

Poetry Exercise #1

Write down three things that are physically impossible. Now set that list aside and write a fake diary entry about the most boring, most ordinary day.

I'll go first:

I woke up. The sun was out. I went downstairs. I made some oatmeal. I ate the oatmeal. The mailman came. I checked the mail. Bills. A birthday card for my neighbor. I watched some television. I pet my dog. I had a sandwich for lunch. I had another sandwich for dinner. I went to bed.

Now, get that list. Choose one of the impossible things. Rewrite the journal entry as a person who (fortunately or unfortunately) has the impossible power/ability you chose.

Diary Entry of a Fire Breather

I woke up. The sun was out. My pillow in flames,
the toilet water boiling. Burnt oatmeal again.
The mailman came. I scorched the bills.
I singed the birthday card for my neighbor.
I watched Mary Tyler Moore melt. I pet my dog to ashes.
I had a sandwich for lunch. Fried peanut butter and jelly.
Dinner was the same. Fried.
I went to bed. I dreamt of water.

(This exercise inspired by Louis Jenkins' poem, "[Walking Through a Wall](#)")

Poetry Exercise #2

Okay, to build this poem, first you need the following ingredients:

1. a physical feature or talent (either one can be made up)
2. an ability, spectacular or boring, it's up to you
3. an object used for presentation (i.e. a platter, a cake stand, a velvet box, a pedestal...)
4. an obsolete or close-to-obsolete profession (i.e. blacksmith, milk maid, rider for the pony express)

Write a poem about the physical feature/talent (#1) and make sure it is more marvel than brag, as if the thing is not truly part of you. As if it is a nuisance. What hardships do you endure for carrying this thing? What easy chore is made hard because of it? What can it do that no one else's can (#2)? Decide who passed it down to you. What was the profession of the person you inherited it from (#4)? How was it presented (#3)? What amazing thing might you become, because of this?

- - -

And here is my, er, stab at it:

You might think I have remarkable boobs. You might even call them *tremendous* when you speak of them with your coworkers, reminisce on how smooth & radiant they are. How they complete small tasks for you with hi-gloss enthusiasm. Changing the light bulbs. Stretching across the room to hand you the clicker. When I awaken from my naps, sprawled on the couch, drooling & bra-less, I often dread discovering what my unsupervised boobs have been up to. It is quite a chore picking up after them. A hair dryer in the fireplace. Stevie's gasping goldfish flopping around the foyer. I inherited these boobs from my great-great-great-grandmother, Betty the Shoemaker. It is said these boobs were won in a card game by her father. He kept them snug in an apple crate and only brought them out on special occasions. Sometimes I daydream of being a flat-chested maiden, running through a field of tomatoes and daffodils. When I was a young girl, I never imagined I would one day possess such wild, incorrigible boobs. I am frightened to have children because of them. I suspect my left boob, especially, might be capable of murder.

(This exercise inspired by "[Confession Poem](#)" by Louis Jenkins)

Poetry Exercise # 3

Ingredients:

1. Something you or someone you know (or made up) has never let go of.
2. A massive "thing" (could be an animal, something mechanical, whatever, just BIG)
3. A comfortable place

Write a poem or story about something someone has yet to let go of. You do not have to name it. But as the poem or story progresses, allow the thing to become bigger until it physically becomes something massive that the person carries with them. What changes has this person made to accommodate this thing? What damage has it done, if any? What does it enable the person to do? What do others think of it? Where does the person take this thing for some peace and quiet?

(The final exercise in the "Burden" series was inspired by the poem "[Fish Out of Water](#)" by Louis Jenkins.)

FISH OUT OF WATER

by Louis Jenkins

When he finally landed the fish it seemed so strange, so unlike other fishes he'd caught, so much bigger, more silvery, more important, that he half expected it to talk, to grant his wishes if he returned it to the water. But the fish said nothing, made no pleas, gave no promises. His fishing partner said, "Nice fish. You ought to have it mounted." Other people who saw it said the same thing, "Nice fish. . . ." So he took it to the taxidermy shop but when it came back it didn't look quite the same. Still, it was an impressive trophy. Mounted on a big board the way it was, it was too big to fit in the car. In those days he could fit everything he owned into the back of his Volkswagen but the fish changed all that. After he married, a year or so later, nothing would fit in the car. He got a bigger car. Then a new job, children. . . . The fish moved with them from house to house, state to state. All that moving around took its toll on the fish, it began to look worn, a fin was broken off. It went into the attic of the new house. Just before the divorce became final, when he was moving to an apartment, his wife said "Take your goddamn fish." He hung the fish on the wall before he unpacked anything else. The fish seemed huge, too big for this little apartment. Boy, it was big. He couldn't imagine he'd ever caught a fish that big.

Poetry Exercise #4

Ingredients:

1. Something that could be used (but is not meant for) digging.
2. A person you had almost completely forgotten about, until now.
3. A routine chore.
4. The person, place or thing nobody warned you about.

While digging/scraping/carving/mining/piercing/slitting(#1), whatever, find the forgotten person(#2)inside. Discover how all that he/she does is the one chore(#3) all day long. And beautifully. Why?

Discover the one thing they could have warned you about(#4), had you remembered them. Don't fiddle too much with details, instead, write how you live your life differently, now that you remember this person. Now that you know they knew what you didn't know, until now. Oh, and make sure you only find them once. Also, make sure you continue to try to find them again, but never do. Really, these prompts are just that - prompts. Small literary or non-literary nudges to get you to write. You might not follow all of the directions in this, and that's okay. I write the poems for these as I go, and I rarely follow my own directions. How can I expect YOU to do so? I ain't your mother. But be sure to follow this one thing: write all of this in the third-person.

(My Poem is in Progress)

(This poetry exercise was inspired by Stephen Dobyns' poem "[To Pull Into Oneself As Into A Locked Room](#)" from *Velocities: New & Selected Poems*, one of my very most favoritest books of poetry EVER.)

Poetry Exercise #5

Ingredients:

1. A beautiful thing that is not yours
2. The last straw

Part One: Write a poem where you end up with something(#1) that is not yours. Make sure you did not properly earn it.

Part Two: Write about the last straw. When you knew it was over, when you knew you had to just walk off the job, when you finally had to sell it, when you had to close its wide open eyes with your own hand, when you put down that dumb book and refused to read any more chapters, when you realized it wasn't alive anymore but you were still feeding it lettuce, when you hugged him and it felt as if all the butterflies had been pinned to the bottom of your stomach, when the heel broke off so you threw the good one away too, when her hair turned brittle and not worth brushing, when she limped into the corner and refused to eat, when you thought twice about replacing the final bulb.

Number the poem. Or don't. Whatever. Don't follow rules if you expect to write anything worthwhile. The cliff will always be there. It's up to you when to jump.

(This exercise was inspired by Miranda July's short story, "[The Shared Patio](#).")

Poetry Exercise #6 *

1. Three things that frighten you
2. Three specific people or places you will never return to
3. A mythological event
4. Three comforts

Find one of the above in a place it does not belong. Write a "Found" poem. Not, like, a *found* poem, but more like [an ad](#). Did you attempt to lure it home? Feed it? Kill it? Ask it out on a date? Drive it to a clinic? Then incorporate the other things from your list. Have fun. Be freaky. Verb the nouns (my favorite thing!) Don't make me come over there and axe murderer staggering towards you in the dark hallway you!

