

# Poetry Lesson Plans

## For Elementary, Middle, and High School Students

"Exploring our own Amazement: Learning the Language of Poetry" Conference  
for Educators and Writers

March 28, 2015

The following lesson plans are adapted from school and community workshops led by RCAH Center for Poetry staff. Multiple online resources, and the creative ideas of Center for Poetry staff and visiting writers, contributed to the development of these plans. We've attempted to cite our sources as completely as possible, and welcome your own adaptations of the activities.

### **The Rider**

By Naomi Shihab Nye

A boy told me  
if he roller-skated fast enough  
his loneliness couldn't catch up to him,

the best reason I ever heard  
for trying to become a champion.

What I wonder tonight,  
pedaling hard down King William Street  
is if it translates to bicycles.

A victory! To leave your loneliness  
panting behind you on some street corner  
while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,  
pink petals that have never felt loneliness,  
no matter how slowly they fell.

(From Poetry 180: <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/165.html>)

## Elementary School

These activities came from a workshop led for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders at Whitehills Elementary School.

Goals: For students to enjoy and explore their own creativity, and think about the craft and process of writing poetry.

### Materials:

- Children's poetry picture book
- Free paint sample cards from a hardware store
- Collection of various objects
- Red Wheelbarrow poem text written as individual words on sheets of paper
- Students: notebooks and pens/pencils (for Seed Poem activity)

### Warm-Ups for Thinking Imaginatively: (10 min)

- Pass out paint sample cards, and have students invent new color names – old-tennis-shoe-gray, dried-out-leaf-brown, sunset, etc.
- Hold up an object (crumpled paper, mug, marble, shawl, etc.) and have students describe it (a mountain, rain, the world, an eye, a planet, etc.) What if the objects are moved around? (i.e., roll the marble, shake the shawl)

Use this warm-up to discuss simile and metaphor.

Simile: a comparison stating that something is *like* or *as* something else.

Metaphor: a comparison stating that something *is* something else.

### Red Wheelbarrow:

Bring the words of the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” written individually on large sheets of paper. Pass out one to each student or pair, and have them move around to build the poem by standing in the order they want the words to go in. Discuss where they think lines should break, and why certain words go together. At the end, read the original text and talk about how they used the same building blocks to create their own unique poem.

The Red Wheelbarrow  
By William Carlos Williams

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white  
chickens.

Activity suggested by Anita Skeen.

Poem text: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/red-wheelbarrow>

**Read Aloud:**

A children’s poetry picture book. Some great books for this age group are:

*As the Crow Flies*, by Sheila Keenan and illustrated by Kevin Duggan

*Mice*, by Rose Fyleman and illustrated by Lois Ehlert

*Ten Little Rabbits*, by Virginia Grossman and Sylvia Long

*The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, by John Scieszka and Lane Smith

*This is a Poem that Heals a Fish*, by Jean-Pierre Simeon and illustrated by Olivier Tallec

*Revolting Rhymes*, by Roald Dahl and illustrated by Quentin Blake

**Collaborative Writing: Seed Poem Activity (25 min)**

Collaborative writing means writing together and sharing our ideas.

Make circles of 5 or 6. Write your name on the back of your paper.

Write one word at the top of your paper – this will be your “seed” for the poem.

Examples: Family, Pets, Friends, Basketball, Halloween.

Write the first line of your poem.

Example: Halloween

Our jack-o-lantern kept watch on the porch all night...

When I call “Time,” pass your poem to the person to your right. They read over what you’ve written, then add a line or more to your poem. When I call “Time” next, pass your notebook to the right again. We’ll keep going until the poems make a full circle.

When you get your original paper back, you can add a final line to complete your poem before sharing it. First, volunteers read their seed poem aloud to the class; then everyone has a chance to share in pairs.

\*Since students this age may have trouble deciphering each others’ handwriting, you may need to help or ask the writer what they meant.

**Additional Resource:**

We have a Powerpoint presentation available that was used to teach a general creative writing lesson in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom. It will be available on the RCAH Center for Poetry website.

## **More Activities for Elementary School**

The following activity plans were made for a creative writing club led at Edgewood Village for 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders, as well as visits to Red Cedar Elementary School.

