

WRITING WITH POWER

Techniques for Mastering
the Writing Process

Second Edition

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not such a big deal—makes it easier to say to yourself, "I don't need to beat around the bush. It's time someone was blunt with Larry about his behavior in meetings."

. . .

People usually assume that writing is always meant to communicate with others. When you use it that way you must think very carefully about it as writing. "Will these words really mean to the reader what they mean to me? Will they have the effect I assume they will have?" But writing is also very useful as a way to work out your thoughts and feelings for yourself alone. When you use it in this way as a process of exploration and discovery, you don't have to think carefully about it as writing (however carefully you may think about the matter you are exploring). Oddly enough, writing as exploration usually helps your writing as communication.

Poetry as No Big Deal

I remember Jeremy, a little English boy whose mother had to tell him that his music lessons were ending. His music teacher had decided he wasn't musical. He looked crestfallen and said to his mother, "But I *feel* musical."

Many people *feel* poetic. Capable of poetry. Sometimes they feel that way even though they have no particular idea or image or feeling they want to write about. Just a feeling that they would like to write a poem and that they could write a good one. It's a feeling that inhabits the midparts of the body anywhere between the gut and the breast.

Most of us* sadly learn to put those feelings away. They lead only to disappointment. We search for what to write a poem *about*, and either we don't come up with anything or, worse yet, we do—in which case we produce a piece of writing that is poetic in all the worst senses of the word: sticky, mawkish, embarrassing.

But it turns out that this is the worst possible approach to writing poetry—searching for what to write a poem about—particularly if we are inexperienced. It turns out that there is a completely different approach, and that is to ignore almost entirely the whole question of what to write about. Assume simply (and correctly) that you have plenty to write poems about and that your job is to keep

*I write here as a non-poet, that is, someone who enjoyed trying to write profound poems as an adolescent, got over it when introduced to sophistication, and then restricted himself to writing a birthday poem to a loved one about every seven years. But in the last couple of years I have enjoyed writing poems much more frequently in the fashion described in this chapter.

from mucking it up by paying too much attention to it. (Not that you ignore what's in the poem, only what the poem's *about*.) Somehow you have to let it emerge by itself so it isn't too falsely poetic or fake or manipulated. You need to keep your mind on what I suspect many poets have their minds on: the formal problem of the poem.

Robert Frost said that writing poetry without rhyme is like playing tennis without a net. And that having to rhyme helped him think of words and even ideas. Try writing a poem by keeping your mind only on the net and how to hit the ball over it. Consider the writing of a poem as the playing of a game, getting the ball through a hoop, a technical problem to be solved. It may seem very unpoetic but it leads to better luck with poems.

What you need for writing poems then is some interesting games to play, that is, some interesting rules you must obey. Allen Tate once described a poet as someone "willing to come under the bondage of limitations—if he can find them." In this chapter I will suggest a whole variety of mostly simple games, rules, or limitations. Gradually you can make up your own.

"The meter must be regular and the lines must rhyme" is the first rule that comes to mind when we think of poetry, but for various reasons it's not a good rule to use for a long time. It leads most of us to stilted language and inauthentic feeling—greeting-card poems. Most other rules, however, will have the opposite effect.

A good rule to start with is an easy one: "Write a long string of lines without stopping, and begin each one with 'I wish.'"* This rule for generating words is a good way to warm up. It permits you to write without stopping; indeed, that initial phrase is a kind of syntactic trampoline. It makes each sentence start itself with a bit of momentum so that more words just arrive without having to be sought. It helps you stand out of the way. This rule is also good to start with because it doesn't call for poems that are necessarily unified or organized—just strings of lines, some of which will have

*Homage to Kenneth Koch. Much of what I present here is derived from his books: *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams. Teaching Children To Write Poetry* (New York, 1970); *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children* (New York, 1974); *I Never Told Anybody . . . Teaching Poetry in a Nursing Home* (New York, 1977). Readers particularly interested in this chapter should consult Koch's books.

genuine merit, many of which will give pleasure to you and even to readers or listeners.