(This exercise was inspired by [Craigslist](#))

* tomorrow I will post my imagery exercise since some of you have asked about it (it had been posted somewhere else once, and then it ran away.)

Imagery Exercise (my one of many)

The following exercise is about seven years old. I developed it while teaching poetry at Bellevue Hospital's on-site high school. I've since given this exercise

to slam team members and/or grown-ups and every time, unlike my students, these folks get hung up on part two of this exercise. They just can't hang. Too many doors inside them closed. But let's give it a whirl:

IMAGERY EXERCISE:

Create three columns on a piece of paper (or Excel spreadsheet, ha!)

In Column One, write down twenty-five inanimate objects (or "objects that cannot just get up and walk away.")

Column Two: write down the first animal that comes to mind when you think of the object in Column One. (Consider shape, movement, sound. A bullet is about the size of a cockroach, or it moves swift, like a shark or digs through skin, like a mosquito.)

Column Three: sounds or actions that animal makes.

Once you've completed all three rows, omit Column Two, and use Column Three to help give your objects character.

Create a line or poem that includes your combos.

For example:

wine glass / monkey / screech, hang, swing, play
eye / snail / crawl, slime, munch, lug

can become:

*The woman gripped
her screeching wine glass
as her husband's eyes
crawled across
the cleavage in the room.*

Poetry Exercise # 8

Ingredients:

1. One regret
2. A natural disaster
3. One perfect thing.

The first line of your poem is going to be #2. Next, imagine/write as if #1 had never happened. Let the poem unfold during the regret's undoing. This is a literary moonwalk, my friend. What difference would it have made, had **it** never been made? Who would be born or not born? Who would you have loved or hated instead? Which house would have burned down, which house would have stayed built or not built? Which house would have the most or least ghosts? Do you understand I don't mean a literal house? What perfect thing would have lost its perfection if there was nothing to regret?

(This exercise was inspired by Bob Hicok's poem "[American History](#).")

Poetry Exercise # 9

Twice within the last seven days, a little exercise I give myself has come up, so I'm taking it as an invisible nudge from the universe. Speaking of "invisible," we're going to write a poem off of what I call a "ghost line." A ghost line is an inspiring line or image that becomes the unseen first line of a poem. It's how I come up with a lot of my exercises. I see a striking group of words or an arresting image and design an exercise based off that.

You know how you underline a favorite line in a book? That's what I do, only I take it a step further and build an entire story or poem off that.

Today's ghost line is from [Anne Sexton's](#) "Menstruation at Forty." It is:

Love, that red disease

Now remember, this is the invisible "first line" of your poem. Do NOT include it in your poem (unless you give credit to the original author.) YOU come up with the rest. So the second line is actually your first VISIBLE line. Fun, right? Also, the poem doesn't *have* to have anything to do with the ghost line, but the point of the ghost line *is* to inspire.

- untitled -

It coughed its final cough
as its head settled
into the pillow,
blistered arms
at its side,
the last breath,
a shattered hymn.

The women gathered
in the corner,
men stood in their suits,
blue and unmoving.
The fever snapped
at the frightened villagers,
lunged for
the other children
hiding behind the white lace
curtains, ineffectual skirts.

By sundown,
the room nearly empty--
a row of candles, unspent,
the boy's small shadow
of sweat:
a wet ghost
in the bassinett.

Writing Exercise # 10

On the eve of [NaPoWriMo](#) , I give you this final exercise ("final" as in "I will be writing poems and wrangling children for the next thirty days straight, so don't come lookin' here for any prompts in that time!")

But before that, I should mention that I was in Detroit eleven days ago for the Women of the World Poetry Slam and it was amazing; full of female voices from all over the country, a rare and invigorating event that I cannot say enough good things about. I have some spectacular up-close pictures of the [Heidelberg Project](#) and we met a gentleman who promised to light a fire in honor of my making the final stage at WoWps. I wish I could go back and collect his match as a souvenir, because it ended up being quite [magical!](#) I will be posting pictures from the trip, hopefully by the end of next week.

Okay. Enough of that business. Here's the prompt:

List

1. A person (real or imagined) that you have not seen/heard from in a long time
2. the first object(s) that comes to mind when you think of that person (it could be the Zippo they always carried, a specific brand of shaving cream they always smelled like, a tube of red lipstick and an emptied shotglass...)

Write a poem or story about how this person(#1) has now been replaced, in your universe, by a sculpture of objects (#2)

It is up to you to decide the shape of the sculpture. It is up to you to decide if that sculpture walks, sleeps, eats, moans, goes grocery shopping...

If it can speak, would you finish a long-lost conversation with it?
What would you offer it? What would you add to it, if anything? What would you take from it?
Where does it live? If it works, what does it do for a living? Does it know who it is the ghost of?
Does it know its real name?

Of blood and doormats

Her voice cracks from her mouth like a lobster. The organ hisses its good-bye song. A hive of blood and doormats, she tippy-toes down the aisle in a dress made of broken water and shotgun shells. Two mothers weep in the front row, noses pressed deep into their corsages. The limo driver polishes the rearview mirror as the groom's twisted arm squeals *I do. I do.*

(This exercise was inspired by Khara Koffel's exhibit and, specifically, "[The Delicacy of Meetinghouse Road](#).")

Writing Exercise # 11

Write a bio in verse for someone. You don't have to know them personally. Include:

1. An act lifted from a fairy tale, myth, or bible/fable
 2. Something you only assume of the person (but state it as fact)
 3. What a part of their body is made of (preferably not humanly possible)
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The cradle fell and out he spilled.
He was the fourth of five sons.
His mouth was a gun tornado.
His first kiss was a lonesome man.
He went to school in a small town where a bottle of gin was elected mayor.
The love of his life had twelve toes and sang like an arsonist.
He married her and had two brilliant mistakes.
He worked in a high heel factory until his hair turned white.
He died in the arms of an unsent love letter.

(This exercise was inspired by Gerald Stern's "[Pennsylvania Bio](#)," from *Last Blue*)

Writing Exercise #12

Let's use a "[ghost line](#)," shall we?

"There is a winged-woman kneeling in the corner of the room."

The Patient

Her face is a jittery hare torn out of its fur.
The bottom of her dress is pinned beneath
one of the machines, but she does not seem to care.
We sit in the blue room together. The news anchor
is done up in lipstick and crime as the roses are dying of thirst.
There is a baby screaming down the hall,
and my old body hears her.
My breasts sulk in the trash can, shriveled
like tongues.

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(From an image by the artist, [Snik](#).)

Writing Exercise #13

The ghost line is:

There was an ocean where her voice had been.

Lolita's Kitchen, 4 a.m.

Bite-sized men rose to the surface,
banging against an iceberg of dirty dishes.
One of the men let out a salted rasp before he sank
like a heavy jewel. Another, buoyed on a baby bottle,
pointed a wrinkled finger at her apron
hanging from a meat hook.
A third, straddling a wooden spoon,
pointed to a plate of sugar cubes
on the counter.
"Look," he cried to the others, "*land!*"

(This ghost line belongs to Fritz Ward's "[Love Letter with Tsunami Diorama.](#)")

Writing Exercise #14

Remember the day you were born? Which person in that room did you trust? Which person had the coldest hands? What secrets did the machines pass to you? Who held you as if you might not come back? What lover's name came riding out on your first breath? Where did everyone go when you slept? What soothed your hunger? What stories came from the spilled blood? Whose face/voice/legs/eyes did you borrow before you learned your own?