### Imagery and Found Poems

Materials: magazines and newspapers, construction paper, scissors, glue

Found Poem Activity: 45 minutes.

- Discuss the importance of imagery, and using all five senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, touch – to help the reader place themselves in your poem.
- Show an example found poem: a poem made of text and images cut from magazines or newspapers.
- Try to include both words and images.
- Clip out whatever strikes your interest, then decide how to arrange and glue the words and images down.
- Keep passing the magazines around: can tell them to trade magazines every 5-10 minutes.

Place the finished poems out on the table, so everyone can walk around and see them. Comment on what we like about the poems. Discuss where we find ideas and inspiration for our writing.

### Exploring Narrative Poetry

Materials: Humans of New York photograph prints (kids/teens of various ages, genders, races.)

Writing Character through Photos: (25 min.)

- Explain that a narrative poem is a poem that tells a story. A useful example to share is “The Rider” by Naomi Shihab Nye (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/165.html>)
- Spread out the photos, let each person choose one, and play some quiet music.
- Kids take 10 minutes to write individually about the person in their photo. Use “I” and try to capture how the person might tell their story.
- They read the poem aloud as their character.
- Group gives comments: What details did we like best in each person’s story? What did they tell us about the character in the photograph?

### Ekphrastic Poetry

Ekphrastic poetry describes a visual image or work of art. In this activity, we’ll use photos and music for inspiration. (Paintings or drawings could also be used.)

Choose two different photographs from National Geographic’s online Photo of The Day galleries. Project them one at a time for everyone to see, and give five to ten minutes for free writing. Suggest some elements they could write about.

Example: Sunset on the Grand Canal

(<http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photo-of-the-day/venice-sunset-canal-gondolier/>)

- Write anything you can think of about this photograph. Does it remind you of anything from your own life? You can write about what you see in the photo. You could pretend to be the person in the boat. Where do they live, where are they going, what are they thinking about? Or pretend you are watching them; have you met them before? What are you doing at the water?

Don't worry too much about the form of your poem; let the writing flow out naturally.

If they are stuck, suggest starting with "I am..."

During the free write, play some instrumental music. Two pieces that work well (available on YouTube) are:

- Sunrise Song – Native American Flute Music – Ronald Roybal
- Cape Breton Fiddle: The Rankin Family – The Limehill Set

Have volunteers read their poetry to the class. Use the examples of how everyone has written differently about the same photograph to describe how every writer has a different voice (your personality, what makes your writing unique) and perspective (way of looking at things).

### List Poems

Have students make a list of things, people and places they love. Give additional topics for lists such as animals, holidays, hobbies, foods. They can write a poem about anything on their list, or turn the list itself into a poem.

### Shape Poems

Teach students about shape poetry, which involves starting with a shape and using it to build a poem. Some examples include haiku, diamantes and acrostics. Help them think about using content and form together to build a compelling poem.

### "I Am" poem

Have students write an "I am" poem. The beginning of each line is already written, and students fill in specific categories to express who they are.

Activity sheet available online:

[http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson391/I-am-poem.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson391/I-am-poem.pdf)

Poetry teaching tips for new teachers: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/poetry-teaching-tips-new-teachers-lisa-dabbs>

## **Middle School**

The following activities came from a poetry assembly led for 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders at the Lansing STEM Academy. It could be run as an assembly or a class lesson. The main goal is for enjoyment: for students to feel inspired and excited to write their own poems.

### **Presentation Outline:**

1. “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou
  - Speak about the power of poetry
2. “Mindful” by Mary Oliver
  - Activity One: Detective Focus Team and review of poetic tools
3. “The Field Behind the Dying Father’s House” by Linda Nemece Foster
  - Activity Two: Personify!
4. Slam and Spoken Word Poetry
  - Activity Three: Collaborative Poem

### **“Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou**

Play this video of a high school student performing Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise.” Ask students to pay attention to how they feel as they listen to the poem.

Video: Sabrina Walker recites “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou

- (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnBVgzp7P3I>)

Project a slide with the text from “Still I Rise.”

- Available through Academy of American Poets:  
<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/still-i-rise>

Ask the class, “How did you feel listening to this poem? What was powerful?” Explain what you think is powerful about the poem. Some talking points might be:

Describes the experience of rising above challenges, being comfortable with yourself and who you are, not being conquered by prejudice, and refusing to give in to people who try to attack.

