

A man's dog was very old and crippled. Each morning she sniffed her food, giving it a few licks. Then she would drag herself over to an empty bowl and shove it along to a previous dog. She would lick the empty bowl and pick her up, crooning softly, "You must eat, Old Lady," and place her next to her own bowl of food. She would stand there and smack her lips a few times, then drag herself over to the empty bowl. The man tried different food, but that never worked. He tried putting the food in the red bowl, but she only reversed the process, sniffing the meaty morsels, then dragging herself resignedly to her own empty bowl. He tried removing one of the bowls, but then the old dog would haul herself around the porch, down the steps falling on her face at the bottom, then out into the yard and under every tree and bush looking for the empty bowl. So the man would put both bowls back on the porch to keep her happy. Every morning it was the same. The scruffy white hair of her muzzle, the raw floppy ears pestered by gnats and flies, that half-seeing gaze through cataracts. He couldn't understand how she survived without food. She looked so bad it embarrassed him for the neighbors to see her. "Maybe I should put her to sleep. That would be the merciful thing to do." All the way to the vet's office she lay on the front seat beside him with her head in his lap. If he took his hand away from her head, she would stare at him until he put it back. In the car there were no gnats or flies to nag her ears. No space demanding she drag herself here or there. When he arrived and lifted her from the seat, she was limp in his arms, pink tongue dangling lazily from her mouth.

CHECKLIST Poetic forms

- Do you understand all the rules of the form in which you are working?** Some forms are fairly self-explanatory, but others have rather complex requirements. Breaking these rules can be part of the fun, but you should at least be aware of the rules you're ignoring. Get a feel for the form before trying to write in it. It's helpful to reread the form's description; then try to match it up against several examples by other poets.
- Does the form enhance your content rather than limit it?** When a form is working for your poem, it seems to propel what you have to say forward, sparking unexpected language and ideas. When the form is working against you, you will feel it dragging down your writing. Different forms fit different poems, so don't hesitate to try your idea in a pantoum rather than a sonnet, or a villanelle rather than a sestina. And an unsuccessful formal poem often opens up when it is recast in free verse.

Getting started writing poetry

As Wendy Bishop tells us, "There is no single, best invention technique that will get all writers drafting productively." Nor is there a "preferable sequencing system," with one type of exercise building on another. Instead, Bishop believes that "invention activities should provide students with exploratory moments and drafting options that develop flexibility and fluidity in a writer."

In short, not everything works for everyone, and you won't know what works for you until you try it. Moreover, you may find that a technique that inspires a poem one day won't yield much the next day, while an invention activity that seems useless this week will work for you next month. The brain remains a mysterious organ, and, as we have noted, poetic inspiration is unpredictable. Most poets will tell you that the more you experiment, try and fail, and try again, the more likely you are to ultimately come up with a group of poems you will be proud to have written. So write, write, *write!*

Over the years, my students have found the following kick-starts quite useful. At least one of them should result in a poem you are proud to include in your final portfolio.

KICK-STARTS Beginning your poems

1. Keep a journal in which you write down *everything* that might become material for a poem: ideas, observations, images, words, phrases, lines, and stanzas. If in the process you feel a poem igniting, start writing it, but don't worry if you end up with fragments and false starts. The more material you collect, the more likely some of it will begin to cohere into a fully formed poem.
2. Find a book full of interesting words. It could be this one, or an anthology of literature, an encyclopedia, or a dictionary. Open up the book at random, and skim the page until a word catches your eye. It might be an unusual word like *kleptomaniac*, or it might be a common or evocative word such as *bruise* or *salt*. Write it down quickly and move on. Try to avoid abstractions and instead seek out words that are concrete and specific. Put real *things* into your poem (peach preserves and wedding rings, dishwater and colwebs) and look for strong, clear verbs ("slash," "punch," "stroke," "sneeze"). Go easy on the adverbs and adjectives. Once you have jotted down ten to fifteen good words, use as many of them as you can in a short poem. Try to keep your poem fairly serious (it's tempting to transform this word salad into a comic jumble) and see if you can finish it in fifteen to twenty minutes. You'll often be amazed at the results.
3. Read published poems (in this book, in an anthology, or online) and respond to them with poems of your own. It doesn't matter whether you respond to the subject of the other person's poem or just a single line or image. Generally it's

most effective to find the moment of maximum energy or tension in the published poem. Identify what excites you about the poem, then make the same thing happen in your own work.