In the first few pieces you write (and the first one or two of any particular writing session) don't try for good lines, just try to keep on writing, as in freewriting, and see what comes. Loosen up. Repetition, nonsense, even cliché, or deadness is fine, just as long as you keep on writing. The process will usually lead you to some good poem-ingredients, and even if it doesn't, it warms you up. I wrote the following at the start of a writing session.

I wish it were April Fool's Day but it's Sadte Hawkins Day.
 I wish I were done with this quarter and my book.
 I wish my father wouldn't die.
 I wish I were with him now.
 I wish I wish I wish.
 I wish things would happen.
 I wish—do I wish anything? Maybe everything is fine.
 I wish I didn't itch, but my life is built on itching.
 I wish I didn't itch, but my life is built on itching.
 I wish it were April 15.
 I wish—I don't like writing I wish—it reinforces my habit of
 conditionalizing the moment. I refuse, therefore, to write
 I wish. There. See. I won't do it any more.
 "I wish." Stop. Shut up. No more.
 "I wish." Enough I won't hear any more.
 "I wish." If you don't stop saying
 I wish, I'll scream.

I had trouble getting started—I think I didn't really want to write—but by gradually accepting and writing about my resistance I drifted into playing with the rule itself. That play produced some verbal energy and pleasure for me and finally a sense of closure. It served to warm me up. After writing it I wanted to go on and write more.

Another one-line rule is to begin each line with "Once." What follows is a more unified piece.

Once Ma had a cookie jar shaped like a peach, only
 once I thought it was an apple cause
 once I said, Hey why a yellow apple and
 once I had said it Ma said No.

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Once you look at it for 10 years,
 once you grow accustomed to it,
 once it begins to resemble a peach until you think how
 strange
 once to have thought it was an apple.

SUZANNE BESS

The following piece represents someone using the rule "Begin each line with *now*." The rule served to give some concentration and order to a frightening time:

Now in the paling of her face,
 now I can see there's a sickness there that hurts her.
 Now, and still later. . . .
 Now she cries out,
 now calm, I worry, bringing water and smiles,
 now forgetting how, cause
 now she sweats so seriously I'm scared.
 Now she sleeps, silent,
 now, moaning, crying, calling out.
 Now sweet and still, we seek distraction in Gorky,
 or Pasternak or Cummings or. . . .
 Now she twists her face into an alien design of pain and
 Now I pray.

KIM KAUFMAN

There are innumerable ways of starting lines to give yourself a recurring pulse of syntactic energy. Begin each line with "yes," or "no," or "and," or with the name of someone you know. But remember you aren't trying for shaped complete poems, just warm-ups and perhaps some good ingredients. For a good way to search out memories from the past (and to give them some concentration and keep them from being too stilted in language), begin each line with "I remember."^{*}

* You can use this structural principle not only for generating poem-ingredients, but also for generating ideas or perceptions or memories for any piece of writing. It aids invention. If you have to write about someone, try freewriting where you begin each sentence with the person's first name and you address your words to her and you don't permit yourself to stop writing no matter what words come out. Or begin each sentence with "I remember. . ." You can use the same technique for writing reports about an organization, project, or period of time. You may get better ideas more quickly this way than by any other method. Some sentences get long and develop into short paragraphs. But don't forget to keep coming back to beginning

Koch suggests two-line sequences, too:

Once
 Now. . . .

Or "I seem . . . ,/but really . . . ," "If . . . ,/then . . . ," Question/Statement, "Morning . . . /Noon . . . /Night . . ." "8 o'clock . . . /9 o'clock . . . /10 o'clock . . ." and so forth.

Koch suggests some one-line formulas that are nearly as easy and useful for warming up, but which don't provide you with the opening word and hence don't have that repetition. For example, make each line a lie.

I feel great.
 The sun shines on beautiful tanned bodies.
 Time is honey slow and people smile inwardly and love their government.
 The dogs run free and so do we.
 I hate this course, it produces nothing.
 But I like to be lazy and vegetate.
 I'm never attracted to people, women or men.
 They never like me either, too bad.
 Fluorescent lights are great, they make you look so healthy.
 Boats are really boring, they make me groan and weak.