Angelou uses detailed imagery: figurative language and strong specific details that appeal to the reader’s senses. For example, here you can see images of the rising dust, and the wide ocean with the tide coming in. Imagery gives your reader a new way of looking at things.

Something else you may have noticed about “Still I Rise” is that Angelou uses the first person point of view. Point of view means the perspective the poem is told from. First person point of view means narration from the perspective of “I” or “We.” The narrator participates in what’s happening in the poem.

## The Power of Poetry

Ask the group, “What do you think is special about poetry?” Discuss the power of poetry, and why poetry is important and unique from other forms of writing.

Several quotes about poetry:

Jonathan Galassi: “Our real poems are already in us and all we can do is dig.”

James Carter: “We should be using poetry as a vehicle to tell stories – real or imagined – to explore the world and the world of ideas, to express our emotions, to shock, delight, fascinate, enlighten, educate, empathize and intrigue.”

### Detective Focus Team: “Mindful” by Mary Oliver

Read aloud the poem “Mindful” by Mary Oliver, which is especially rich in poetic devices. Explain that after this poem, you’ll need volunteers for a Detective Focus Team, so everyone should remember their thoughts as they listen.

Project a slide with the text of the poem.

- Available online through Best Poems:  
[http://www.best-poems.net/mary\\_oliver/mindful.html](http://www.best-poems.net/mary_oliver/mindful.html)

#### **Mindful** *By Mary Oliver*

Every day  
I see or hear  
something  
that more or less  
kills me  
with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle  
  
in the haystack  
of light.  
It was what I was born for—  
to look, to listen,  
  
to lose myself  
inside this soft world—  
to instruct myself  
over and over  
  
in joy,  
and acclamation.  
Nor am I talking

about the exceptional,  
the fearful, the dreadful,  
the very extravagant—  
but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.  
Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself,  
how can you help

but grow wise  
with such teachings  
as these—  
the untrimmable light

of the world,  
the ocean's shine,  
the prayers that are made  
out of grass?

Ask for volunteers for a Detective Focus Team to help talk about the poem and find poetic tools that are used.

What is the heart of this poem? What emotions does the author feel?

What things in the world make you feel this way?

How does the author use language in her poem to make us feel her meaning?

Now we're going to be detectives. What poetic tools can you find in this poem? (Write poetic devices on the blackboard/easel as they think of them, and have them point out where in the poem each is used. Let them suggest devices first, then bring up whatever they miss):

- **Simile** – comparison stating one thing is like another: “leaves me like a needle”
- **Metaphor** – comparison stating that something IS something else; using one thing to designate another: “in the haystack of light”
- **Hyperbole** – exaggeration to create a strong impression or emphasize a point: “More or less kills me.”
- **Rhyme** – “delight/light.” She only uses one rhyme in this poem; what effect do you think it adds?
- **Alliteration** – repetition of consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words: ‘To look, to listen, to lose myself’
- **Assonance** – repetition of a vowel sound: ‘that leaves me like a needle’.
- **Point of View** – First Person

Good job, detectives! Poetry is not just mechanical; these poetic tools should enhance the meaning and emotional effect of the poem.

## Personification

Point of view relates to another poetic tool, personification. When a poet uses personification, he describes an abstraction, a thing, or a nonhuman form as if it were a person.

Read an example of a personification poem; both are available online:

- Linda Nemece Foster's "The Field Behind the Dying Father's House"
- Pablo Neruda's XLIX from *The Book of Questions*

In a personification poem, you become the thing you are writing about. A voice other than the poet tells the entire poem. You write from the perspective of something that is not a person, using "I" or "We," and giving human qualities like speech.

Janine Vega says, "When we speak for something in nature, we take on the personality of that thing and speak with its voice." Choose something you like and can identify with. You can say you're anything, but to be believable, you have to get into character, just like in a play.