- ▶ **4.** A variation on exercise 3 is to write a poem beginning and/or ending with one or more lines by another poet. Choose a line that you find particularly marvelous, and write from or toward it. Many poets ultimately transform or eliminate the model poet's line from their own poem. (If you choose not to, be sure to give the other poet credit for his or her work.)
- ▶ **5.** Respond to poems written by poets you know personally, such as fellow students or friends who write poetry. Exchange your poems by hand or through e-mail. If you know someone is waiting to read your poetry, you are much more likely to write it.
- ▶ **6.** Write a poem inspired by one of the other arts. For example, does a painting you love seem to want you to tell its story in words? If you haven't found that painting yet, the art section of your library will have plenty of books with full-color illustrations, or you can go online to a virtual gallery such as the WebMuseum (ibiblio.org/wm). Do more than simply describe the scene in front of you: set your imagination free, and consider using what you see as a springboard for something more personal. You can also use music as an inspiration. For instance, write a poem that evokes a Chopin étude or a punk song by Extreme Noise Terror. Excellent poems have also been written about dance, theater, and even architecture.
- ▶ **7.** Everyone who has ever composed a poem for a special occasion such as a birthday or an anniversary knows this desire to connect with someone else. We want to please that person by showing that we have thought longer than we normally would about the event at hand. Write a poem that celebrates some special occasion, whether it be an **epithalamium** for a marriage; an **elegy** for someone who has passed away; or an **ode**, which can commemorate everything from a military victory to the painting on a Grecian urn to the song of a nightingale.
- ▶ **8.** Write a poem in a form not discussed in this chapter. (You can find descriptions in Lewis Turco's *Book of Forms*, Miller Williams's *Patterns of Poetry*, on the Academy of American Poets' Web site, or simply by Googling "poetic forms and techniques.") Write a **ballad** (a narrative poem in quatrains rhyming *abcb*, with alternating four- and three-beat lines) or a poem in **terza rima** (a poem in three-line stanzas, in which the end words of the first and third lines rhyme, and the end word of the second line becomes the rhyming word in the following stanza). You can spend your lifetime as a writer working in the hundreds of patterns that previous poets have devised. If you are drawn to the challenge and boundaries of forms, experiment with as many of them as possible.
- ▶ **9.** Begin writing a poem. When you reach what feels like a natural pause—a period, a comma, or just a lull in the sentence—break the line and begin a

new stanza. Count the lines in your first stanza, and then make sure all subsequent stanzas have the same number of lines as the first. Whether you're writing in couplets, tercets, quatrains, quintets, or an even longer group of lines, the regularity of your stanzas will oblige you to make interesting choices about diction and enjambment and where and how to conclude your poem.

- ▶ **10.** Write a poem that describes and focuses on an unusual object that is right in front of you. Students have written poems about everything from stuffed animals to old pocket watches to Christmas ornaments to bottle openers. In the best of these poems, careful depiction of the object merges with storytelling and the creation or re-creation of vivid memories.
- ▶ **11.** Write the poem behind a news story that captures your attention. Your poem may stick to the facts as much as possible, or it may begin from a charged moment in the story and quickly become a pure creation of your imagination. Consider writing the poem from an unusual point of view. A poem about a kidnapping, for instance, might be told from the perspective of the kidnapper or the person who has been kidnapped, but it also might be seen from the vantage point of the kidnapper's neighbor or the kidnapped person's childhood friend. Text-based sources—that is, newspapers and newsmagazines (in print or online)—tend to work better than television stories because the facts remain in front of you for easy perusal.
- ▶ **12.** Write a poem in the form of a letter. Richard Hugo's book *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* is a great source for these types of poems. Hugo addresses poems to close old friends and to newer friends he doesn't yet know well. He brings these people detailed news of his own life and asks for information about their world. However, because the letter is in the form of a poem, Hugo condenses what he has to say and presents the material as eloquently—and as imaginatively—as possible.
- ▶ **13.** Write a poem in the persona of someone other than yourself. In this type of poem, also called a **dramatic monologue**, you become a character from history or of your own invention. Usually set during a moment of crisis in the speaker's life, the dramatic monologue is addressed to an audience of one or more silent listeners and gives the inside story from the perspective of someone who, on the exterior, may not be an especially sympathetic character. The friction between how we are likely to see the speaker and how he or she sees himself or herself has resulted in some outstanding work. Among the master poets who have worked extensively from behind the mask of personae are the British Victorian poets Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson and the contemporary American poets C. K. Williams, Richard Howard, Robert Hayden, and Ai.