

A GUIDE FOR STUDENT POETS

THE ROAR ON THE OTHER SIDE

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Contents

Introduction	11
1 Sight Training.	17
2 Real Toads	23
3 Metaphors Be With You	33
4 White Whales and Swimming Hats	43
5 Musical Thought	53
6 Anatomy Lessons	63
7 A Few Formalities: Sonnet, Haiku, and Syllabic Verse	71
8 More Formalities	81
9 Genres	99
10 “Sing Darker”: Matters of Voice	113
11 Writing, Reading, and Revising	119
12 Gathering of Poems	135
<i>Teacher’s Annex</i>	163
<i>Glossary</i>	169
<i>Author/Poet Index</i>	181
<i>Poem Index</i>	183
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	187



Introduction

Poetry starts with silence—not silence in the world but silence of mind.

To write you must learn quiet. This is hard, because the world we live in is loud. There is the noise of TV, traffic, sirens, telephones, dishwashers, barking dogs, lawn mowers. You get in a car and the radio is automatically blaring. At the mall, you shop to the stampede of rock. “We will make the whole universe a noise,” boasted Screwtape in C. S. Lewis’s classic work, *The Screwtape Letters*. “The melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end.”

Our Creator asks us to “Be still and know that I am God.” Not many people practice being still. Even young children today seem to have sprouted headphones. If we cultivate the art of inner quiet and develop habits to nurture the mind’s green fields, we will hear the melodies of Heaven.

Noise, of course, is not a bad thing. Loud noise is thrilling: sirens, fireworks, band music, semi-trucks, thunder, stadium cheers, avalanches. But stillness needs a larger room than most of us give it. By making decisions to read a good book instead of watching TV or take a walk instead of playing a video game, you are enlarging this room. Writing poetry will add floor space and a skylight.

God made our minds to love Him. We do this by first coming to the cross of Christ for salvation, where, as the hymn says, “sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.” We love God with our minds by being renewed through His Word and thinking about excellent, lovely, wholesome things. Did you know that when you study birds (ornithology), bugs (entomology), words (etymology), the human body (anatomy), and just about any “-ology” you can think of, you are loving Him? “The works of the Lord are great, studied by all who have pleasure in them,” wrote the psalmist. We love God with our mind when we admire smoothness, strangeness, structure, intricacy, fragrance, complexion, motion. “Glory be to God for dappled things,” exclaimed the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins.

So then, noticing what God has made is important. In noticing, we name. Thus Adam became the first poet. He named every striped, spotted, winged, webbed, slow, swift creature. He was creative. When you think of words to perfectly name what you feel and see and hear, you are also creating. Noticing and naming are the subjects of chapters one and two.

Using metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech (language that can’t be taken literally) adds even more delight, as when Emily Dickinson describes a sunrise: “I’ll tell you how the sun rose/A ribbon at a time./The steeples swam in amethyst/The news like squirrels ran.” In chapter three, you’ll learn about metaphorming, the art of seeing similarities.

Here’s how Daniel Marion, a prominent poet from Tennessee, describes his favorite barbecue place:

Song for Wood’s Barbeque Shack
in McKenzie, Tennessee

Here in mid-winter let us begin
to lift our voices in the pine woods:

O sing praise to the pig
 who in the season of first frost
 gave his tender hams and succulent shoulders
 to our appetite:
 praise to the hickory embers
 for the sweetest smoke
 a man is ever to smell,
 its incense a savor
 of time bone deep:
 praise for Colonel Wood and all his workers
 in the dark hours who keep watch
 in this turning of the flesh
 to the delight of our taste:
 praise to the sauce—vinegar, pepper, and tomato—
 sprinkled for the tang of second fire:
 Praise we say now for mudwallow, hog grunt and
 pig squeal,
 snorkle snout ringing bubbles of swill in the trough,
 each slurp a sloppy vowel of hunger,
 jowl and hock, fatback and sowbelly, root dirt and pure
 piggishness of sow, boar, and barrow.