(With love and great thanks to the remarkably phenomenal heart and eye of [Diane Arbus.](#))

Writing Exercise #15

Ingredients:

1. a bad day
2. an act that requires deep concentration
3. a small space

First off, don't choose a day that has the potential to ruin this day. Cool? Cool. Now that we have that all cleared up:

write a poem or story in third person. You don't get to be "I" in your worst day story. You have to be He or She or the man or the woman or the girl or the boy or the invisible dog.

Describe the atmosphere of the worst day (#1). What fruits weren't in season? What song was caught in your hair? What animal was in the road? What word was painted on the butcher's wrists? What stepped off of the train? Which one of your teeth snuck away? If you don't remember, that's even better. MAKE IT UP. If you do remember! Lie! Perfect.

Narrate yourself through this day. What was your heart doing to avoid all of this (#2). Narrate the importance of its ignorance. Finally, pick something or someone (real or not real) that was waiting for you when you got home. Where, exactly, was it? (#3) Oh, and don't tell what the thing was doing there. This should be left between the thing and the reader.

(This exercise was inspired by [A Series of Unfortunate Events.](#))

Writing Exercise #16

Ingredients:

1. what you stole
2. what you should not have let him/her take
3. what you want back

Write an apology list poem. To everyone. One per line. DO NOT list who the apology belongs to. If you broke mom's favorite picture frame, write "broken picture frame." then let that image graduate into something else, like, "cracked third grade smile." If you stole someone's car, let that

graduate into, "the missing engine." see?!?!? that's IT. None of these have to be real. Except for the things you listed in #1 & 2. When referencing #2, of course, it is an apology to yourself. The importance here is in the specific details. And in keeping each apology as private as possible. And in never actually writing the word "sorry" or "apology." After all that, figure out a way to squeeze some of the lines into a poem about what you wrote for #3.

(This exercise was inspired by my obsession with creating new lists to mine from.)

Writing Exercise #17

Today's ghost line is:

Wall me up alive in my own body.

(This ghost line is from Margaret Atwood's "[Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing](#)")

Writing Exercise # 18

I took this photo [click on it to enlarge] while adventuring with the fam deep, deep in Ohio. I love the sag and bow. The aching windows. How the corners are like a child's tippy toes, trying to reach the ground from grandpa's big chair.

What would you do if you saw this house in the supermarket? What would its voice be made of? What small and furious thing(s) have taken over? Where does this house sleep? What songs does it not remember? What forgotten things are waiting inside? What does it eat? Who would you name this house after, and why? Where does it hide its condemned hands?

Writing prompt 18.5

It's my little book of word lists, images, poem ideas and spells. If a word pops up in my head, I write it down and then decide what other word best compliments it. "gasoline pacifier" is a fun word combo, though I haven't put it anywhere yet. I also like "dashing rifles" and "cast-iron thrill." I do not actually write any poems in here. I started writing poetry during my last office job (criminy! that was 9 yrs ago!) and for some reason, I can't seem to write unless I'm "sneaking it in" and clackitty clacking at a keyboard. (Preferably one adorned with spilled milk and bread crumbs.)

Writing Exercise #19 (Part One)

The ingredients are:

1. Three historical moments that happened the day/week(s)/month(s) BEFORE you were born. Wikipedia your year. Just type in, say, "1967" and it will give you a good long page of events that happened. Mine through it. Choose an event and write it out.
2. Five things that did not happen (yet) THAT YEAR.
3. Three features you think of when you think of your mother or father (or both.)

This should take some time. Research the year you were born. This will supply you with #1 & #2. Write each event out. If a ship sank, write about the lone person in the cold water. Write their last thought. Write the one crucial line of the farewell love letter they rehearsed in their head. Was something discovered? Did an important person pass away? Choose an empathy point from these events and write write write. Finally, have these moments affect your #3. The drowned sailor in your mother's soft blonde hair. The shrapnel lodged in your father's mustache...

Paint a picture. How it was before you came. This is part one. This is probably gonna take time. Part two is coming on Monday.

This poem will be in parts. You can break it up however you like. "Part One." Or just "I." Or, "The Beginning of The blah blah blah"

Writing Exercise #19 (Part Two)

To conclude writing exercise #19, you must write the second half, of course.

Here are some ingredients that might help you:

1. A calm sound
2. What brings you warmth
3. What you never said

Part two starts here: The Gone Away Place. It can be when your spirit left your body. It can be where you went as a child when you were scared. It can be where you hope to go, where you hope to wake up when you have left this world.

Decide the soundtrack for this place (#1.) Decide what bellows this sound. A bird? A woman? A piano hanging from a tree? Let the walls or the ceiling or the floor or the sitting chair or whatever you want be made of #2. And have someone or something be covered by the text of #3.

Writing Exercise # 20

Okay, this is the last exercise for 2009. We've gone through twenty of these suckers (and by "we" I mean...I have no clue) and a lot has happened since my first exercise. For one, my first full-length book of poetry, "Pink Elephant" (Cypher Books) was released, debuting at number 12 on SPD's [poetry bestsellers list](#) (what? how?! Also, if you've read it, wouldn't it be fun to review it at either [Amazon](#) or [GoodReads](#)? I thought so!) I went on a mini book tour to New England where, once again, Massachusetts made me feel like the prom queen. I have had more poems

accepted by journals as well as some flash fiction and I am tightening the screws on three beasts I am working on simultaneously (in between nursing, changing diapers, baking birthday cakes, texting funny memories to my dad and brother, painting my toenails a deep wet red...) This has been an amazing year, as well as one of the roughest. More on that later. Or not. Who knows? I just hope this year has been gentle and sweet and necessary for YOU. Whoever you are. LOVE.

Ingredients:

1. Something very hot
2. The first object you see when you close your eyes and think of him/her
3. The not enough, list them and be specific
4. The too many things, list them and be specific
5. The first thing that ever scared you. Make it up.
6. What did you change to accommodate _____ ?
7. What inside you will never budge.
8. Where does the blue sky go at night?

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Now, take all of the answers you've written, and move them around. They don't have to make sense. The morning skillet. Somewhere, at the end of the woods. This bone of survival. Love and vitamins and secrets. . .

List them. Then, decide for this group the title. It will be what makes this poem come together. Make sure the title is a little too long. Like, "The other things you took from me the night you came back to the apartment to get the last of your belongings out of the medicine cabinet."

Add lines. Move them. DO NOT TITLE and then arrange. Arrange. Title. Re-arrange. Re-write. Remember what never happened. Write whatever the hell you want. This is yours. No one else could have written it but you. This last exercise was inspired by whomever and whatever and wherever you choose.

Writing Exercise #21

Ingredients:

1. Three "famous" physical characteristics of yours.
2. Describe the weather (past or present) inside your heart, using all five senses.

3. One place that is, for you, the epitome of "peace and quiet"

First, place each thing from #1 in a hiding place (taped to the bottom of a jewelry box, behind a dresser drawer, beneath the mattress)

Okay. Now, narrate the condition of your house/apartment post-death. Include #2 to describe the atmosphere of the house. Scatter the #1s throughout the house. If you want, instruct the person you wish to inherit them on how to find them.

Save your most valuable #1 for #3. Who would you send for it? Or, would you not give it to anyone? Would you instead let it flourish and become something else? If so, what would it become? Have fun. This isn't morbid. No one lives forever. And this is probably as close to a living will that you are ever going to get. (Although if you want, I can give you the name of a good lawyer)

This exercise was inspired by Jack Gilbert's poem ["Gift Horses."](#)

Writing Exercise #22

Ingredients:

1. Three truths you learned by the time you were ten-years old.

2. Three beliefs you still have, despite the truth.
3. Three things that feel like heaven.
4. Three things that feel like hell.
5. Three pieces of nature that are massive.