### "Personify!" Challenge

Now we need six new volunteers who feel confident with improvising and thinking on their feet, for our magical "Personify!" challenge. (Call six students up front, and put them in two teams of three students each.) Your teams are going to take turns practicing personification with a special challenge. Remember that in a personification poem, you're writing from the perspective of something that is not a person. In each turn, the first person will give the name of a non-human thing. The second person will say something that is happening. The third person will say something in that non-human narrator's voice. For example:

- First person: A teakettle
- Second person: Boiling on the stove
- Third person: I've always wanted to sing opera but I never got very good at it. I don't think the cook likes it either because she turns me off every time I get a good high note going.

Now it's your turn to personify. (Alternate between groups, giving each group 3 turns. Help the narrator person out, and encourage teammates to help them out, if they're stuck.) Let's clap for our Personify magicians!

### Slam/Spoken Word and Collaborative Poem Activity

Spoken word, or slam poetry, are two ways many poets write about issues that are important to them. Share an example video:

- Andrea Gibson, Sarah Kay, and Taylor Mali all have wonderful pieces online.

Let's take the passion and energy of the slam poets as inspiration. We're going to write a collaborative poem together from scratch, right now, to pull together everything we've learned about today. I'd like to have 8 new volunteers who can come give us ideas. (Give volunteers

either the blackboard or a large piece of paper to work with. As they work, type what they come up with onto a slide, so the whole audience can see. Let the volunteers suggest what to write.)

- First, let's think of a topic we really care about. What topic should our poem be about?
- What do you think about this topic or issue? What do we want the reader to understand?
- Whose voice can we speak from? Do we want to try personification?
- Can someone think of a good first line? Some more details?"
- Who has a simile or metaphor? What about a rhyme?"
- Do we have assonance? Alliteration? Is there a place for humor in our poem?
- Do we have a powerful conclusion? What about a title?
- Is there anything we should add or take out?

Have one of the students read the poem aloud to the audience, and celebrate the group's authorship. End the lesson with a question period.

### **Erasure Poems**

Activity adapted by Debbi Brody. Materials: Magazines, sturdy paper in 12 X 12 sheets, glue, scissors, black markers

- Flip through the magazines until you find an article that appeals to you. Choosing a topic you're unfamiliar with may lead to exciting possibilities.
- Tear out an entire page of the article. Skim over it with a black marker, crossing out words and phrases that don't particularly interest you, and leaving the ones that do. Don't worry too much about how they fit together.
- If desired, copy over the remaining words and phrases to a fresh sheet of paper, preserving their original layout on the page. Credit the original article and author by writing down the source.
- Collage magazine cutouts into the background of the poem. It works well to choose a common color that you think fits with the emotional theme of your poem.

### **Guided Freewrite: collecting material for a poem**

List:

- your favorite colors
- your favorite time of day
- your favorite sound
- anything that you collect
- a few things you love to do
- someone you care about
- a memory you have with that person
- something you'd like to say to them
- a place that's meaningful to you
- things you do there
- what you can see there

## Poetry Workshop

Note: The following is one example of how to lead a small-group workshop to help middle- or high-schoolers revise their poems.

10 minute “Getting into character” write to get ideas flowing:

You are going to get into character as the speaker of your poem. Write whatever comes to you in response to these prompts.

- What does the speaker of your poem want or hope for?
- What do they fear?
- What is their favorite: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch?
- What does your character’s voice sound like? Who are they speaking to?

Workshop: Arrange chairs in circle. Have students read their poems aloud one by one.

Explain: The goal of a workshop is to support the writer by helping them make their piece of writing the best it can be. We consider a work in progress and offer specific ideas, feedback, and questions.

Because of the trust involved in workshoping, we owe each author honesty and kindness. Honesty means we should be as specific as possible about what we like and what we think could be improved. Kindness means we are encouraging and respectful of the writer, and try to be helpful in our comments.

As a workshop leader, keep the conversation going, but let students comment first. The writer should mostly listen and write down ideas, then ask questions at the end.

- Opening: each comment on a strength of the poem that has stuck with you. This can be a specific point or detail.
- What were the most interesting parts, and what really rang true to you?
- What is the poem about and what is it trying to do? Is anything unclear?
- What’s the heart, or most important part, of the poem?
- What does this poem need to be more powerful and captivating? Was there any point where you didn’t feel connected to the poem? Could anything be improved or changed? Some things to consider are character, voice/perspective, imagery and detail, structure.
- Is there anything you’re curious, as a reader, to hear more about?

