I felt it blow.

My apple of air
has turned into wind
and flown over there.
—Keri Oliver, 5th grade

Keri's poem is less a description of an impossible object than a description of the wonder the object inspires; in any case, she has invented an amazing image.

Often the student's response to the challenge of the exercise is to create an image out of juxtaposition, and the resulting images are striking and strange.

Shadow Stair

The shadow is rising,
the wolves climb the sky.
After the wind,
we knew it would come.
We no longer saw
the wings of eagles
in the east,
no longer heard
the whispering of the sea.
—Laura Lee, 9th grade

Laura was moved by the strangeness of her original concept. More a metaphorical image than an actual description, this work took her several weeks. The object (a stairway made of shadows) was appealing to her, but she wanted to wait until the mood of the rest of

the work was correct. The power of the poem was worth the wait.

Angels

Ghosts from the inside in,
a glow like the solemn beam of light
in a cave image of the mind.
I was not afraid,
I was filled with wonder.

They played a nameless song,
the song sang itself,
the last note was sorrow.

I began my way home
in the cold and black
on a blanket of snow
from the new-fallen tears.

It was a nameles song
that played itself,
welcome without answers.

These, my soul,
they might have been angels.
—Lee McClure, 11th grade

Personally, I'm stunned by this work, especially the last couplet. Some students choose impossible animate objects, objects that already exist in the literature of the unconscious: minotaurs, gnomes, angels. Lee has created a Wallace Stevens-like description of not only the look, but the content and even the aura of angels—no small feat.

Exercise 3

Exercise 3 is fundamentally the contemplation of infinity. It works best with sixth-grade students and older, but it's even been successful with second graders on occasion. An endeavor of this sort prompted Einstein to theorize curved space, Bertrand Russell to find useful mathematical concepts, and Schopenhauer to find God—not a bad day's work for a classroom assignment.

Students who are especially interested in science and mathematics seem to be prompted more by this exercise than any other exercise. The idea is to sit comfortably and merely imagine the infinite: sizeless size, endless space, eternal time. What can be visualized or imagined beyond the farthest reaches of the mind? The image of infinity is presented in the poem's title, and the description of the image is the poem.

Medial Eternity

Figures move silently,
space is the sunny world stepped outside.
Characters struggle to entertain.

Continually, characters tumble:

5—2—4—7—46—11

Freedom arrives, the dark shield,
travelling into the brighter world.

Electromagnetic forces pull
and steal away the light.

The slate is clean.
—Tracy Hogan, 11th grade

Tracy was a star student in mathematics and not really interested in writing poetry until this experience. She's now written a series of one hundred poems about mathematical concepts called *The Universe Explained.*

You Stand on the Bank of a River

You stand on the bank of a river.
The river runs perfectly straight
with no curves or angles.
Brilliant white light is reflected from the water,
but there is no sun in the sky.

There is a waterfall in the river,
25 feet down. It drops away
at a 90 degree angle
barely splashing at its base.

There are no animals, there are no plants,
and the only sound is the orderly splash
of the falling water.

All of this is enclosed in a metal box
a mile square
floating at the edge of an unknown galaxy.
—*Michael Dean, 11th grade*

Some students enjoy the experience of the journey beyond their ordinary conceptual framework; it's just great fun to travel. Once in the outer reaches, Michael realized that he was experiencing realities within realities, a particular kind of infinity. (The relationship between the product of this exercise and the "impossible object" exercise is apparent here.)

The White Albatross
I fall into the water of life.

The white albatross dips
into a blood-red sky.
Waves of comets star my sightless eyes
with visions of the past
flowing sideways.
—*Melissa Noblet, 11th grade*

Picking a mysterious image to solve the problem of describing the indescribable, Melissa has expressed an experience of standing outside herself to watch the flow of eternity. This poem embodies the aim of the exercise: to experience the indescribable, and then describe it in original language.