SIMON ANSKELL

It was just a warm up but it yielded the following:

The sun shines on beautiful tanned bodies.
 Time is honey slow and people
 Smile inwardly and love their government.
 The dogs run free.

Other formulas: each line must mention a color; a word in Spanish; a part of the body.

What seems important to me about this sort of initial easy rule for writing strings of poem-ingredients is not just that they warm you up, but that they warm you up in a particular way. They help

me sentences with the germ formula. Keep using this syntactic pump till your source is dry. This continual looking your subject in the eye and addressing your words to it—or this recurrent "I remember" which drags your mind back to events without giving you a chance to think analytically—these gimmicks somehow force you to blurt out what is important.

you generate words you didn't plan, words that surprise you or come from a part of you not easily available. They help you stand out of the way. Once you are warmed up, you can keep that capacity, that openness to the unexpected, and go on to write things more like poems: writing where you allow yourself some time for deliberation and reflection and second thoughts as you write.

But as you go on to attempt more shaped pieces in a more deliberate way, be sure to keep the two crucial elements in the process: have a rule you must obey and don't dawdle.

Having a rule doesn't just give you a technical problem to occupy your attention, it also takes a tiny element of authority off your shoulders. "I can't think of anything to write a poem about. But if she is going to make me write a haiku* about breakfast, I guess I can work something out. It may not be any good, but it was her idea not mine." The trick is that you can be that she—that person who says, "Hmmm, let's see, haiku: breakfast." Not because you have any preference or need for a haiku or any particular memory or feeling in mind about breakfast. It's probably best if you don't. (You can even give all responsibility to chance by putting rules on cards and shuffling them.)

And don't dawdle. Some reflection, yes, second or third thoughts now and then as you go along—this isn't freewriting as in "I wish"—but don't let fifteen or twenty minutes go by without at least a short poem to show for your efforts. You simply have to force yourself to accept some unsatisfactory sections, some unsatisfactory whole poems and just say what the hell. It's only raw writing after all. You can revise later or simply throw it away. You'll have lots of poems to choose from.

You can use a phrase to generate stanzas, not just single lines. Rule: write a poem about childhood (about your father, mother, favorite car, whatever) of three rough stanzas, each one beginning with "I remember." Even though you are not setting up a rhyme scheme or metrical demands, the formal repetition of "I remember" and the fact that you are calling this a poem helps you give your words the concentration characteristic of poetry.

* haiku, a traditional Japanese form in which you are restricted to seventeen syllables. Purists say the lines should go 5, 7, 5. For example:

Small bare feet, cold floor.
Me want a breakable bowl.
Waddler in diapers.

But you can give more concentration by tightening the rule a bit: start three four-line stanzas with "I remember." Get some form of the word remember (for example, memory, remembering) in each fourth line. Repeat some word or phrase in lines one and two or in lines two and three.

Write a short poem about an object you can see that begins "The (object) (verb). . . ." Within a line or two say "It makes me. . . ." Somewhere include a question.

The electric outlet flashes, it sizzles, and
Peering into the socket I see a tunnel,
Iridescent blue sparks flying back through the inside of time.
It makes me wonder how far my hate really goes.
To the wire? the station? the turbine? the water?
The dam? the rain? the sun? the night? the doorway?
The fire? the iron? the harp? the weaver?
The pasture? the challenge? the whisper? the word?
The silence-singing crystalline air dissolves
And there is no more.*

WILLIAM L. McNAUGHTEN

This formula could be expanded: describe a room or a place by writing three stanzas which follow the preceding rules. However, the last stanza should not have a question.

A favorite of mine is to insist that the poem start off with a short bit of actual speech, unfinished perhaps. Spoken words seem to inject life.