One thing that makes this poem so much fun is the delectable sounds the author selects: “snorkle snout ringing bubbles . . . sloppy vowel of hunger”—take your pick! In this book you will learn about sounds in poetry, and rhythm too. Consider the rhythms of these lines by John Donne: “Batter my heart, three-person’d God; for you/As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.” In the poem, God is pictured as a tinker (one who sells and repairs pots and pans) who has to do a lot of pounding and hammering to make the subject of the poem, a sinner, yield to His grace. Notice how the rhythm advances the meaning. We feel the glancing blows through Donne’s skillful use of monosyllabic words: knock, breathe, shine, seek. Sound and rhythm are the subjects of chapters four and five.

Chapters six through eight consider such things as sonnets and stanzas, white space and planned freefalls—

what we call form. Chapter nine covers types of poems, or genres; chapter ten, voice and diction. Chapter eleven offers practical advice for reading, writing, and revising poems. It also encourages young writers to seek recognition of their work. We'll discuss manuscript preparation, researching poetry markets and contests, and the nuts and bolts of submitting material.

Finally, the book includes a section called "Gathering of Poems" followed by a series of exercises and writing projects in addition to those included in the text under the heading "Stepping Stones." There is also a glossary of literary terms.

To use this book successfully, you'll need some basic equipment. Most important is the journal. Buy an attractive, bound book with lined paper. The ideal size is 8½ by 11 inches, but a midsized one will do. All of your writing will go in this journal: lists, word-play, free-writing, and other activities and exercises assigned in the book. Don't worry about neatness and perfect sentences. A typical free-writing entry may simply be a series of phrases, as in this passage I wrote in response to the word shower: *Rain and melting hair streams and storms, quick tattoos and drenching rinsing nailing singing water.*

The other equipment you'll need is a computer or typewriter and a colored folder with pockets to keep your poems in. All poems should be typed. Plan on revising your poems many times, for the writing process is one of re-vising, which means "re-seeing." See what words need to be cut, what images added, what lines rearranged. At the end of the course, you will want to choose some to send to contests and magazines that publish poetry written by young people. As I said earlier, it is important to seek audiences. Just as words are a gift from God, I believe the skillful poet has gifts for readers. Thinking about publishing your writing helps you develop and improve. Even

rejection slips—inevitable and so disheartening—play a role in toughening and training.

Finally, because all writers are apprentices, it is important to study the masters, past and present: Shakespeare, Dante, Dickinson, Dillard, Frost. Contemporary poetry is a mixed bag, so be sure to seek parental guidance in your selections. Generous helpings of sumptuous poetry by masters are included throughout the book with hopes you will pursue these authors and read their works in entirety. One thing this book does not do is evaluate poems in terms of the underlying worldview. Other books explore that dimension. I have also included writings of my own gifted students, gathered over the years.

And now, to the fields . . .



1. Sight Training

At the beach one summer, my family and I came across a most curious young man making his way along the shore, a sun-bronzed, wind-blown man with bulging pockets. We greeted him and asked what he was collecting. He sputtered some sounds, then opened his mouth and began removing what looked like small black stones from his inner cheeks.

Once he could speak, he told us he was collecting fossils, that the beach was full of them. I said I had tried to find sharks' teeth for years but never once had spotted one. He began to point out various types of fossils he had collected: bat ray plates, sharks' teeth, vertebrae. I was astounded. He took us to his car, opened the trunk, and showed off his sea horde. "Here's what you look for," he said. "The fossils are shiny black, blacker than any other object on the beach. And they won't break, as shells will."

Since then, I have sat myself down beside many a shell-studded sand mound and plucked out sharks' teeth by the dozens. The young man had taught me how to see. Henry James, the American novelist, gave advice worth following: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost." A well-trained eye sees the world in particulars. I've learned to spot squawroot, kestrels, and, in deference

to my son, Dodge Vipers. (But I still haven't found any arrowheads.)

You are learning to write poetry. You must learn to see.

Stepping Stones

Orange You Glad

» Go to the grocery store with your mind in a canvas state ready for paint. Bring your journal along. Visit the produce section and note names, colors, shapes, textures of vegetables and fruits. When you get home, catalogue in your journal everything you saw. Then choose five or six items that caught your eye and record what you thought and felt in the presence of bananas, kiwis, lettuce, onions, plums, etc. Include details that appeal to the senses.

Please look with me at an orange I'm about to peel.