At heart then, these three exercises could be described as answering the impossible object, and contemplating infinity. If an aim of poetry is transcendence, then the first step toward it would seem to be a step away from the boundaries of conventional thought. These heady exercises are designed to usher or jolt the poet out of the desk and into the ether.

A TEXTBOOK CASE

by Nancy Kricorian

A WHILE AGO I WAS HIRED BY A TEXTBOOK company to do some freelance work finding poems for a series they were putting together. This was closer to my line than most of the summer jobs I end up doing, and they were going to pay me a reasonable sum per poem. I also liked the idea of choosing poems that thousands of kids would read.

The writing and planning team for each grade gave me a list of what they wanted. This ranged from rhymed poems about the city to tankas. The most unusual request was for a concrete poem that rhymed. I explained to the editor that concrete poems don't rhyme. She wanted me to write one because it fit their lesson plan, but I couldn't see any reason to teach kids to write a kind of poem no poet would write.

Other problems came up. For example, I was surprised when the writer for the fifth-grade level told me a Richard Brautigan poem I gave him was inappropriate. The poem was about a little boy playing Chinese checkers with an old woman, and I thought perhaps the mention of their cheating was bothersome. The writer explained that because of the discrepancy in age between the old woman and the little boy, kids would think the poem was about child molestation.

After I finished the project, feeling pleased at having fulfilled such particular demands, the head editor called me into his office to tell me that one-third of the poems I proposed were unacceptable. He gave me a twelve-page "editor's taboo list." I asked why he hadn't given me the list before I did the search; he said because I had taught poetry to kids he had assumed I had a sense of what was appropriate.

On the way home I read through the taboo list. It forbade the mention of ghosts, magic, religion, tobacco, cheating, sugar, and candy. Birthday cake, death, divorce, negative emotions, and religious holidays were to be avoided. In addition, there was a full-page acceptable foods list put out by the California State Department of Education: lentils, pumpkin seeds, pizza, and turtle meat were okay, while fried food, candy, and tea were not. Rather than cutting up pies to teach fractions, textbooks should use granola bars.

I never saw the final version of the textbook, but I can imagine kids in schools across the country by now are learning just how boring poetry can be.

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CHILDMADE

by Cynde Gregory

Once, a long time ago, when your grandparent's parents were children, fish had feet. Some fish had 4 feet, some fish had 5 feet, some fish had 6 feet, no fish had 7 feet, and some fish had 8 feet. The fish wore yellow, orange, and blue shoes made out of scales. When they walked they sounded like this: *tick-tick-tick.* They sounded like clocks. But there was a problem. There was one fish who did not wear yellow, orange, and blue shoes made out of scales. His feet were different. His feet were round. His shoes were like a horse's shoes. When he walked, he sounded like a brontosaurus walking. When he walked, he sounded like thunder. When he walked, the other fish got bounced up in the air and down again, up and down, and this made them angry. They wouldn't play with the brontosaurus fish, or talk to him. The brontosaurus fish became very sad. He was so sad he couldn't move, he couldn't even walk. He was afraid to walk because if he did, the other fish would bounce up into the air and down onto the ground, up and down. So he just stood there, and cried and cried. Then when he was done crying, he looked at the sky that was as blue as a bluebird. He didn't see the bluebird that flew out of the sky to talk to him, because the bluebird was as blue as the sky, and they looked alike. The bluebird said, "Don't cry, I will take you with me into the sky." So the fish flapped his feet and together they flew into the sky. The fish met the hawk, the robin redbreast, the owl, the sun, all the clouds, and the wind, and all of them said, "You are not a fish at all, you belong in the sky with us." So the brontosaurus fish, who wasn't a fish after all, flapped his feet and stayed in the sky forever.

—Chloe Dresser's preschool class

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THE ABOVE STORY WAS CREATED BY A group of preschool storytellers, the result of my first creative "writing" workshop with very young children. My friend Chloe had repeatedly invited me to visit her preschool class and "do your creative writing thing with them." I put her off, avoided her for weeks, said I'd think about it, and finally, with a great deal of trepidation, agreed. The kids, she told me, were four and five. There were twenty-two of them, and they were used to working in a big circle, as a group.