‘Sharpening’ activities:

Great first lines and powerful endings.

- Consider how you can pull the reader in right away with a ‘hook’, and leave them at the end of the poem with a powerful image that will stay with them.

Line editing: “Zoom in” to consider your poem line by line, including line breaks.

- Poetry is about the specificity of images and words. Looking at your poem line by line helps you decide if there is anything you want to take out or change.

## High School Workshops

Note: the following workshops can be adapted for either high school students or adults. Many were designed for events led at Edgewood Village. It works well to bring a variety of traditional and contemporary poems as examples, and the workshops will be enriched if participants are invited in advance to bring their own favorite poems relating to the theme.

## Poems of Place: Homes, Journeys and Maps

Materials: Paper, pens, markers and colored pencils. Printouts of these example poems:

- “Grand Central” by Billy Collins
- “So This is Nebraska” by Ted Kooser
- “The Two Fires” by Margaret Atwood
- “Up-Hill” by Christina Rossetti

\*All these poems are available online except “The Two Fires,” which is included here.

Introduction: Around the circle say names and where we are from.

Read aloud and discuss poems that participants and I have brought.

- What do you especially connect with in each poem?

Discuss what “home” and “journey” mean to us:

- Home may change throughout someone’s lifetime.
- Journeys can be tangible in terms of miles on a map, or can be more emotional in terms of personal growth.
- Quote: “Where we come from, where we live now, the particular places that are ours, help to define us, and influence and inform our poetry” – *The Poet’s Companion*, by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux.

Guided writing warm-up:

- List some places that have been significant to you throughout your life.
- List some important trips or journeys you have been on.
- Write about the place you consider home at this time.
- Write about your favorite place you’ve visited.
- Write about a journey that was hard for you to take.

Writing activity:

Choose one of these places and write a poem that shows us what it means to you. Bring us there by using strong sensory details in your writing (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch.) Feel free to accompany it with a sketch or drawing.

Share!

# The Two Fires

By Margaret Atwood, from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

One, the summer fire  
outside: the trees melting, returning  
to their first red elements  
on all sides, cutting me off  
from escape or the saving  
lake

I sat in the house, raised up  
between that shapeless raging  
and my sleeping children  
a charm: concentrate on  
form, geometry, the human  
architecture of the house, square  
closed doors, proved roofbeams,  
the logic of windows

(the children could not be wakened:  
in their calm dreaming  
the trees were straight and still  
had branches and were green)

The other, the winter  
fire inside: the protective roof  
shrivelling overhead, the rafters  
incandescent, all those corners  
and straight lines flaming, the carefully-  
made structure  
prisoning us in a cage of blazing  
bars

the children  
were awake and crying;  
I wrapped them, carried them  
outside into the snow.  
Then I tried to rescue  
what was left of their scorched dream  
about the house: blankets,  
warm clothes, the singed furniture

of safety cast away with them  
in a white chaos

Two fires in-  
formed me,

(each refuge fails  
us; each danger  
becomes a haven)

left charred marks  
now around which I  
try to grow

## Narrative Poetry and PostSecret workshop

Bring a few of the following narrative poems to discuss: What's powerful to you about each character and their story? Discuss plot, conflict, resolution. What makes great storytelling? Sensory details!

- "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" by Louise Erdrich
- "Pinup" by Billy Collins
- "Olive Jar" by Naomi Shihab Nye
- "A Votive Light" by Jane Taylor
- "Monet Refuses the Operation" by Lisel Mueller
- "Domestic Work, 1937" by Natasha Trethewey

\*All these poems are available online except "A Votive Light," which is included here.

Writing exercise: Telling Life Stories

List:

- A favorite memory
- A story you like to tell people
- An event in your life when you were very sad.
- An event in your life when you were overjoyed.
- An event in your life when you were terrified.
- A time you had a conflict with someone you cared about.
- Something in your life you are proud of.
- An important journey or trip you took.
- An experience where you did something new for the first time.

Now, write a poem about whatever's most exciting to you from your list. Remember to give us details that convey your experience.

You can also draw narrative prompts from the "Story Sparks" list, attached.

PostSecret (bring blank postcards and craft supplies)

- Discuss the original PostSecret project and show the book:  
*PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives* by Frank Warren
- Decorate and write a postcard with something you are most proud of from your life.
- Suggest displaying the cards in the school or meeting space.

