

In Praise of the Unlikely

(Contributed by Jane Hirshfield)

Praise poetry is almost ubiquitous in world literature. Another trajectory of poetry over time has been the inclusion of an ever-broadening field of what can be brought into the complicating, expanding vision of the lyric. This writing experiment (I prefer offering an “experiment” to the more dutiful “exercise”) combines these two variables in a way completely accessible to beginning writers, yet still interesting to the more experienced.

First, without any preface, ask the participating writers to make a series of lists. Be inventive with these—have them write down some colors, some sounds, animals, abstractions, flavors, household objects, places... Make one of these lists “some things you can’t imagine writing a poem about.” You might give some examples—a cockroach, the scent of an armpit left on a coat. (You will want, as you’ll see in a moment, to find your own examples.)

When the lists are complete, reveal the instructions: to write a poem that is about one of the things on the list of things they had thought outside the reach of poetry; to find some good in that thing; and to include in the poem as well at least one thing from each of the other lists. (This last instruction encourages expansiveness of imagination and also grounds the poem in the senses, objects, etc.)

Next—important to the success of the experiment—you will want to prime the writers with some different examples. Muriel Rukeyser’s “Saint Roach” is a poem I like to use, available at: <http://www.bio.umass.edu/biology/kunkel/rukeyser.html>

(This is a particularly nice web site for looking up this poem because it is in a Biology Dept site, with links to more than you ever thought you would want to know about cockroaches.)

Another rich source for model poems is Pablo Neruda’s odes—“Ode to a Dead Fish in the Market,” for instance. Yannis Ritsos’s “Remembrance” is a work much less in the mode or spirit of an ode, but it is remarkable for its successful use of armpit odor in a lyric. You will probably want to find your own examples, poems you can feel entirely enthusiastic about presenting as examples of the different ways and spirits in which this experiment can be undertaken.

It’s good to offer a variety of approaches in the model poems, so that the participating writers will feel many choices are open—the parallel structures of one poem, the lavish imaginative wanderings of another, the clear historical vision of a third... A few words about the poets’ lives also gives a chance, especially good when working with younger students who may not have had much of an introduction before, to expand their awareness of some of the broader issues of poetry—the various circumstances in which poems are written, the fact that they come from the center of lived, difficult, and widely

differing lives. But before you send the writers off to make their own poems, be sure to repeat the specific instructions, returning them to the task at hand.

One reason this experiment works so well is because (as mentioned above) it grounds the poems in the seen, heard, lifted, touched, tasted, without making it particularly conscious (i.e., without enjoining the writers to “Show, don’t tell!”), by the simple, continual act of returning to the lists (which should be mostly concrete nouns, or some sense-based adjectives if you like, but probably very few abstract nouns). It also succeeds because it allows the writer to create his or her own field of choices before there is any conscious awareness of beginning. The material is there at hand, the energy of charged language is there (from listening to and thinking about the model poems), and in the act of selecting *which* unlikely subject to write about, the poet is already at work on the experiment, magnetized and awakened to its potential; he or she begins to write with an already-established engagement and momentum.

Finally, this experiment’s basic structure can be used with any other list/category offered as the potential subject. Its protean nature is limitless.