Panic. I had worked with first graders at the end of the school year on occasion, but preschool?

Before going to class, in order to decide upon the best course of action, I considered the information I had at hand about preschoolers:

Preschoolers have a short attention span.
Some preschoolers are bossy and take over.
Some preschoolers are shy and won't look at you.
Preschoolers will surprise you by what they say.
Preschoolers like to ask and answer questions.

I decided working in a big circle was the best plan. They were used to circles and knew how to follow circle rules. In a circle:

I would immediately sense when their group attention span was flagging.
Everyone would have the satisfaction of having created the story.
Bossy kids couldn't take over.
Shy kids wouldn't be pressured to speak, but would still feel themselves part of the creative group.
Their surprising and creative ideas would provide the story's essence.
I could exploit their natural curiosity and authority in the crafting of a story.

More on the making of this story later.

Asking Questions

By nature, group stories are organic. They have a lively spirit. A group story is created by the tribe working together, but it's more the sum total of the ideas and energy the individuals put into it. It's synergistic.

The story circle is composed of one leader and any number of kids. The leader has a primary role—to stimulate ideas through a series of directive questions; and a secondary role—to maintain an intense, concentrated group focus.

Your questions must be extremely spare. They are prompts only. If the question is rejected by the group, let it go. Just as the story itself is organic, growing naturally piece by piece, your prompt questions must be organic —what you sincerely want to know. If several children have several possible answers to a prompt question, listen carefully to each one. Sometimes a story is so hot and the group is so involved with its making that everyone has a zillion different ideas. Select carefully;

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each answer that you pick to stitch into the fabric of the story both deepens the story's overall pattern and leads toward the next event.

The questions you ask serve one of two purposes:

1. They move the story forward through time on a narrative track, involving cause and effect, surprise twists, or some other event. These questions are in the nature of "And then what happened?"
2. They channel the story into deeper, richer territory by asking for details of setting, character, or mood. These questions stop the story's temporal, logical movement and freeze all action in space while the group considers the finer points:
   Why was the mother angry at the monster?
   What kind of shoes did the kangaroo wear?
   What did the boy's treehouse look like?

It is essential that you, as leader, be open and ignorant. Begin with an opening idea, character, or setting. Nothing more. Don't offer a character in a place doing something; already they will realize it isn't their story but yours. And allow yourself to be pleasantly surprised rather than annoyed if the group refuses your opening in favor of one of their own making. Grab it. You can always use yours another day.

> I used to know a teeny tiny little girl. Do you know where she lived?

This possible opening offers a unique character to the children and also assumes that you share a collective body of knowledge, even if it is made up as you go along. The teeny tiny girl might suggest to one group a Thumbellina, a magical character who obviously lives in a fairy-tale world. To another group, the teeny tiny girl might simply be young or small for her age, a situation that becomes the basis for the story's problem.

Each question requires only one answer. If several kids have great ideas, listen to them and choose one quickly. Don't feel you have to go around the circle asking for twenty-two different answers to each question. Nothing will get made that way, and everyone will get bored and cranky, including you.

And remember, you are a member of the group, too.

Caution

Beware of leading too much with your questions. "Did" questions are absolutely out. They have only two answers—yes and no. And they don't do a thing to prompt the children's own creative thinking. The kids will either want to please you by assuring you that yes, the flower did go to school or they will tease you by rejecting your obviously loaded suggestion. Ask:

why • how • where • who • what

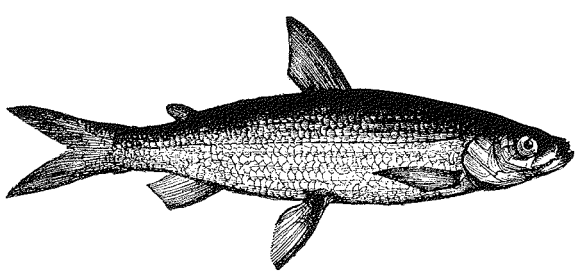
Rephrase the prompt question: *How* did the flower learn to read? Sure, "at school" is most likely answer, but the question phrased in this way allows for a surprising spontaneous eruption of unique ideas. Maybe the flower taught herself. How? By reading the backs of cereal boxes.