I'm gonna call this your time machine poem. Because here's what is gonna happen: you are you, now. Only, you get to go back to your kindergarten class with that amazing brain and heart of yours, full of what you know, as your five-year old self. Tell them everything, Billy. Each line should sound like a recess bell. You can break it down by using numbers. Or each line can be to a specific student (make up names, I only remember Scott Schulton from my kindergarten class. Oh, and Salma Gonzalez, who was a first grader. She yanked my braids every day while we waited in line for the bus. Salma Gonzalez, you're a no-good ass-for-brains. And skanky.) Tell the truth about your teacher (even if you're making it up.) Tell the truth about the quietest kid in class. Tell the truth about bullies and first loves and sticky hand holding and panty showing. Tell them everything. Pull from your list accordingly. But make sure you tell three of your classmates that they are what you wrote down for #5. Tell them how big they really are. How strong. How powerful. How everlasting. They need to hear it. I promise.

This exercise was inspired by the amazing Samantha Thornhill's poem, "[Lice](#)."

Writing Exercise #23

Ordinarily the prompts I post are loosely based on a line or an idea I've found in a poem I admire. I try my best to steer you lovelies from attempting to "rewrite" a poem (in your own poetic voice, of course) but today, I have to admit that the poem I was inspired to build a prompt from is so sharp and succinct, I think it's okay to use its premise as a jump off point for yours. So here goes.

Ingredients:

1. Make a list of three peaceful & gorgeous moments from your life. It can involve someone else, or just yourself. It doesn't have to be a life-changing moment, just a time when you were relaxed and safe and warm and full of contentment.
2. Recall the atmosphere of these moments. Specific objects. Sounds. Colors. Aromas...
3. List three things about you that have changed since then.

Write a poem or story that calls it back (#1) You can call them all back. You can call small elements of each one back (#2) but I definitely think it would be interesting to bring them back to a place that, even though it/they might not be compatible with your current situation/feelings (#3) Let's call this your "treasure" poem. Maybe yesterday at work, you needed your grandmother's turquoise bracelet, and the song you heard her sing when she thought she was alone. Or maybe Linda's hair beneath your pillow. Or an entire person in your medicine cabinet. Do what you want. It's your life.

This exercise was inspired by Lucille Clifton's ["oh antic God"](#).

Writing Exercise # 24

Well, I haven't written off of a ghost line in quite some time. If you don't remember the rules, [here they are](#).

Today's ghost line is brought to you by the inimitable [Erica Miriam Fabri](#). She is one of my most favorite homegirl poets. The line is from her poem "[The Secret Language of Symbols](#)." It is also the longest ghost line we've ever used, so let's get to it:

**"You told me you came from a place
where stampedes of horses hunt in the valley of your ribcage."**

So here's the drill. I want you to write a biographical poem for someone you despise. Write the truth of them. Use as many sounds and colors and aromas that you can think of. If you need help, try making an [imagery table](#) before you start. I like the idea of continuing the "you told me," but you don't HAVE to, of course. Instead, you can just start at the beginning. Conception is always fun: "You were spun like a web in the upper right corner of your grandmother's house." To know or design the origins of another is a great way to build empathy. Imagine George W. Bush's first kiss was with a mirror in the middle of a cornfield. Doesn't so much of his life suddenly make sense?

Okay. I've fallen off a little. Forgive me. Back to the exercise:

Assume you know everything about this person. The weather they were born into. Their first day of kindergarten. Their first love and how/why it ended. You know their favorite place to hide. So don't make this easy for yourself. Come up with some doozies. Get as juicy as you can get without drowning your couch. Oh yeah. And when you're done, give it to them. And if you can't do that, tape it to the inside of a bathroom stall. Or slip it under a peach at the grocery store.

Writing Exercise #25

Ingredients:

1. A person you mourn (living or dying) and yes, it can be abstract. Yes, it can be an old self of yours. Make a list of things you recall about this person. Be specific. The red sweater with the hole in it. How their hair hung above their left eye.
2. Write out the event that caused the mourning, even if you aren't exactly sure. Decide, right now, what it was. The last straw. The breaking.
3. A place you will never go.

The title of the poem is the person you mourn. You don't have to use a name. It can be "The Boy in The Red Sweater with a Hole in the Sleeve." What was the first to go? Write the specific things that disappeared first (the list from #1) What grew or fell in its place? What of these things is inside you now? Pick one image from #2 and send it somewhere far. Send it to number three if you want, (even though number three is where, when you think of this person, your heart goes).

(This prompt was inspired by the line "A cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel's heart. Where its icy legs touched her, she got goosebumps. Six goosebumps on her careless heart," from Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.)

Writing Exercise # 26

Ingredients:

1. List five things you can't control. Be specific.
2. List the last five moments that will run through your heart on your last day here.
3. List five people or events you wish you could change. Name specific details about what you'd change.

The title of this piece of writing might be "An Inventory of (insert body part/organ here)" Or, "An Inventory of Your Last Breath." Choose things from your list that you carry in this body part; the lists are your inventory. Keep this in second-person narrative ("you carry your father's clouded lungs in your hands, it is hard to drink a glass of milk because of them.") Write out the consequences of the things you carry. If you choose to carry things from # 2, there are still consequences. But hopefully, they are brighter. Name them. Once you've built some lines, narrow them down. Pick the most important words. Rearrange them for their sound. Figure out what words work best together. Find the rhythm of them, (how else are you going to build [cinquains](#) of them?)

Writing Exercise # 27

Let's make an [erasure poem](#) from a page out of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*.

THE ROAD

He got the little oillamp lit and left it sitting on a rock and he rose and shuffled out through the leaves wrapped in his blankets. The boy whispered for him not to go. Just a little ways, he said. Not far. I'll bear you if you call. If the lamp should blow out he could not find his way back. He sat in the leaves at the top of the hill and looked into the blackness. Nothing to see. No wind. In the past when he walked out like that and sat looking over the country lying in just the faintest visible shape where the lost moon tracked the caustic waste he'd sometimes see a light. Dim and shapeless in the murk. Across a river or deep in the blackened quadrants of a burned city. In the morning sometimes he'd return with the binoculars and glass the countryside for any sign of smoke but he never saw any.

Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy's age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside ground with pick and mattock and brought to light a great hoard of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull cubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day. The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted hor-

Writing Exercise # 28

Let's face it. Some years have been cruel to us. So let's just wring out that year of all its ugliness so we can move on with our beautiful selves, alright? Let's go.

Ingredients:

1. List three moments that will not let go of you.
2. Five honest facts about yourself. They don't have to be deep. They just have to be true.
3. Three skills you wish you had, then expand (for example: carpentry = carving = whittling a forest of brides)

- - -

Call the poem whatever you want, but dedicate it to the year(s) that (one or all of) the events from #1 occurred. It could be the Year of The Divorce. The Year of The Fires. The Year of The Left Behind...The Years of Unimaginable Difficulty and Lost Things.

Write a prayer for yourself. Build a church for yourself. A place where you are allowed to move beyond that terrible year. Weave in the facts about yourself. Allow them to be praise, even if, at first, they were not. If you stated "I am old," good. If you want to expand that, and say "My hair has become a silver lining," good. Allow yourself to create. Take #3 and run with it. Do everything.