## STORY SPARKS

Great ideas to draw from for narrative poems!

Contributed by Robin Nott

- A TIME YOU MOVED IN YOUR LIFE
- A GREAT SADNESS IN YOUR LIFE
- A GREAT JOY IN YOUR LIFE
- AN IMPORTANT FRIEND
- A HERO TO YOU
- A GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENT
- A DREAM OF YOURS
- AN ANIMAL YOU LOVE
- A SPOOKY OCCURRENCE
- A VACATION STORY
- A STORY FROM YOUR WORK or SCHOOL
- A TIME OF DISCOVERY
- AN IMPORTANT LESSON YOU LEARNED
- AN INTERESTING PLACE YOU'VE BEEN
- A TIME OF GREAT CHANGE FOR YOU
- A GRANDPARENT STORY
- A PRIZED POSSESSION
- A FISHING OR OUTDOORS STORY
- A BIG MISTAKE OR FAILURE
- A LOVE STORY
- A TIME THE WEATHER SCARED OR INSPIRED YOU
- A TIME YOU SURPRISED YOURSELF, OR OTHERS
- THE GREATEST RISK YOU HAVE TAKEN
- A WISH THAT CAME TRUE
- A MAGICAL PLACE OR EVENT
- A DREAM YOU ARE PURSUING
- YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY

### **The Secret Formula (Donald Davis)**

1. My world as normal (before)
2. My world explodes (positive/negative change)
3. My world is changed (transforms)

-from *Telling Your Own Stories* by Donald Davis.

## Indian Boarding School: The Runaways

BY LOUISE ERDRICH

Home's the place we head for in our sleep.  
Boxcars stumbling north in dreams  
don't wait for us. We catch them on the run.  
The rails, old lacerations that we love,  
shoot parallel across the face and break  
just under Turtle Mountains. Riding scars  
you can't get lost. Home is the place they cross.

The lame guard strikes a match and makes the dark  
less tolerant. We watch through cracks in boards  
as the land starts rolling, rolling till it hurts  
to be here, cold in regulation clothes.  
We know the sheriff's waiting at midrun  
to take us back. His car is dumb and warm.  
The highway doesn't rock, it only hums  
like a wing of long insults. The worn-down welts  
of ancient punishments lead back and forth.

All runaways wear dresses, long green ones,  
the color you would think shame was. We scrub  
the sidewalks down because it's shameful work.  
Our brushes cut the stone in watered arcs  
and in the soak frail outlines shiver clear  
a moment, things us kids pressed on the dark  
face before it hardened, pale, remembering  
delicate old injuries, the spines of names and leaves.

## My Father Writes a Poem for my Mother

By Anita Skeen

*When you write about your mother passing,  
he says to me from beside her bed where he has spent  
the night, and I know you will, be sure to say  
last night it rained, that the rain she asked about  
each day played for her on the moonsoaked river  
and that, in the early hours, the birds  
lit up the sky with song and the bush out front,  
the bleeding heart, which all winter sagged  
so sick and scraggly, opened out this morning,  
the green leaves licked by tongues of rain,  
the little hearts lined up like get-well cards  
on her dresser scarf, and that out back,  
there on the east side of the house,  
where the bud has been so small  
and tight, the amaryllis burst this morning  
into bloom, and that it's raining  
still, it's raining still.*

## A Votive Light

By Jane Taylor, from *The Lady Victory*

It's wise to say goodbyes early  
in case you go at night, Sister  
required to wheel you out, red  
lights every corner  
all the aching way to Mercy  
and your back breaking cold  
sweat against the plastic seat.  
The station wagon hits all  
the 23<sup>rd</sup> street pot holes. Jesus.  
You don't want to pray  
now after all this time  
but once the nurse slips  
the needle in you float  
like a votive candle, hot  
flickers of pain expanding  
into a holy blow torch  
flaming, and you rise  
above it by the intercession  
of the Victory Lady, you  
view the blasted schism  
from a moon of your own  
making, a place so far  
removed no one will ever  
hear your small goodbyes.

# Poems of Interaction: Our Relationships

## Improvising: Ten-Word Poem Activity:

Here we experiment with words to create a picture. The first two words plus the last three “equal” the last five.