By slowing things down, examining the story for its real substance, you will help your children realize that good literature, whether it is in the oral tradition or written in a book, offers solid detail for the listener/reader to grab hold of and smell and taste and pet.

Analyzing the Process

The best way to explain how the story of the brontosaurus fish came about will be to transcribe the questions I asked and the answers the kids gave. Notice that after each accepted answer I repeated the story back to them, incorporating the new information into the growing body of the story.

Teacher: Once, a long time ago, when your grandparents' parents were children, fish had feet. What kind of feet did they have?
Students: Four!
Five!
Six!
[pause, grins]
Eight!
Teacher: No fish had seven feet?
Student: Nope. How would they walk?
Teacher: *Once, a long time ago, when your grandparents' parents were children, fish had feet. Some fish had 4 feet, some fish had 5 feet, some fish had 6 feet, no fish had 7 feet, and some fish had 8 feet.*
What did these fishes wear?
Student: Shoes, silly.
Teacher: Right, shoes. What kind?
Students: Colors.
Yellow ones.
Blue ones because of the ocean that fishes like.
Orange.



Teacher: They like colors. I never saw blue, yellow, and orange shoes for fishes. What were they made out of?

Students: Scales.

And when they walked, they sounded *tick-tick.*

Teacher: I've heard that sound before. What else goes *tick-tick*?

Students: Clock.

Yup. Sounds like clocks. And them too.

Teacher: [checking] The fish sounded like clocks?

Student: Yeah, when they walked. *Tick-tick.* [giggles]

Teacher: OK.

Once, a long time ago, when your grandparents' parents were children, fish had feet. Some fish had 4 feet, some fish had 5 feet, some fish had 6 feet, no fish had 7 feet, and some fish had 8 feet. The fish wore yellow, orange, and blue shoes made out of scales. When they walked they sounded like this: tick-tick-tick. They sounded like clocks.

But! [dramatic pause; I gasp; they gasp] But!

Student: One didn't.

Teacher: Huh? One what? Didn't what?

Student: One fish didn't wear those shoes. Those scales on his feet.

[long silence; thinking]

Teacher: Why?

Students: Different kinds of feet.

Round ones.

Teacher: Hmmm. Fish with round feet. Hmmmm.

Students: Oh! Hey, listen to me! They were round like a horse foot.

No, they were round like something else; it's my answer.

No, they were! He wore horse's shoes and when he walked he sounded like brontosaurus walking.

When he walked he sounded like thunder!

Teacher: Wow. What happened when he walked?

Students: [long pause] Nothing.

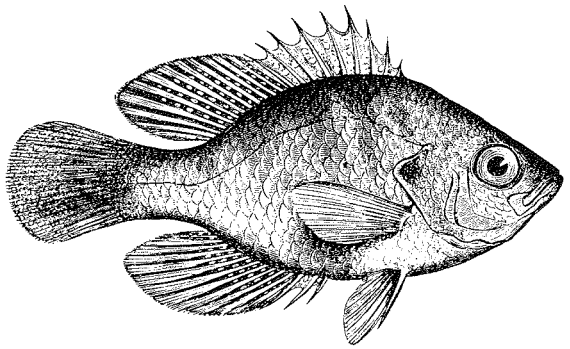
I don't know.

My mommy picks me up after school every day.

Shutup, stupid. [long pause]

Teacher: Close your eyes. Can you see the round-footed fish who walks like a big, heavy brontosaurus? He sounds like thunder. *Boooomm! Booommm!*

Student: *Booooom!* Gaaaa! I'm getting bounced in the air. And falling down again.