"But on the other . . ."
He paused,
Looking down at his right hand,

* A note about revising. Sometimes it's hard to resist over-clarifying or over-stating your meaning when you revise. Or at least that's what I feel McNaughten did when he revised as follows:

The wall outlet flashes and sizzles threateningly before me. Peering into the socket I see a tunnel, iridescent blue sparks flying backwards through time.
. . . It makes me wonder just how far my hate really goes. . . .
to the wire? station? turbine? dam?
to the river? rain? sun? sea?
Straining, I see stellar fragments; cosmic clash,
then, only silence.

I believe he could enhance the strength of his original by making no changes at all in wording and only cutting some items from the end of his long list. If you can cut away what isn't needed, but leave the best original words with juice, that is often the best way to revise.

his hand with all five fingers curled to a point
around the little chalk-end
which pointed toward his face;
his hand that he didn't even see because his eyes were glazed over;
his hand that was the word he forgot to say.

One student nervously looked around with her eyes,
holding her head absolutely stationary.
She'd never been to his class before.
The others, scattered round the windowless room
listened appreciatively to the air conditioning
and gave themselves up to the
pleasure of smelling chalk dust.

PETER ELBOW

I made myself the rule without any phrase in mind. "But on the other [hand]" was simply the first thing I thought of after I decided on the rule, and being stuck with that I *had* to proceed and simply see what came next. Being boxed in and having to work from there—and write *something*—had the effect of dredging an image from me that was totally unplanned (and unremembered as far as I could tell). The process helped me to invent in a way I seldom can. It was such a pleasure not feeling the poem has to be about anything, just to fulfill a rule and sort of go along till it seems to end itself. I didn't force my pen to keep moving at all times but if a pause or stuckness lasted a whole minute or two I forced myself to put down something—like forcing myself to settle for "it" in Scrabble when my time runs out. I edited the results right afterwards, in a couple of minutes, leaving out a couple of lines and a handful of words and phrases.

Write a short poem that begins with a swear word.

Dammit!
You're always complaining,
Bitching at me.
Nothing I ever did was right.
But that's just too bad.
You're dead now.
So leave me alone.

KAREN GREENE

Write a poem that begins with pronouncing a curse or spell on someone.

A form that I know from Richard Hugo's use of it: make a poem by writing it as a real letter to a real person. Here is Karen Greene again:

Dear Sharon

I've been trying to find the time
To write to you.
I got your last letter
such a long time ago.

Elizabeth can crawl now.
When she smiles
There are two teeth.

Michael's O.K.
We don't live together
any more.
I don't love him.

I have a one bedroom apartment,
upstairs with a balcony,
green shag on the floor.

KAREN GREENE

A favorite germ for me involves using (instead of just fighting) the demon who tries to stop you from writing. This time I said make the demon talk to you.

Whitney,
You know the sound of that typewriter
only gets me horny.

Listen,
Such an Om . . .
Click, click, click.
Godamn inhuman machinery.
You know, Whitney,
If you were out in the sunshine
then a sunny metaphor would
inform and transform
this page.
It would not so reek
of metal and electricity.

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Turn off the typewriter, Whitney.
 Ouch, your ears.
 Why, art cannot come from such pain
 transforming and deforming
 Deflowering and overpowering.
 Can't you see that it's feeding me, Whitney?
 It's making me stronger.

WHITNEY BLAUVELT

Sometimes the very structural principle that you used to generate the poem in the first place can be omitted when you are done. Paula Aldrich found she could take down the scaffolding ("begin each line with the name of a person you care about") and end up with a structure that stood better by itself.

Dad, you're gone.
 Dad, you're dead. Cremated.
 Dad, I miss you.
 Dad, I cry when I miss you.
 Dad, why do I have to cry?
 Dad, why must I feel alone without you?
 Dad, why did you have to die?
 Dad, it's been two years, why can't I adjust.
 Dad, it's spring coming.
 Dad, it's planting time.
 Dad, the snow is melting.
 Dad, fields are waiting for your tractor—for your hand in sowing the crops.
 Dad, is it spring where you are?
 Dad, are you planting there?