- Examples:

gray sky  
rain buckets spilled  
when will the sun return

tiny cat  
kitchen coffee cup  
chocolate colored spilled milk footprints

- In partners, create several of these. Don’t think too much; all ideas are good. Share with the group.

(Activity source: <http://www.pyeglobal.org/2013/04/27/games-for-workshops-ten-poems/>)

## Discussion:

Read aloud and discuss a few of the following poems, along with any that participants have brought. Discussion questions follow.

- “Red Brocade” by Naomi Shihab Nye
- “My Father Writes a Poem for my Mother” by Anita Skeen
- “Alive Together” by Lisel Mueller
- “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes” and “Litany,” both by Billy Collins
- “Nude Interrogation” by Yusef Komunyakaa

\*All poems are available online except for Anita Skeen’s, which is included in this booklet.

## Writing Prompt:

Think of someone from your life about whom you feel strongly.

- Examples: a friend, an enemy, a partner, a family member, a lover, a stranger, a hero, a teacher.

## Brainstorm:

- List some personality attributes of that person.
- List some physical descriptions of them.
- List how you feel when you’re around them.
- List some memories you’ve shared, things you do together.
- List anything you’d like to tell them.

Now, using some of the ideas you’ve listed, write a poem about that person. The poem can be in any form and doesn’t have to rhyme. Afterward, anyone who wants to can share their poem with the group. Comment on things we like best about the poem.

## Discussion Questions

### Red Brocade

- What do you think of the line, “That’s the armor everyone put on to pretend they had a purpose in the world”? Do you recognize ways you or others put on “armor” in everyday life?
- How do we usually treat strangers in our culture? Do you think the poem argues for a better alternative?

### My Father Writes a Poem for my Mother

- How does the author give us a sense of the family’s closeness?
- What’s the emotional atmosphere of the poem?
- What images do you connect with most?
- Why do you think “it’s raining still” repeats at the end?

### Alive Together

- Why do you think the poem includes so many possible “lives”? Are there any you find most interesting?
- What do you think is the relationship of the two people in the line “I am alive together with you”?
- Do you like the switch, in the end, to a list of what life offers? (“together with marvels and follies...”)

### Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes

- How do you feel about the poet’s exploring his relationship with someone he’s never met?
- What does the last line mean to you? (“life is a loaded gun that looks right at you with a yellow eye”)

### Litany

- How would you use an image to describe yourself?
- How does it feel to be addressed directly as “you,” the reader? Does it make the poem feel more intimate?

### Nude Interrogation

- What effect does juxtaposing direct, spoken questions with imagery have on the reader?
- How do you think it affects the speaker to reveal his secret?
- How has the author created a sense of urgency?

## Haiku Hike

This outdoor activity can be done with any age group. We originally ran it as a seminar at the MSU Science Festival.

Haiku “focuses on an instant in nature”. In a haiku moment: “the writer has an insight into a natural object that can be expressed in about 12-17 syllables.”

### Plan

1. Brief lesson/overview of haiku, including examples. Explain structure and how to write a haiku. Can hand out individual haiku on index cards and have participants read them aloud.
2. Nature walk, for inspiration and jotting down haiku. Activities along the way and opportunities to pause and write.
3. Return and share writing, and impressions of the walk.

### Haiku Overview (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5782>)

Traditional Japanese form of poetry. 3 lines, 17 syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count. But, this is not a rigid rule.

Began in 13<sup>th</sup> century as the opening phase of renga, a syllabic oral poem generally 100 stanzas long! Haiku broke away from renga in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was mastered by Matsuo Basho. Greatest traditional haiku poets include Basho, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, and Masaoka Shiki.

Classic haiku by Basho:      An old pond!  
   A frog jumps in—  
   the sound of water.

Often focusing on images from nature, haiku emphasizes simplicity, intensity, and directness of expression.

Traditionally written in present tense, focused on associations between images. Pivot word or turning point introduces an insight or shock of awareness.

May involve *Kigo*, a defined word or phrase that symbolizes the season of the poem, such as cherry blossoms in the spring.