(Today's exercise was inspired by Anne Sexton's "[For The Year of The Insane.](#)" READ IT.)

Writing Exercise # 29

The questions we ask are usually a form of hunger. Some of the questions, of course, are starved and snapping. They have a lot of teeth. While other questions are quieter; small attempts to

quench a mild thirst and are equally as kind to us as they are to the person being asked. That said, let's jump in:

INGREDIENTS

1. If you are human, there are at *least* twenty questions you would like to have answered. They could be questions asked of a former lover, a current lover, a parent, a teacher, a stranger on the street, a god, an animal, a country. They might even be questions that could all be answered by one person. They are questions that burn holes in your coat pocket. Questions that pop up at dumb moments, when you'd rather think or worry or wonder or marvel at something else. One question usually leads to more questions. Write down at least ten of those you need most answered. If you are a more advanced human, you might only have one. Write it down.

- - -

Let's build a pantoum of questions. The form is this:

Stanza 1:

Line 1
Line 2
Line 3
Line 4

Stanza 2:

Line 5 (repeat line 2)
Line 6 (new line)
Line 7 (repeat line 4)
Line 8 (new line)

Stanza 3:

Line 9 (repeat line 6)
Line 10 (line 3)
Line 11 (line 8)
Line 12 (line 1)

Each line should be a new question, but make sure whichever line you choose to open with is the line you want to close with, too. If it is only one question repeated, try tweaking it. "Did you think of me when you kissed her" can become, "Were my lips beneath her lips?"

Pantoums look strict, but I actually feel a lot looser when working with the form. To get a better idea of how you can alter repeated lines, check out this masterful (and often hard-to-find) [pantoum by Maxine Kumin](#).

(This exercise was inspired by the frightening poem/fable "[The Invisible Men](#)" by the Nakasak Eskimo - scroll down a little to read it @ the site)

Writing Exercise # 30

This has a chance of being either really silly or really w i c k e d. As usual, it's up to you.

INGREDIENTS:

1. Think back when you were small. Between 5 and 8. Write down as many of the things you wished for back then as you can remember. If you can't remember, imagine it.
2. List three things you were afraid of as a child.
3. List three things that scare you now.
4. List three things that bring you joy, to this day, from way back when.

- - -

Fans of The Twilight Zone know the story of little Anthony from the episode "[It's A Good Life](#)." I know it scared the piss outta me when I first saw it. Still does. A boy who is not really the freckle-faced boy before you, but some sort of monstrous being who can destroy you by thinking it. Even his good intentions backfire. A cure for a woman's headache leaves her headless. (This is not in the episode - it's alluded to in the [original sci-fi short story, by Jerome Bixby](#).)

So let's imagine you got what you wished for when you were young. Let's imagine you became the master of all that scared you. Let's pretend your joys were forced upon everyone. Let's imagine you are now the narrator, and the poem is your voice-over, and you are witnessing your young self go about your daily life. Or better, let's imagine your young self's first kiss. Or prom. Whatever you like. But make sure it's kept in third person. And make sure you know better than your young self. I mean, you're from the future, right? Your now is at least a decade or two later than your small self's now. Bring up the thoughts of the people around you. The normal fears (#3) they have, or once had or *wished* they had, that are now overshadowed by the aftermath of your young self.

There goes little Judy, who is not so little. She is one million-feet tall / she is known to crush houses / and kick over fire hydrants when she is mad / She is whistling the birds out of their nests / and smashing anything that won't shut up. / She doesn't know it yet, but Judy is about to meet the boy of her dreams. / A boy she would shrink herself down for. / Too bad her friend, The Dark, will not approve. / Too bad The Dark has belonged to Judy for so long / she doesn't know how to let go of it.

Writing Exercise # 31

I'll be posting a couple more writing prompts today since I'll be on the road for the next two days, and I can't leave my pals hanging during NaPoWriMo! Today's prompt has been itching in me for quite some time. I hope it gets your pens scratching.

INGREDIENTS

1. Three close-calls you or someone you love/know/have read about has experienced.
2. List five things, natural or man made, that you admire.
3. List five things about the person you wrote about in #1 that you admire. (Kudos if you're writing about yourself!)

Have I mentioned lately, how there are no rules? How you can't write something wrong, if you've written ANYTHING? How these are not guidelines, but jumping off points? Like jumper cables, only without the grease on your pants?

- - -

Write out the day of the event from #1. If you don't know by now, I am a huge supporter of atmosphere: set the tone for your poem by using objects, weather, sights and sounds. Don't forget to use the five senses as much as possible.

We are all ghosts of near-deaths. We have all survived something. It doesn't matter how big or small the event is. If you are reading this, you are still here. You can write the event itself, or the aftermath of it. Choose when your car nearly skidded off the road. Choose the drink you turned down on the first day of your sobriety. How things changed. But make sure you mention what didn't change (#2.) The beauty that remains is important. The beauty of #3 is important, too.

If you can't praise the event, praise the survival. Your/his/her quick thinking. Count the blessings. Make them gods if you want. Be a god if you want.

(This prompt was inspired by one of my favorite poets, Aracelis Girmay, and her poem "[To The \(Heart\) Horse.](#)")

Writing Exercise # 32

I've given this exercise in a few workshops before, but I've always handed out the phobias. In this case, it's up to you:

INGREDIENTS

1. List five phobias you have. If you don't have any, make some up. Need some help? [Who's your mommy!?!?!?](#)
2. List ten routine things you see in a house. Or a city. Or a church. Or a playground. Or a supermarket.

- - -

Title your poem with one of the phobias as well as the setting you chose for #2. For example, "In The Church of Automatonophobia." Make sure the routine things are tweaked to accommodate their settings. I'll always remember when a poet wrote, "In The Town of the Forgetful / the mayor is a dead elephant / there is no electricity / the daisies deceased..." What do the people here pray to? If you want, write a letter from someone who lives in this place to a person in the "outside world."

If you don't want to do a phobia, and would rather it be "On The Island of Well-Hung Waiters," SWEET.

Dream big, kittens. This is your fairytale. This is your daydream't nightmare. This is your fantasy island getaway. Happy birthday, all the time.

(This exercise was inspired by [this get-up designed by the late great Alexander McQueen.](#))

Writing Exercise #33

You know what I hate more than most things on this planet? Bullies. They come in many forms. They come as politicians, classmates, hurricanes, disease...

So let's keep this simple.

INGREDIENTS

1. List a bully. Just one. Because we can't lose focus.

Write a curse. If you want to bless them instead, that's cool, too. If you want to curse a philanderer with fourteen daughters, that makes perfect sense. But you gotta get deeper than that. If you want to bless your mother's hands with bowls of forgiveness, you can do that too.

It might be cool to flip from line to line. A curse of this / a blessing of this.

Do you, unless you're standing up for someone else. Then do you, but also give yourself magical powers.

It's clear I need a glass of water. It's been a long day. Peace to you. You're doing great.

(This exercise was inspired by the Poet Laureate of My Heart, [Martín Espada](#) and his miraculous poem, "[Federico's Ghost](#)."

Writing Exercise # 34

Today, I am going to let you be inspired by those who have inspired me. Listen to these poems. These are poets who, back in 2001, made an initial and everlasting impression upon me, who changed my brain for good, who hammered down the wildness in me so I could learn how to build something of it.