Teacher: *When he walked, the other fish got bounced up in the air and down again, up and down, and this made them, made them...*

Students: Furious. Angry. *Grrrrr.*

They said go away, we won't play.

Teacher: [long face; sigh; I move to the middle of the circle and stand uncertainly] And he was so sad he...

Students: Couldn't even walk.

Cause if he did walk, boy oh boy. Up and down again.

He cried.

Just stood there and looked up at the sky.

Teacher: *The brontosaurus fish became very sad. He was so sad he couldn't move, he couldn't even walk. He was afraid to walk because if he did, the other fish would bounce up into the air and down onto the ground, up and down. So he just stood there, and cried. Then when he was done crying, he looked at the sky.*

[I stop to catch my breath]

Students: Blue sky.

Bluebird sky. [giggles]

Teacher: *Looked at the sky that was as blue as a bluebird.*

Student: Then a bluebird did come.

Teacher: How blue was the bluebird?

Students: Blue.

A bird.

Blue.

The sky is blue and the bluebird too, the same thing.

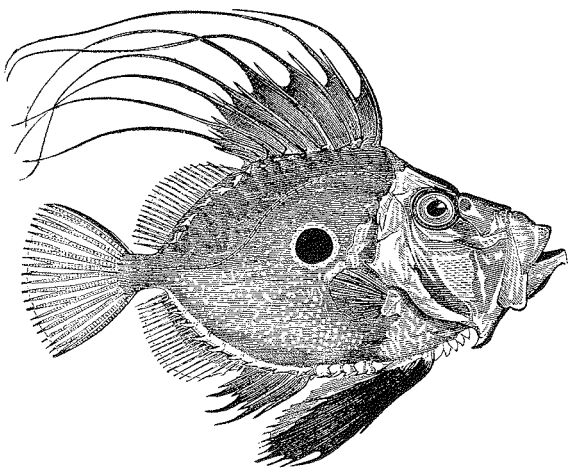
Oh! [frantic waving of arms; kid is so excited she topples over]

The blue sky has the bluebird inside but you, I mean the fish, doesn't see the blue bird right away because it...it...

Disappears into the blue.

Right. What's the word? Paint does it.

Teacher: Blends in?
Student: Yeah.
Teacher: *Then when he was done crying, he looked at the sky that was as blue as a bluebird. He didn't see the bluebird that flew out of the sky to talk to him, because the bluebird was as blue as the sky and they looked alike.*
Yes? Next? You're doing great.
Students: Bird talks.
Ohhhhhh, don't cry. I'll take you up.
Teacher: How?
Student: Flapped his feet.



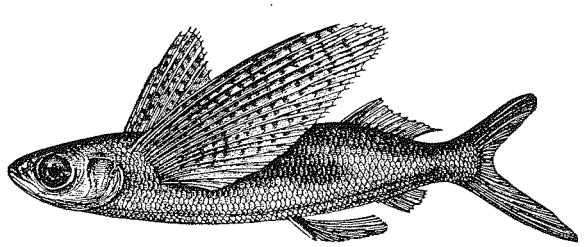
Teacher: *The bluebird said, "Don't cry; I will take you with me into the sky." So the fish flapped his feet and together they flew into the sky.*
Students: You know what? I saw a hawk once.
I saw a owl.
I saw a robin reddress.
Teacher: Who else lives in the sky?
Students: Sun.
Windy windy windy.
Cotton clouds.
White clouds.
Toilet paper. [nasty, delighted giggles]
Teacher: *The fish met the hawk, the robin redbreast, the owl, the sun, all the clouds, and the wind, and all of them....*
Students: I'm hungry.
Said hi!
Teacher: Hi? That's it? Hi and bye?
Students: Hi! Wanna live with me?
Hey! You're a fish.
Hey! You're not a fish. More like a bird.
Teacher: *said, you are not a fish at all, you belong in the sky with us. So the brontosaurus fish, who wasn't a fish at all, flapped his feet and stayed in the sky forever.*

Kindergartners naturally speak in snatches of phrase or single words. Story circles have a focused, intense energy, and you'll find as you work with your group that they sometimes begin a statement only to drop back and let someone else finish it. Keep track of what's happening in the group to be sure no one is getting shouted down or bullied, but don't coax a child who has begun a statement and then loses the energy for it or can't find a word. Everyone will be there as much as they can be; accept it and love them for it. The story made by a group is a lot like a crazy quilt; you add things as you come upon them in the sewing box.