Dad, you're gone.
 You're dead. Cremated.
 I cry when I miss you.
 It's been two years, why can't I adjust?
 It's planting time.
 the snow is melting.
 Fields are waiting for your tractor,
 for your hand in sowing the crops.
 Dad, are you planting there?

PAULA ALDRICH

Poets have traditionally built on elements or structural principles they found in other poems. Kenneth Koch read Blake's "Tyger, Tyger," and asked children to write a poem in which they spoke to an animal.* We were reading *Hamlet* in a class and, almost as a lark, I made the rule "Begin a poem with a phrase and a negation of it (as in 'to be or not to be')." I ended up with this.

Hamlet at the Beach

Going in or coming out.
 That's all they seem to do.
 Water drips off them as they come out.
 The women pull up their stupid tops.
 The men glance down at their crotches, pretending not to look.
 They shake their head and make little drips fly out in all directions.
 Some bang their heads against their stationary hands.
 The idiots.
 Going in they are either sleep walkers or crazy mechanical dolls.
 And greasy from the oil.
 A problem in geometry: where would the sun have to be so that I see not one gleam from a perfectly oiled body?
 Behind a cloud. Behind the earth.
 Up their ass.
 Going in or coming out.
 Let them do it.
 Why should I care.
 They do nothing once in. They do nothing once out.
 They only need to change.
 They need me to look at them.
 We all have our job.

Again the central element in the process was forcing myself to take the first or second phrase-and-negation that came to me in response to the arbitrary rule ("going in or coming out"—along with an image of swimmers on a hot beach). And then forcing myself to

*In *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red. Teaching Great Poetry to Children* (New York, 1974), he stresses how the procedure can be seen as a way to read existing poems, not just write new ones.

proceed from there even though I had no plan. The title came afterwards. What feels to me important about the process is the way it helps me stand out of the way and still concentrate my attention.

Write a poem that looks at or talks about the same thing over and over again as in Wallace Stevens's "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." I wrote:

Before we moved
I broke the rotten section off
the cherry tree behind the house on Percival Street
even though there were still some blossoms on it.
When we used to look out our bedroom window
we saw the cherry tree.
The cherry tree helped
when I had need of looking out the bedroom window.
The cherry tree did not take sides
in our arguments.
To smell a blossom I had to stand so close
that I couldn't focus on it. Simple justice.
Decisions, decisions: every cherry has to come
either alone or in pairs or trios.
Is every leaf really the same?
It depends what you mean by the same.
Let us suppose that for every cherry there is a bird.
Would that make life simple?
Would we get no pie?

I see now that it is about missing the house on Percival Street where we used to live. Perhaps it needs a final stanza to put things back in the past tense, and it would point up the theme a bit more. But there lies the danger. If I had tried to write a poem about missing that house, it probably would have been terrible. Being stuck with having to write tiny stanzas about the cherry tree did it for me.

But of course there is a price to pay. It wouldn't be a bad poem (by some sort of kindly amateur standard) if it wasn't so obviously an imitation. But if I'm willing to pay that price, I get in return the ability to write something better than I could write without help. Long before Kenneth Koch started using simple rules with chil-

dren and others inexperienced in writing poetry. Theodore Roethke was using complex rules with serious poetry students.

Roethke's solution to this problem involved, in part, using a number of exercises in form, exercises so monstrously arbitrary and not of the student's choosing that the arguments against false emotion or the dreads of vanity can hardly appear. Richard Hugo describes one such exercise in "Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching" (*American Poetry Review*, 3, No. 1, 1974):

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives
tamarack	to kiss	blue
throat	to carve	hot
belief	to swing	soft
rock	to ruin	tough
dog	to bite	important
frog	to cut	wavering
slag	to surprise	sharp
eye	to bruise	cool
cloud	to hug	red
mud	to say	leather

Use five nouns, verbs, and adjectives from the above lists and write a poem as follows:

1. Four beats to the line (can vary).
2. Six lines to the stanza.
3. Three stanzas.
4. At least two internal and one external slant rhyme per stanza. (Full rhymes acceptable but not encouraged).
5. Maximum of two end stops per stanza.
6. Clear English grammatical sentences. (No tricks.) All sentences must make sense.