[Daniel McGinn](#)

[Mindy Nettifee](#)

[Lucy Anderton](#)

[Derrick Brown](#)

[June Melby](#)

[Chris Tannahill](#)

[Rachel Kann](#)

[Jeff McDaniel](#)

Writing Exercise # 35

I was thinking a lot about lineage yesterday. About how I don't know much of where I come from. Seeing photos of my [maternal] great-grandparents for the first time yesterday clued me in on small things. I know where my brother gets his nose, where my youngest daughter gets her bone structure.

Of course, we inherit much more than physical features. Which brings me to this exercise...

INGREDIENTS

1. Write down any habits or personality traits that you know you inherited from someone in your family. If you did not grow up with blood relatives, imagine which parts of you were inherited from your birth mother/father, or a distant relative.
2. Write down three spectacular forces of Nature.
3. Write down five objects you equate with either of these words: violence, power, strength.

- - -

This poem can start from anywhere. And by "anywhere," I mean, before you were born, when you were born, shortly after you were born, six years after you were born. Explain the passing down of things (#1). If it's something your great-grandmother hid in a crack in the ceiling, put it there. Explain the day you discovered it. The day you needed it - when the kids chased your brother home from school, during your first kiss, after experiencing that first funeral...

Inherit at least one thing from #2. Or use one of those forces to explain something of or inside you. (Note: whether you choose an animal or a cyclone, make sure you have one of the "things" gather inside you in a large group. Want help with the names of groups of things? [HERE YOU GO](#). It's fun to switch 'em up, so that your fists become a sleeping flock of horses, or your mouth is a wreck of loose kisses.)

Pass some of your traits to other people. Perhaps a daughter, or a son, or a friend who needs it. Shoot, give it to a movie star who needs it. Some wicked celebrity, some soft politician. Give it to them like you would give # 3 to someone. Include the warning or safety measures. Describe where to hide it. How to conceal it among every day attire. Have fun, people. We are all full of

amazing things, some we cannot control. So let's ride 'em out of ourselves, and write them into our art.

(This exercise was inspired by both [the interview and the poem here](#). Jan Beatty is A MIRACLE BEAST. Buy her books. She is perfect.)

Writing Exercise # 36

Write the conversation you should have had. A conversation that, for whatever reason, is impossible to have now. It's okay if it is with yourself. Or with a ghost. Or with a dog or day. Just have it already.

(Inspired by [Yesterday](#), by W.S. Merwin)

Writing Exercise # 37

It's been a while since we've used a ghost line. If you are just joining us, or have forgotten what a ghost line is, here's my definition from way back: "A ghost line is an inspiring line or image that becomes the unseen first line of a poem. You know how you underline a favorite line in a book? That's what I do, only I take it a step further and build an entire story or poem off that."

Today's ghost line comes from Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Jailbird*.

"I had to make up a lot of memories just to fill up all the empty spaces."

Now, go! And if nothing comes to mind, [play with this website](#) a little bit until something comes!

Writing Exercise # 38

I've used a Diane Arbus photograph in a previous writing exercise, but I don't care. Her images always inspire me in a way that few photographs can; there is always an underlying mood beneath the subjects. You always feel as though they are putting on a show for you, but the facade is ready to disintegrate at any moment.

Today, I'd like to use this photo [\[click the image to enlarge\]](#):

Decide for yourself who these people are. Where they are. Or if they're really even people. Do they represent something else? What is inside that box? What is beneath that crown? Why have they been dethroned? What are they king and queen of? Who has forgotten them? Which of the two is the least patient? Can't forgive? Is full of music? Has never been kissed?

Writing Exercise # 39

First, let me tell you that I read the poem that inspired this prompt about five years ago, and it turned my organs around. My insides shifted. I *felt* it, people! Like a goon, I forgot the title of the poem, as well as its author, but thankfully, my friend Marty knew what I was talking about when I said, "What's that amazing poem about _____ and it had a piano in it?"

Yesterday, I was thinking of how lazy we get in our writing. How, when we're exhausted sometimes, we end up getting all literal and boring. So, let's remember what it is we do again.

INGREDIENTS

1. Similar to the [imagery/personification exercise I created way back when](#), create for yourself a word bank. Think of five to ten beefy words you want to work into today's piece of writing, then decide what objects/people/places/animals best fit each word you have chosen. I usually devote an entire page of a journal to a word. I have "Things That Are Alone" or "Things That Are/Sound/Feel Red", or "Colossal" "Emptying" "Musclcd" etc. S T R E T C H that noggin. Get out of that literal box! Swing from that chandelier of a brain you have! Eventually, you won't need a list or journal. Your brain will automatically reach for things beyond itself.

(Sometimes my class would just build a list poem aka "catalog verse" with these items, like "Sixteen Things In A Lonely House" or we'd talk about how, in poetry, certain objects have become universal symbols for other things and we'd design a kookier version for our own writing. The moon is a symbol for femininity or longing or something unreachable, sure. Easy. But what about a pocket wrench? An empty elevator? An unused tube of lipstick?)

This is also where you can remind yourself to allow objects in the poem to set the tone of your writing. I talk about this a lot, I know, but I really feel it is important as writers to keep in mind that everything is capable of witness. In the poem *Signs* by Samantha Thornhill, "finding a shoe in the woods" is a symbol of fear and anxiety. Robert Hass' [A Story About The Body](#) has an unsettling end (I won't give it away) that sits with you long after the prose is finished, because the objects he chose are saturated in private symbolism; they will mean different things to different readers. Classy!

2. Choose a moment you have witnessed between strangers. If you can't think of one, make one up--if you must, choose a moment between friends or family members, but DO NOT involve yourself.

3. Change the scene around. Move it to a different place. Have the event happen in a tight space, like an elevator or a medicine cabinet. Or onstage. In the ocean. Or on a high wire. Or in the library. Let the surroundings constrict or magnify the voices and movements of the people.

As always, you are the conductor here. There are no rules or guidelines in these exercises, just nudges. Keep the poem in present tense, that's all I ask. Title the poem with either a word or symbol from #1, or with the setting from #3. Let items from your word bank flower the atmosphere. Make sure that, whatever the event is, it adapts to its surroundings. It might struggle, it might prosper. But make sure it is forced to evolve.

(This exercise was inspired by the magnificent C.D. Wright poem [Tours](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16175)<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16175>.)

Writing Exercise # 40

Let's go, folks.

INGREDIENTS

1. Write down something you do well. A skill or trait you know is TIGHT. Do you know how to love your woman proper? Do you know what it takes to make the perfect tamale? Are you good at forgiving? Flamenco? Lying?
2. Three rules you live by. They can be anything: don't flat iron wet hair. Don't kiss with your eyes open. Always eat the upper right hand corner of the birthday cake.
3. List three things that could have destroyed you BUT DIDN'T.

Alright. You have a lot of options here. This can be an instructions poem. This can be a praise poem. This can be a wicked [ghazal](#) or a message in a bottle buried in your backyard.

Write the magic, spectacular voodoo of you. Is this skill expensive? Did it cost you anything or anyone? Does this trait happen without you even trying? What does it require? Do you need small hands? Do you need to be alert? A good listener? Full of nails? Incorporate one or all of your rules (#2) to live by. Understand how they tie in with this power, how they amplify your ability to do this thing well.

Don't forget to work in the moments from #3 with the rest of the poem. It's okay if they appear as non sequiturs. Or if they are incorporated into the skill. Or if they are what drive you to be such a badass husband/taxidermist/educator/chicken soup maker/guitarist/kisser. It can even be your opener. "I survived a plane crash, and now I knit small sweaters with a steady hand."