Stop frequently and repeat the information to them. They may make you go back to an earlier point in the story and change it. Remember that they are in charge; you are just the secretary. You have to make the jump for them sometimes ("I'm getting bounced up in the air!"—the speaker here isn't a kid anymore, she's a footed fish, and she assumes I know it). If you aren't sure you understood something that was said, ask again. Beware of interpreting too much. You are there only to act as the speaker out of whose mouth come the ideas from the group-brain. You cannot take over, only repeat.

Strut Your Style

While I caution you against too much teacherly interference in the making of the story, I do not want to inhibit you as a stylist. You are receiving answers, on a good day, from your entire class. These answers will be choppy—single words sometimes, partial phrases sometimes. What you are seeking from the children are ideas, glimmers of creation. Your job, in addition to editing (i.e., choosing what goes in, what stays out) and prompting, is to provide the linguistic texture of the story. You provide the voice of the storyteller. You phrase ideas and link them together, repeat phrases, draw out a section of the story, or couch it in a particular cadence. The way you do this will be the difference between a story that is stuffed with potential (from their great ideas) but fails due to incomplete execution, and one whose potential is realized.



OUT OF A RUT

by Carol F. Peck & Joanne Lastort

ABOUT TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY THROUGH the the semester—or a writing workshop—students sometimes find themselves in a rut—all their poems seem to sound alike. They need exercises to help them change their perspectives. Below are some exercises I have used.

Style Copying

For this exercise, students choose professsional poems written in a style very different from their own. For example, a student who usually writes short poems with two- or three-word lines might choose ten to twenty lines of Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" or of Thomas' "Fern Hill"; conversely, the student who usually writes in long, loose lines might choose one of Emily Dickinson's poems with short, packed lines. I urge students who normally write rhymed, accentual-syllabic poems to select a poem in free verse, and vice versa. The next step is to analyze, word by word, the grammatical structure of the example (the easiest way is just to write "noun," "verb," "adjective, " etc. above each word). Then the student writes a new poem, following that structure but using all new words—*not* synonyms—for the example poem's words. The result is often a "breakthrough" poem—an experience in writing in a whole new style just to see how it feels. For years I avoided this exercise because it sounded too gimmicky, but it has proven valuable to many students, including those in my occasional prose-writing classes (one earnest young man was unable to break out of the stilted "governmentese" in his fiction until he imitated a Langston Hughes paragraph and finally caught the music and rhythm of a master's prose).

World in a Word

For this poem, the student chooses a word that has numerous definitions, quotations, and expressions associated with it (it works best if it functions as several parts of speech). The word provides the poem's unity; the many associations provide the variety; and the student's challenge is to weave it all together into an effective progression.

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Match

All the news to tell in Paris,
Cricket, tennis, polo,
But don't play with it,
It can make your home disappear
(and Smokey the Bear will tell you
what it does to forests).
Still, with your own true love
You can make such a perfect one
Or have a maker strike the
perfect catch.
A box of cars for little boys,
Sticks making ships that
never sail,
Books with no pages
(but you'll always know where
you've been).
A child's hand cautiously turns
The card over to find it.
The flame burns stealthily towards us,
Intending to kill, yet,
Like Anderson's little girl,
We see our salvation, our hopes
Dance before us for a second
Before it turns black, useless,
Consumed by the rough kiss
of its mate.
—Laura Thoms, 12th grade

Some words that work especially well are: *spring, hand, eye, finger, light, fence, foot, boot, ring, fast, table, chair, count, court, run, walk, cover, lie, program*, and *head.*