It's big as a softball, with thick, bright, fake-looking skin. I dig in my thumbnail like a spade and begin to loosen and tear the hide, exposing a white webbing, a kind of packing material. A tang fine as seaspray scents the air. The globe is seamed and perfectly sectioned. I break the threads to release each segment, fat as a wineskin, and slide one into my mouth. The juice was bottled in Heaven, I am certain. As I eat, it drips from my fingers and lips, lavish and miraculous, until I eat it all, leaving a film of sweetness like gold leaf on my face.

It should be obvious this passage does more than mechanically describe an orange or the act of eating an orange. What else is intended? Write a paragraph discussing the words and the meanings arising from them.

Now you choose a piece of fruit to eat (not an orange). Write a journal entry of your own, describing the experience. Use sensory details and words full of suggestion.

Nature Sleuth

» Buy or check out from the library a field guide to rocks, birds, fossils, moths, pond animals, wildflowers—

whatever interests you in God's wide world so you can name it. For instance, you could identify the various trees in your backyard by consulting the Audubon field guide with its lovely full-color photographs.

Consider yourself a sleuth solving a puzzle. The clues are details that help you classify your object—in the case of a tree: bark, leaves, height, flowers. Record the date, a written description, and a drawing. Use the field guide to help you label your discoveries. If you want to confirm the accuracy of your identification, make an appointment to visit a professor at a local college who is an expert in your subject area. Take your specimens and journal to show him.

Write down freely all the thoughts and feelings that come to you as you examine your specimen. You might consider the object in its natural setting. Don't worry about writing complete sentences or having a topic sentence. Let impressions flow in words, phrases, fragments, sentences, lines of a poem. Follow the trail.

Here's an example:

Holly Tree

Leaves scratch on glass trying to get in. Shiny and sharp
as cat claws. Berries like drops of blood. Tree attracts
cedar waxwings who arrive yearly on a fixed April day
to devour the berries left over from Christmas. Their
constant diving and swooping knocks off the old,
yellowing leaves to make way for new. In winter, the
tree leans with heavy snow but never breaks. It is part
of the house, sturdy survivor. An evergreen feast for
birds and eyes.

There is more to seeing than observing details, which is what scientists do to gather information. They look to see what is there in order to make factual statements or predictions. But the poet's lens is more like a prism than a telescope; more like a kaleidoscope than a microscope. For the poet takes bare fact and clothes it with meaning. The poet hears the roar on the other side of silence. The poet sees the world in a grain of sand, men as trees walking,

and the ocean as a whale-road.¹ He sees with feeling and finds words for his wonder or rage. Blinded by traitors and exiled from home, old Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear* says, "I see it [the world] feelingly."

Poets choose words that are rich in CONNOTATION, a term that refers to emotional associations of language. (DENOTATION is the literal, dictionary meaning of a word.) Another way to say this is that some words are resonant, vibrating like musical sound and carrying meanings that go beyond the literal. To call a dandelion a weed is to condemn it. But a wildflower—now that's a thing of beauty. Jungle or rainforest, wetland or swamp: it's all a matter of perspective. A house in need of repair is a dump and an eyesore to people in the neighborhood, but to the realtor running an ad in the paper, it's "a bargain, a real fixer-upper."

In his poem "The Chimney Sweeper," William Blake wanted to protest the cruel treatment suffered by young boys in the eighteenth century who were sometimes sold for labor by their impoverished parents. The speaker of the poem is a lad who was sold at a young age to a master sweeper. He tries to comfort the newest recruit, a child named Tom Dacre:

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved; so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for, when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

The second line with its reference to a lamb's back offers a good example of connotation. What is suggested by *lamb*? If you have a baby brother or sister, you know how soft and fine is the hair that curls at the nape of the neck. The tenderness and innocence of a very young child is implied.

¹ These are quotations from a variety of sources, including George Eliot, William Blake, the Bible, and *Beowulf*.

Stepping Stones

Word Vibes

» Write down the different connotations of the words in each group.

- charger Clydesdale nag
- fat obese voluptuous pleasingly plump
- genius nerd bookish
- city slicker ghetto rat homeless person

» Now think of words with different shades of meaning to go with the nouns below:

- country boy
- dog
- homely
- unusual

How to See

» Find a copy of Annie Dillard's book, *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Read the chapter called "Sight" and write an essay identifying the different ways of seeing she describes.