

JOURNEY POEM

The genesis of this exercise comes from a chapter taken from a textbook on writing assignments given at the college level, but it works extremely well in the high school, or even the middle school, given the proper amount of time. It offers the opportunity to teach several of the simpler and more complex elements of figurative language, the effectiveness of concrete sensory imagery, how surprise can work, and also the process of *organic* form (that is, the form develops as the poem develops; it isn't known beforehand), even though there are formal requirements.

1. Have the students think about various journeys in their lives, ones they've made on a routine basis: going to church; going to school; going to visit a particular friend or relative; going to work. Use these examples as a way to begin the discussion, and get them to contribute ideas of their own (some will suggest going back and forth to the barn to do chores, or to the library, etc.). Once the list is made, have each student choose a particular journey of their own and write down the occasion for it. Give them maybe three-four minutes for this. Then ask them to do a free-write for about ten minutes about this journey. Ask them to remember as many sensory details as they can, being very specific. Have them think about weather, about sounds, various smells, how other people looked, etc. Have them write quickly, without stopping or lifting the pencil from the page.

2. Pass out sample poem 1, and read the poem to the class. This is a journey poem, written about walking the six or so miles to town from home, collecting beer and pop bottles on the way in a gunny sack pack. In those days, you could return a regular beer bottle for a penny; a quart beer bottle brought two cents; regular pop bottles brought three cents, and "large" ones a nickel. It cost just thirty-five cents to get into the movies then, and for a dollar you could pretty much get into the film (a double feature, serial, cartoon, and newsreel) and buy enough candy and pop to get mildly sick. The problem was the leftover stale beer smell, so that people tended to move away into seats farther off. Talk about the poem a little, asking for feedback, noticing details. Speak about it as a journey. A journey poem tries to deal with change; how does the person benefit from the journey? Is the arrival the point, or is it what happens to you on the trip? Ask them to think about other poems that are journeys (*The Odyssey*; *Canterbury Tales*; *The Divine Comedy*; Basho's *Back Roads to Far Places*—there are many).

3. Pass out sample poem 2, which is the same poem, but broken down into the requirements to show both how it was made, and to provide instructions on how to write one that's similar. They have to write the poem in "twenty parts" which are listed, along with an explanation and the appropriate example highlighted from the sample poem. This is a splendid opportunity to point out cause-and-effect, to rehash personification, metaphor and simile, to examine the notion of synesthesia, etc. Tell the students they have to use the material gleaned from their free-write to make their own piece, satisfying each requirement as they go along, in exact order. The requirements themselves will, of course, generate new memories, and cause them to look at their experience—their own journey—in various ways.

It isn't possible to get all this done in a single class; sometimes it works well as a homework assignment, but some teachers like doing the set-up one day, and using the second day as the writing day.

Going to the Matinee, Anacortes, 1960

Beer bottles line the ditches all the way to town
like beach drift after a storm.
In each bottle there is a message which has evaporated.
With my gunny sack pack, I look
like a humped, arthritic old tramp. The clink
of glass is a music that changes
with the miles, changes
as the weight of the pack ropes
cuts into my thumbs. The air is summer
on the tongue, but the soaked cloth stinks
of stale hops, of spit, old rainwater,
smells like the weight of a ticket
to *Flash Gordon in the Caverns of Mongo*.
There are still messages in these bottles,
and every storekeeper, any small kid,
can read them. At Heart Lake, a single heron kites
from the cattails, and floats in a June wind
that doesn't know what a *dweeb* is.
A heavy rain begins, because it's Saturday,
and there's a serial between the double features.
I'm readier than Freddier, and jammier than Jim.
At Fergie's Market the clerk sniffs at the bottles
spilling from my bag. His eyes are hard as he counts
out the shiny quarters of respectability.
His grin is the grill of a hearse.
I dig through the grave he puts me in
and surface in line for the matinee.
Little Sammy tells the clerk he is eleven.
He will tell her this for so many years
that always the simple act of eating popcorn
will make him feel younger.
I take a seat in the licorice dark,
cloaked in the stench of old beer, wrapped
in a silence so profound the noise
vibrates inside my head like a shout.
En la oscuridad, todos los ojos tienen lenguas.
In the darkness even the eyes have tongues.
The walls gossip, the sticky floor points me out.
All around me people leave their seats, until I am
the single bottle left in its fragile case, this memory
a wind blowing across the glass rim of time.

Here is the same poem, broken down to illustrate how it follows a formula with 20 requirements.

I. Begin the poem with a metaphor or simile.

Beer bottles line the ditches all the way to town
like beach drift after a storm.

2. Say something specific but utterly preposterous.

In each bottle there is a message which has evaporated.

3. Use at least one image, in succession, for each of the five senses: sight, touch, sound, taste, smell.

With my gunny sack pack, I look
like a humped, arthritic old tramp. [**sight**]. The clink
of glass [**sound**] is a music that changes
with the miles, changes
as the weight of the pack ropes
cuts into my thumbs [**touch**]. The air is summer
on the tongue, [**taste**] but the soaked cloth stinks
of stale hops, of spit, old rainwater, [**smell**] . . .

4. Use an example of *synesthesia* (mixing the senses).
smells like the weight of a ticket

5. Use the proper name of a person, & a place.

to Flash Gordon in the Caverns of Mongo.

6. Contradict something you said earlier in the poem.

There are still messages in these bottles,
and every storekeeper, any small kid,
can read them. . .

7. Change direction, or digress from the last thing you said (digression: stopping what you're talking about to talk about something else).

At Heart Lake, a single heron kites
from the cattails, and floats in a June wind

8. Use a word (slang? not obscene, please) you've never seen in a poem.

that doesn't know what a *dweeb* is.

9. Use an example of false cause-effect logic.

A heavy rain begins, because it's Saturday,
and there's a serial between the double features.

10. Use a piece of "talk" you've actually heard (preferably in dialect and/or which you don't understand).

I'm readier than Freddier, and jammier than Jim.

11. Create a metaphor using the following construction: "The (**adjective**) (**concrete noun**) of (**abstract noun**)"

At Fergie's Market the clerk sniffs at the bottles
spilling from my bag. His eyes are hard as he counts
out the **shiny quarters of respectability.**

I2. Use an image in such a way as to reverse its usual associative qualities.

His grin is the grill of a hearse.

I3. Make the speaker of the poem do something he/she could not do in "real life."

I dig through the grave he puts me in
and surface in line for the matinee.

I4. Refer to yourself by nickname & in third person.

Little Sammy tells the clerk **he** is eleven.

I5. Write in the future tense, such that part of the poem seems to be a prediction.

He **will tell** her this for so many years
that always the simple act of eating popcorn
will make him feel younger.

I6. Modify a noun with an unlikely adjective.

I take a seat in the **licorice dark**.

I7. Make a declarative assertion that sounds convincing, but that makes no "real" sense.

I am cloaked in the stench of old beer,
wrapped in a silence so profound the noise
vibrates inside my head like a shout.

I8. Use a phrase from a language other than English, then translate it.

En la oscuridad, todos los ojos tienen lenguas.
In the darkness, all of the eyes have tongues.

I9. Make a non-human object say or do something human (personification).

The **walls gossip**, the **sticky floor points me out**.

I10. Close the poem with a vivid image that echoes the image you began the poem with.

All around me people leave their seats, until I am
the single bottle left in its fragile case, this memory
a wind blowing across the glass rim of time.

Write a similar poem of your own, about a journey of your own, using the same formula, in exactly the same order.