Borrowers Afield

For this poem, the student borrows a vocabulary from a totally "unpoetic" field, such as chemistry or calculus, as did John Donne in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." Part of the idea is to explore possibilities of metaphor and pun in those words. For example:

Triangle

The triangle is the first
And most primitive shape
To evolve,
Crawling out of the sea of lines
To first walk the fruited planes;
It has evolved more
Than any other shape,
Having nothing better to do
While watching its more
Complex relatives
Move in their higher circles.
—11th grader

Beat Biology

Phyl 'em
Xyl 'em
Phlo 'em
But Win!
Go Ecosystem!
—11th grader

I suspect that other vocabularies that would lead to good poetic results are those from music, art, automotive and wood shops, and athletics.

Although I have used these exercises confidently for several years, I have often wondered how students felt about them. So I asked a fellow poet—a former student—to comment. And Joanne Lastort not only commented but went on to show me intriguing variations on my original ideas.

THE POET/STUDENT SPEAKS
by Joanne Lastort

I have often felt very frustrated by coming up with a total blank during an intensive writing workshop. Time there is so limited I hate to waste a minute of it. Fortunately, I've been tricked into writing again by such deceptively simple exercises as described above. Furthermore, I've not only found poetry with the exercises but have gone beyond into variations and new directions. Here are a few.

Definition Variation

From the "world in a word" exercise, I moved into the greater challenge of choosing just *one word* from each definition for a word and assembling them all into a poem, one word per line (unless you need more for emphasis). In this poem, progression is the name of the game: how much can you suggest about a situation or a relationship through the words alone?

Chain

Measurement
Connect
Link
Ornament
Fasten
Support, secure
Protect
Bind
Restrain
Fetter

Break
—J.L.

Crossword Clues

Working along those same lines, I discovered poems in crossword puzzle clues. At first I combined them any way that seemed to make a poem. Then I moved into the greater challenge of alternating "Across" clues with "Down" clues, or using only clues with even numbers (or only odd), or using only the first twenty consecutive "Across" (or "Down") clues, etc. I even have fun playing with titles for such poems: "Crossword Crosses," "Cross Currents," "Cross Connections," "Crosswinds," "Crosses to Bare," etc.

Sass
Once more
Fixe
Point yielded
Mended hose
Swears
Prank.
—J.L.

Sub
Beauty
Roof
edges
Dark beer
Kinsman on
mother's side
Dancer
Shearer
Angry
Certain exam
acronym
In the manner
of
Exclamation
of contempt.
—J.L.

Specialized Vocabulary

The limited vocabulary exercise doesn't have to be limited to academic fields. Any familiar activity—cooking, boating, baseball, even housework—will work as long as it has a specific, recognizable vocabulary. Traffic signs and weather lend themselves to this exercise.