Do you!!

(This exercise was inspired by the unstoppable Honorée Fanonne Jeffers and her poem [The Gospel of Barbecue](#).)

P.S. along with yesterday's exercise, I posted a little request. [Check it out](#). There is a limited edition mini-chapbook involved!

Writing Exercise # 41

INGREDIENTS

1. What took you so long?
2. What more could you have done?
3. What's eating you? (Literally. Figuratively. Go bananas.)
4. What finds you no matter where you hide?
5. Where did you go when no one noticed?
6. What song or story or monument do your hands resemble? Your eyes? Mouth? Heart?
7. What is constantly at work?
8. What or who was nowhere near one of your greatest accomplishments?
9. What simple thing would you like to do today?
10. What simple thing did you wish for when you were small?
11. What is the meanest you could get?
12. What wish of someone else's would you grant?

Write a fairy tale poem to retell your life story or a moment in your life or someone else's life or the life you imagine for a person you mourn/love/admire/fear.

(This exercise was inspired by the album *Wild Go* by the outstanding band [Dark, Dark, Dark](#) and, specifically, the song -- that I have on repeat for hours at a time most days -- [Something For Myself](#).)

* * *

P.S. [Find out how to get your hands on a limited edition chapbook I'm putting together.](#)

Writing Exercise # 42

I have two cousins in the whole wide world: Frankie and Jenny. My brother and I spent most of our first ten years running around with Frankie and Jenny on the streets of Santa Ana, California as our dads drank themselves into hurricanes. When their dad (the only uncle of mine that I actually considered my Uncle) died last year, it was on the day of my dear friend [Gabrielle Bouliane](#)'s memorial service. There literally was no room left inside of me to grieve. I have never properly dealt with my Uncle Frank's passing.

This morning I found out that Jenny died late last night. Complications from pneumonia. It's been horrific. She'd been in the ICU since February 27th. Her body was being ravaged daily.

For those familiar with my book *Pink Elephant*, Jenny has a brief appearance in my poem *The Doll*. Jenny was the youngest of us cousins, and the happiest. I never could understand it. She was always smiling, her eyes half-mooned to joy. She had red hair and freckles and big brown eyes. She was unlike any other person in my family.

Jenny leaves behind her three young daughters and her husband, Carlos. Her youngest turns a year old today.

Right now, I am listening to the saddest record in my collection. I am thinking about taking the people I love and hoarding them somewhere. I am thinking about underground bunkers in a field of blue children. (Have you ever read that story? By Tennessee Williams? It is one of my favorite stories of all time, and is nearly impossible to [find](#).)

For today's exercise, I'd like you to try the following:

1. List three activities you love to do, but don't always have time for.
2. A line from a song you love and love and love.
3. Three beautiful truths.

- - -

I did not grow up with a mother. I was an angry child because of it, and my anger was dressed in a man's clothing. I did not know how to be anything but mean and violent. Brutish. Femininity was something I copied, over time, and it felt unnatural for the first three decades.

In your writing today, I want you to find a small child somewhere. You choose the where. It can be at the library, behind a romance novel. Or in the ocean. In the backseat of your car.

Take them in. Teach them how to do one of the things from #1. Understand that they might not know your language. Understand this child has had no guidance. Adapt your words to their youthful nature. Write a poem of new language if you want. Design the song lyric to be good advice, or a prayer or mantra. Remind them of #3. Let one of the beautiful truths be a god to them. A parent. A home. Or something created for this child as a gift for their many losses. Give them what they don't know they need. Something they can pass down to their own children. Something to hold onto through loneliness.

(this exercise was inspired by my brave cousin Jennifer, who had four children, despite her body's protests. After losing her first daughter, she had three more, spending nine months on bed rest for each of them. This exercise is also inspired by the loneliness and loss threaded throughout this poem, by Ofelia Zepeda, [Deer Dance Exhibition](#).)

Writing Exercise #43

Today is better than yesterday. This has to be true. Thank you for the kind notes, friends. Now, onto some writing.

INGREDIENTS

1. List an animal/insect that you were frightened of when you were a child. To this day, snakes terrify me. So do wasps. I was stung more than fifty times when I was a kid, thanks to my rock-throwing brother. I hate how their hind legs hang as they fly around, like these paralyzed limbs that just drag along. UGH. Okay. Enough about that.

2. Three questions you are afraid to ask.

Let this poem be its own wild thing. Let the animal or insect or whatever you feared as a child be a life-sized version of its self. Consider what a creature like this would wear. How it would talk. A physical trait it might have. Get comfortable enough to ask it your three questions. It might actually know the answer. It might lie to you. Perhaps this creature has followed you throughout your life. Perhaps it has come to make amends. Or knows a secret of yours. Wants you to know of someone else's good news. It's okay keep quiet. It's okay to watch it tear your house apart from the other side of the window. It's okay if you don't want to look at it, if you ignore it as it goes about its business. But make sure the reader knows it is there. Make sure we know you know it's there.

(This exercise was inspired by a nightmare I had last night about a suit of snakes.)

Writing Exercise #44

Being poor and doing taxes is stressful. I almost forgot to put up this prompt. I'm sorry.

INGREDIENTS

1. Twenty things you remember that he/she doesn't.

- - - -

Go to town. You don't have to focus on one person, here. Let the hes and shes be numerous. Remember specific details, but if you make them up, be sure to make them meaty. (You know how you remember things the way your young or in love or grieving or tired or drugged or sad or excited self perceived them? And looking back at it, you know there's no way things happened like that? Include *those things*.) Give as much atmosphere as you can muster. Write what took the place of the other person's memory of it, or write where they left the memory. Why doesn't your father remember leaving you in the car all that time? What did your lover do instead of hold your hand? Did your wife leave your wedding anniversary in the medicine cabinet? What is it doing there? What happens to half-remembered things?

If you're the non-rememberer, that's okay too.

(This exercise was inspired by the poem [Neglecting the Kids](#) by the great Jack Gilbert. If you're going to borrow his form completely, don't forget to write "after Jack Gilbert." Because we gotta give credit where credit is due.)

Writing Exercise #45

INGREDIENTS

1. A person with a character trait or habit that keeps you up at night.
2. A quiet thing that goes about its business (often unnoticed)

In today's writing, let the person's habit or trait breed something of itself that resembles #2, only make sure whatever it breeds is representative of its creator. Have these things graze or swim or peck or sleep long hours. Choose something from #3 that this trait eventually becomes. Think of a church steeple termited with grief. Or a herd of cyclones that overeats (women). Maybe the person loves too much or falls in love too often. Maybe they are always giving back-handed compliments. It's always up to you, ladies and gentleman. I just work here.

Be the careful observer. The grim Jacques Cousteau narrating its movements and slow, steady destruction.

(This exercise was totally inspired by the obnoxiously talented artist - who also designed the cover of my book [Pink Elephant](#) - [and plaid shirt aficionado, Mike Stilkey.](#))

P.S. Wanna help a teacher out while getting a limited edition chapbook from me? [Clicky Clicky.](#)

Writing Exercise #46

This is one of my favorite prompts that comes from one of [THE BEST teaching books for writing ever.](#) (YOU'RE WELCOME.)

I call this the Russian Nesting Doll Exercise, only the things don't have to get smaller. Here's how it works:

One of my students wrote: I opened my heart and out came my father/I opened my father and out came a fist/I opened his fist and out came my teeth/I opened my teeth and out came a song...

