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 Poetry and Healing
 Handout, Fall 2023

Writing poetry: how to do it

Some thoughts on poetry:¹

“Poetry is a companion through dark times. The poem is a friend who calls you at just the right moment on a bad day when above all *you feel the need to be known* (Fox 5).

“The poem is a voice that makes it clear *you are not alone*” (Fox 5).

“*Sacred place, companion and natural medicine*,--poems are all of these and each will support your process of healing” (Fox 5).

Poetry as action: what does the speaker want or need?

In one way or another, a poem seeks to persuade or sway the reader to do, believe or feel something. Consider how a poem is a kind of action and as such, often shows us a speaker making a rhetorical move. In this context, a poem can do the following:

1. Apologize
2. Come to an epiphany
3. Celebrate
4. Confess guilt
5. Witness an experience, event or person
6. Describe a dramatic moment in the past
7. Express awe or joy
8. Guide or instruct
9. Praise
10. Pray
11. Inform
12. Console/reassure

Of course, the list of things a poem can seek to do or impart to an audience is endless, so for today’s purposes, we’ll concentrate on illustrating just a few of the moves stated above in some examples below. These rhetorical moves are important because they work in shaping the poem and helping the narrative come together—think of them as a kind of glue that creates a story in

¹ Fox, John. *Poetic medicine: the healing art of poem-making*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997.

the poem. If you are ever stuck on a poem, ask yourself: who is speaking to who, and what do they want and need? What is going on? Try to imagine a dramatic situation taking place—this may help.

Examples of poetry as action:

1. The celebration narrative

Exa. Lucille Clifton “won’t you celebrate with me”
 won’t you celebrate with me/what I have shaped into/
 a kind of life?/
 come celebrate/ with me that everyday/something has tried
 to kill me/and has failed.

2. Confession of guilt narrative

Exa. Corrine Hales “Power”
 No one we knew had ever stopped a train./
 I felt my heart/ Beating against the cool ground/
 And the terrible long screech of the train’s
 Braking began. We had done it.

3. Witness an experience, event or person

Exa. Al Zolynas “Considering the accordion”
 Once in a Czech restaurant in Long/ Beach, an ancient
 Accordionist came to our table and played the old/ favorites
 It seemed like the accordion/floated in air, and he swayed weightlessly behind it

4. Describe a dramatic moment in the past

Exa. Corrine Hales “Power”
 My brother jabbed at me,/ pointed down the tracks. A man/
 Had climbed out of the engine, was running/in our direction,
 Waving his arms./screaming that he would kill us—

5. Express awe or joy

Exa. Lucille Clifton “sorrows”
 who would believe them winged
 who would believe they could be
 beautiful

How to write the poem:

1. Start by writing similes or metaphors or images. What is on your mind at the moment? Write about this. If you are at a loss for what to write about, aim to describe a picture or an object and reflect on it.
2. Write as many similes, metaphors or images that come to your mind as you can. Write a list! Once you've written a list of compelling images, circle or highlight the lines that stand out to you. As you study the lines that interest you the most, see if you can find a narrative logic emerging in the lines.
3. Once you have a feel for the speaker's objective in the poem, craft an interesting open line and consider the action of the line when you do. As you do this, try writing something like "If only X" or "What I most wanted in the world was X" or "To return to X, drive down X." Go for a line with a definite action.
4. Do you see a narrative emerging in the poem? See if you can connect the images in the poem to some kind of story. Keep going!
5. End your poem with a question or quote or image. Aim to surprise yourself. Get started on your poem and aim for a few lines. If you can continue your poem after the workshop, please do so and see what happens!