Privileges

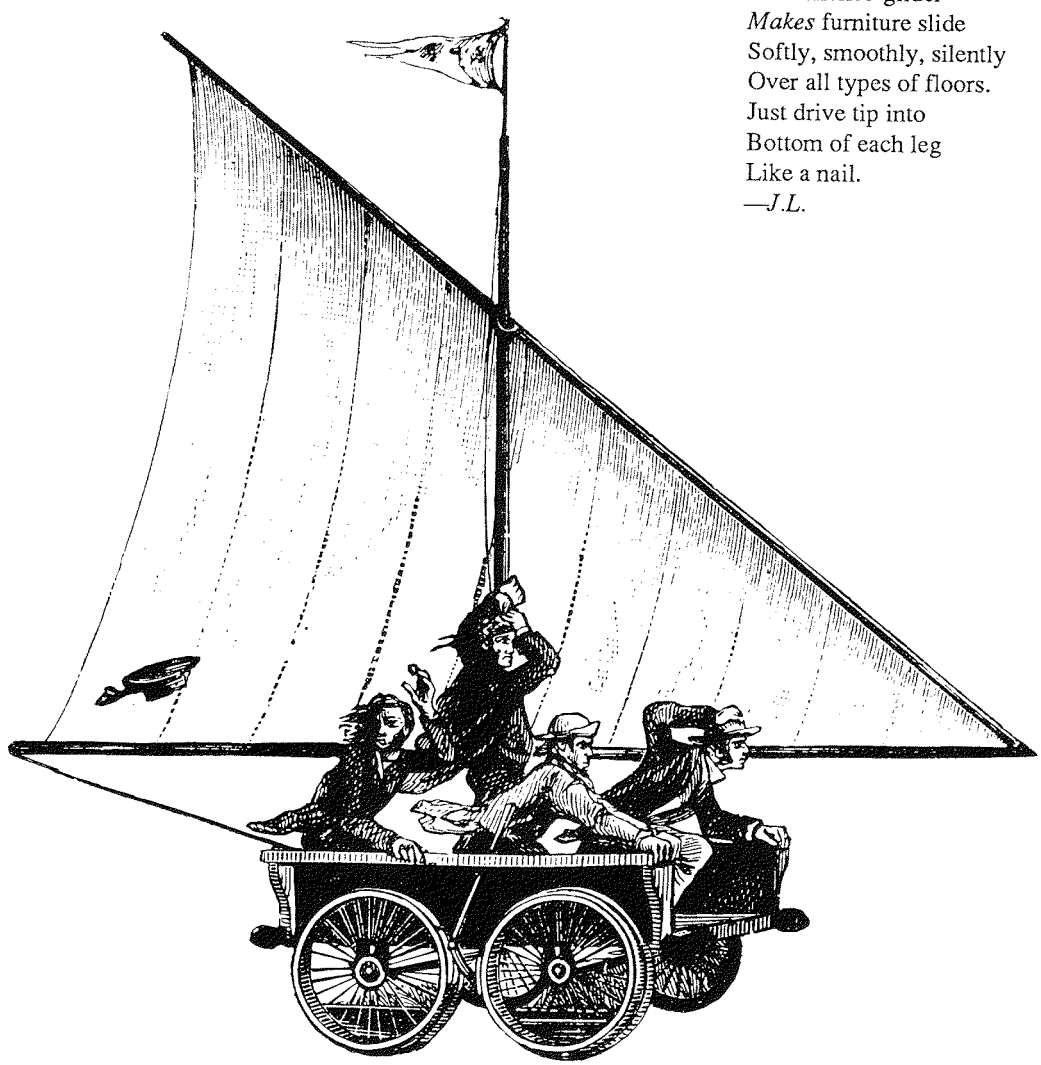
Danger
Curves ahead
Vision impaired
Crossing double lines
Speeding recklessly
Down soft shoulders
Slippery when wet
Under the influence
Onto back roads
Passing on a curve
Hidden entrance
Failing to stop
At a signal
License suspended.
—J.L.

Forecast

Cold snap
Turned bitter
Temperatures below normal
Precipitation above normal
Mostly cloudy tonight
Chance of rain
Chilling to snow
Winds variable
Air quality poor
Temperatures falling
Absolute zero.
—*J.L.*

Stimulators Abound

I did not consciously look for these new interpretations of old exercises—they found me. My advice to anyone with writer's block is just to relax and look for poetry stimulators in the "boring, mundane" aspects of life, like the traffic you're stuck in, the crossword puzzle you read every morning, the weather you live with, and even your junk mail. My final examples come from a food service and housewares catalogue:



Tomato Shark

Do your tomatoes
Stare
Every time you open
The refrigerator door?
Now, new, nasty
Aquarian solution
Take out
The eyes of tomatoes
Quick and easy
Salesman will show you
Keep vegetables
In their places
Tomato shark!
—*J.L.*

Silence-Glider

Plagued by
Noisy furniture?
Clacking chairs
Tittering tables
Stomping sofas
Bellicose beds
Dancing desks?
New silence-glider
Makes furniture slide
Softly, smoothly, silently
Over all types of floors.
Just drive tip into
Bottom of each leg
Like a nail.
—*J.L.*