As the form has evolved, many rules, including the 5/7/5 syllable count, have been routinely broken. “However, the philosophy of haiku has been preserved: the focus on a brief moment in time; a use of provocative, colorful images; an ability to be read in one breath; and a sense of sudden enlightenment and illumination.”

Juxtaposed (contrasted) images, and brevity, are powerful in haiku. Haiku influenced modern poet Ezra Pound, who wrote, “The image itself is speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.” This influence is evident in his poem, “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

### **More Activities:**

#### Elementary:

Haiku relies on rhythm. Practice clapping out syllables of words, phrases, and example haiku.

Find a small object (stone, leaf, etc.) that triggers your imagination to use as a writing prompt.

Use a chart to explore all five senses in haiku – at each stop on the hike, collect observations about sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Combine poetry with art: illustrate haiku (could have brushes and watercolors available)

Haiku scavenger hunt – could use haikus as clues, or search along a path for hidden haiku.

Postcard Haiku activity (Anita Skeen):

- From a box of post cards, each student chooses a post card that speaks to him or her in some way and sees a "story" in that post card.
- Go around the room and have each student say why he or she chose the post card.
- Have the students write a paragraph about the post card (tell them no one will see this writing exercise but them).
- Then, have the students "translate" that paragraph into a haiku poem for the back of the post card (this is assuming they know what a haiku poem is. If not, that lesson would have to be taught before the "translation" occurs).
- Finally, tell the students they can share their poems by mailing them to someone.

#### Middle/high school:

Haiku developed from *renga*, a longer form of cooperative poetry composition. In partners or small groups, write a cooperative poem. If in partners, each person could write a haiku, then switch and have each partner write one in reply inspired by the first. This could be inspired by Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*: first person writes a question in haiku, and the next answers.

In small groups, each person could add a haiku verse to make one longer poem. Each person starts with a haiku on their own paper, then pass in a circle until everyone has added and the poem is back with its starting person.

Create "found haiku" by clipping words or phrases from a magazine and gluing them down. Or, collect objects, or Smartphone pictures of sights that strike you, and build haiku around them.

An online resource: "Thoughts on teaching and learning haiku" (Jeannie Martin)

<http://www.hsa-haiku.org/EducationalResources/Workshop-Four-Sessions.pdf>

## **Additional Resources:**

Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools (Library of Congress):  
<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine, provides information on poems and poets: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

Poets.org: <http://www.poets.org/>

A Suggested Four-Week Unit of Study in Poetry: Grades 3-5: <http://www.pdflibrary.org/pdf/a-suggested-four-week-unit-of-study-in-poetry-grades-3-5.html>

A collection of videos featuring poets reading their work: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>

New York City Department of Education provides educator resources, including lesson plans for poets, a list of anthologies, and tips for families interested in poetry: <http://schools.nyc.gov>

Poetry.com allows writers to post and get reviews of their work: <http://www.poetry.com/>

PoemHunter.com has information on poems and poets: <http://www.poemhunter.com/>

Power Poetry has poetry tips and resources for teenagers: <http://www.powerpoetry.org/actions/6-tips-writing-love-poem>

Detailed Lessons for Writing Poetry:

[http://curriculum.austinisd.org/la/elem/5th/documents/LA\\_WTG\\_DetailedPoetryLessons\\_5thGr\\_1112.pdf](http://curriculum.austinisd.org/la/elem/5th/documents/LA_WTG_DetailedPoetryLessons_5thGr_1112.pdf)

Kenn Nesbitt's Poetry for kids has poems, games, videos, contests, and other resources geared toward children and poetry: <http://www.poetry4kids.com/>

The Poetry Toolkit: foolproof recipes for teaching poetry in the classroom:  
<http://www.thepoetrytrust.org/images/uploads/pdfs/Toolkit%20for%20Teachers.pdf>

Favorite Poem Project: <http://www.favoritepoem.org/>

Kids' creative writing club ideas: [http://www.goodreads.com/author\\_blog\\_posts/3764858-kids-creative-writing-club-ideas](http://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/3764858-kids-creative-writing-club-ideas)

Seton Hill University's tips for writing poetry: <http://jerz.setonhill.edu>

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Iowa's tips for writing poetry: <http://clas.uiowa.edu>

Poetry Tactic Montage – “Twenty Little Poetry Projects” by Jim Simmerman (attached)