After reading Hugo's piece, I tried the exercise with a class and found that, if I presented it as a game, students were willing to play. What could they lose? It wasn't their poem, but a game at which one can only win. The exercise is marvelous in its resource of always giving back to the students a little more than they put in. Gifted students, apparently, will turn the exercise into their own piece, for the poems below are remarkably individual. The less gifted, at least learn, *firsthand*, important things about diction, rhyme, and rhythm. As Roethke says, "even to 'hear' a good poem carries us far beyond the ordinary in education. And to write a *versé*, or even a piece of verse, however awkward and crude, that bears some mark, something characteristic of the author's true nature—that is . . . a considerable human achievement."

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Pliny at Stabiae

South of Pompeii the helmsman balked,
 refused to go further. He cursed his gods
 and watched the flame column burst up
 curve, branch like a pine. Waves pitched
 our sloop while molten lava swallowed
 whole vineyards on the eastern slope.

Mud slaked down from a dense blue cloud.
 In the wavering hot air, dogs howled
 in fear. Sharp rocks and pumice pieces
 were raining, bruising men who ran
 for shelter through the rubble streets,
 hugging pillows over their heads.

At length came a sort of calm. Ash fell
 thick and silent as snow. I asked for
 water to cool my burning throat,
 and slept a bit. When I awoke
 I found the others were gone. The sun
 swung wildly in the red streaked sky.

MARGARET WHALEY

[Two other poems are omitted here.]

Since using the exercise I have developed others which also encourage students to tinker and to remake and which free students from the usual personal obstacles. I ask them, for instance, to translate a poem from a foreign language and to explain what was lost or gained in the process. I give them a handful of poems which I have rewritten as prose and I ask them to restore them as verse (including, usually, William Carlos Williams at his prosiest, and a ringer, a piece of prose that scans and perhaps rhymes, as do some sections of Vladimir Nabokov's short story, "First Love"). Sometimes we take a handbook such as Lewis Turco's *Book of Forms* and use it like the *I Ching* or the *sortes Virgilianae*. . . . Close your eyes, flip the pages; whatever form your finger stops on is your momentary fate, a *rondelet*, a Welsh *cyhydedd*, etc.*

Translating poems is another way to give yourself constraints—nets to hit the ball over. You can even translate from a language you don't know if you find a version with a literal translation.

*From the article "South of Pompeii the Helmsman Balked," by John Burt Foster, Jr., *College English*, vol. 39, no. 4, December, 1977.

cluded. (Best if you can hear it out loud in the original. Much poetry is recorded. The Penguin books of poetry in foreign languages have literal translations of each poem at the bottom of the page.) Or take an old poem and make it new. Or simply take a poem and twist it somehow. "Amateurs borrow, professionals steal," said T. S. Eliot. I have been trying to illustrate in this chapter how amateurs can write pleasing poetry in an amateur spirit, but now I want to illustrate that even a serious professional poet writing a serious poem can still attain this spirit of somehow not making too big a deal out of poetry:

*Psalm 81**

All all come before you
 Big wigs and small
 The down and out

The up and coming
 The boisterous the preposterous
 Left fielders right wingers
 The motley the mortified
 Flag wavers free loaders

What a procession!

Every one out down
 The scythe ranging wide and far
 (those bony implacable arms
 Those harvester's hands!)

Like the newborn fawn's
 Legs sheared off in the long grass

Bundled in
 Guts and spring wheat
 Eyes
 Half opened in birth
 Half closed
 In death

Harvest and planting
 The hunter
 Stuffs his sack and strides on

Have mercy on us
 Have mercy

DANIEL BERRIGAN, translator

Printed in *The Catholic Worker*, January, 1990.

Many of the poems I've quoted were written in a class or a group. Often I, as teacher, suggested the rule to obey. In a certain sense that was an aid to the others: my authority took some of the onus off them and helped get them going. I didn't have any special authority over myself of course, yet a willingness to follow my own rule was usually extremely helpful to me, too. If you have a small group of people who want to try this approach, it is fun to share the responsibility for setting the rules. Five people could each bring one rule for an evening's writing.

However you arrange it, other people somehow help. Their presence writing with you, the fact that you have to get on with it and write *something* even if it is terrible, and the chance to read some of your pieces out loud and hear what the others have written: these things usually help you get words down on paper, energize you, and focus your attention. Particularly if you are inexperienced. Writing in a group can get you going and later you can use the same approach on your own.

Writing group-poems can be a good way of pooling imagination. There's the familiar party-game approach where each person writes just one line. (You can have each person write knowing all the previous lines, or else have each person know only the preceding line, or else play with everyone blind to all other lines.) These games often provide a kind of loosening up, randomness, even hilarity. They usually increase everyone's verbal and imagistic resources. More substantial than pooling single lines, however, is something like a group childhood poem: each person writes a short stanza beginning with "I remember." You may or may not want other restraints (for example, each person is assigned a toy, implement, room of the house, time of day, whatever). There are many ways to build a shaped group poem. We were reading Shakespeare and seven of us decided to write "The Seven Ages of Woman."

Infant

Having moved from womb to breast
the lack of warmth bewilders me.
No longer am I safe and protected.
So much awaits me I have yet to comprehend.
Fists clenched, legs kicking
helpless, I cry
without thought.

Only feelings and instinct
tell me I am hungry and alone.

Schoolgirl

I chased Bobby today.
He ran. Ran from my cooties.
Boys are stupid sometimes.
I stopped when I got tired
laughing at the springtime air.
Laughing at Bobby glancing behind himself nervously.
Boys are stupid most all the time.

Lover

Fire flames reflecting colors off of your back,
rippling light as you move into a curling wave
of our self-created moisture.
I let you touch me and feel our rhythms
beat within the movement
leaping into blues and greens
coloring me from moves within your wave.

Housewife

Musky smells penetrate the night air.
Paper shuffles, cans collide like
a waterfall. Sounds carry to
depths below with a thundering
crash.
The plastic trash can leaves an angry hand,
bitting pavement with a bound.
Next time he can do it for once.

Mother

My belly soft
from too many children
too often
too soon.
My eyes are tired.
I have seen—
And I have known—
The painful world
that my babies
Must learn to live in.

But

I want to
keep them safe from it.

I know

that they think I
don't know anything.
That Mom
is just an old-stick-in-the-mud.

But honestly,

I just want to
keep my babies
safe with me.

Grandma

I dole out the treats
and receive my thanks
from their glowing eyes
and gooey grins.
The sticky fingers
will remain behind
for me to wipe away
with a contented sigh
tomorrow.

Aged

"Turn off that news!
Put it back to Hollywood Squares.
Just because you can still walk around
doesn't mean you get to choose the program."
I've been here longer than any of them.
People used to visit me too.
I've seen 'em peter out.
I'll see their honey-sweet relatives stop coming too.
"You won't be so smart alecky then!"
Oh no, the door bell.
My hair isn't ready.
I wonder if I'll let him muss it up
after the dance.
Oh mommy, I don't want to go to school today.
Please let me stay home and cook with you.
They're mean to me,
they pull my hair.
"Don't you touch that dial.

My eyes weren't closed.

I was just thinking."

PAM CORWIN, BRUCE CLIFTON, LAUREN PHILBRICK, BING
BRISTOL, KAREN KLOCKE, GINA KANEVSKY, PETER ELBOW

In short, by not making too big a deal of poetry—letting it be play-within-rules, letting it be about what it turns out to be about—you can write poems which please but don't try too hard. You will sometimes get a poem that is terrific or could be made so. This is a bonus. And if you decide to cross over that dangerous line and start making a big deal out of poetry, you probably won't do it till you have learned to make up rules for yourself, to cut away what's weak and not feel stuck with your original scaffolding, to find authentic language by choice rather than just by accident, and most of all to develop an ear for when poetry is too pretentious.