See?! FUN. Or not fun. But still, it's gonna get your gears working. Promise.

I'm off to Boston and NYC. I'll do my best to put up prompts from the road, but they might be wonky because my phone is a total jokester sometimes.

Writing Exercise #47

INGREDIENTS: (Multiple Choice)

1. Your first eight acts of rebellion.
2. Eight things you've stolen.
3. Eight things that were taken from you.
4. Eight things you've given away.
5. Eight things you deserve.
6. Eight things you covet.
7. Eight things you keep hidden.
8. Your eight final acts of rebellion.

Write a poem in parts/numbers. Imagine this poem as a slide show. "Here you'll see me climbing into the cupboard and stealing the cookies/ and in this one, the girl with unleashed braids chases me through my kitchen with an ax"

Have fun. Or have awful. But have it well, my dear.

(This exercise was inspired by Lewis Carroll's "[An Agony in Eight Fits.](#)")

Writing Exercise #48

INGREDIENTS:

1. Go [here](#) and pick an occupation for your subject.
2. Three things you like to do for your lover.
3. A fun place that would be better if it wasn't always so crowded.

Write the person you've chosen for #1 as your lover. How does his/her occupation affect your romantic routines (#2)? Daily routines? Sleeping routine? Eating routine? What happened the first time you took them to #3? How have you changed to accommodate them? Is there something you can no longer do? Is there anything you miss? What would your wedding be like? Children? Home? Arguments? Turn ons?

Writing Exercise #49

Seems like a day for a litany, doesn't it?

INGREDIENTS:

1. Three things you witnessed by the age of ten.
2. Three things you learned the hard way.
3. Three things you can't forget.
4. Three things that worry you.
5. Three things you have built.
6. Three things you have destroyed.
7. Three things that follow you.
8. Three things that calm you.
9. Three things you envy.
10. Three things you wish weren't true.

I love the litany as a form. As much as I love unitoums (one-word pantoums). Before you start today's writing, read Gabrielle Calvocoressi's poem, [Late Twentieth Century in the Form of Litany](#). My sister, April, introduced me to her and holy BOLOGNA! Go buy all of her books. Then come

back to your lists of things and design your own litany. Decide, first, which of the things you've written down will be your recurring line. Then go go go.

We're in the home stretch, folks. One week left of NaPoWriMo! By now, your brain is either exhausted or it's limber and ready to jet on down to the finish line.

(This exercise was inspired by the mantra I built for myself on the subway yesterday.)

Writing Exercise #50

INGREDIENTS:

1. Someone from your life who was treated terribly by a group of people. It's okay if you didn't know them personally. It's better if you are unsure of their current whereabouts.

Write a mythology for this person. Decide when, in their life, they became a target for wrong doing. Start it small, at birth perhaps. When the lonely nurse refused to give them over to their mother. Or first grade, when the teacher never called them by their right name. Create the moments that snowballed into them becoming a person who could endure hardships later on. But make sure this becomes their power; their ability to withstand the worst of people.

For example, this girl Alma from fifth grade used to pick on us first graders while standing in line for the bus. She used to yank our braids or kick us really hard in the back of our legs. In reality, I'd finally had enough one day and I turned around and whopped her in the head with my metal Bee Gee's lunch pail. But here, I'd write that every time she kicked me, I'd levitate a little. And when I came home to my father, he'd smack me a little higher into the air. You know. [One Hundred Years of Solitude](#) style.

Allow as much of the fantastic to happen to and from this person. Give them all of the powers you can muster. Write them a wonderful life. Or write them as the hero of a cautionary tale. Remember how everything in the world is capable of witness. How did nature respond to this person? What became of manmade things in their path? What, if anything, has taken the place of their blood? Hands? Mouth? Heart?

(This exercise was inspired by Neutral Milk Hotel's songs [Little Birds](#) (start it at 1:06) and [Oh Comely](#).)

Writing Exercise # 51

INGREDIENTS

1. Three objects that scare you.
2. A calming place or song.
3. A boring routine.

- - -

Write a letter to someone from inside another person's brain. Choose your brain wisely. Imagine the setting in a place like this. What's lying around (#1)? What is the soundtrack (#2)? What is in there that shouldn't be? What does it need more of? What is the constant inside this brain(#3)? What memories can you see in there, and where are they kept? Is anyone else in there? If so, what is he/she doing? Does anything grow in there? What is it upholstered with? How long have you been there? What will you do to get out?

(This exercise was inspired by a line in Ana Božičević's poem *Swan* <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/239620>.)

Writing Exercise #52

This is going to sound easy, but it isn't.

INGREDIENTS:

1. Three things you stress out about.
2. Five things/skills you do not have, but want.
3. Five sounds you hate.
4. Three animals that scare you.
5. Five small things that annoy you.

- - -

Here's what we're going to do. Title the poem with a moment from #1. For example: When The Phone Goes Three Days Without Ringing or After You Lose Your Job or When Your Lover Moves Away or When I Got Spanked For What I Didn't Do...

Then let the next lines be guided by this title and go! Include as much of your others lists as possible.

When Your Lover Moves Away

Everything leaks.
Everyone sounds like a grand piano under water.
Sharks thrash in the sink. You wake up
missing your writing hand.
The cats howl like distant sirens.
Every child is playing a filthy violin.

(This exercise was inspired by the magnificent Regie Cabico and his poem *Glare* [http://qpoetry.com/poems/cabico/.](http://qpoetry.com/poems/cabico/))

Writing Exercise #53

I'm writing this from my space phone, so it's gonna have to be short and sweet:

Write a diner scene where an old movie star comes in and takes a seat next to you.

Writing Exercise #54

Yesterday and today have been a whirlwind. I'm currently in NYC for the PEN International Voices Festival. I am badly sunburned, I am fatigued and I am cranky. That said, I am annoyed at falling beyond on my exercises. So let's just get to it.

Write a poem about the night you were conceived. Wikipedia will be helpful in figuring out what the world was like at the time. Use this calculator to figure out when it happened:
<http://www.paulsadowski.com/Birthday.asp>

Use that juicy imagination of yours. GO BIG.

Writing Exercise #55

I'm writing this in Duane Reade. Someone just said, "I hope she understands what I'm willing to give up to be with her. She is the god of my heart."

Just when I think I've heard it all...Oh New York city, you can be so sweet sometimes.

Write a poem about the god of your heart. If you want, choose a different organ or body part. Or an emotion. Or the best or worst year of your life.

Writing Exercise #56

INGREDIENTS

1. One of the worst decisions of your life.
2. Three selfless acts you have committed.
3. Something you used to love when you were little.

Now, read [this amazing poem](#).

Write an alternate universe poem about one of the worst choices you've ever made. The best way to do this is to write out as much as you can remember about #1; try to get down to the smallest details of that day. If you don't remember, make it up.

Your reader never needs to know what it is, because we're going to journey with your alternate self. Choose a setting opposite of where the bad choice was made. Make sure elements of that day are still around you, but this time, they are not as they'd been, originally. If a broken windshield was involved in the actual version, have a waitress drop a tray of drinking glasses. If you were bruised after the real events of the bad decision, make the neighborhood you're alternate self walks through be filled with nothing but blue houses.

Have your alternate self complete a selfless act for a stranger. Make sure that stranger is a metaphor for something from the original event. Make sure this act has a snowball affect for the stranger. Something good or grand that is able to happen due to your generosity. Allow yourself to still love #3. Allow it to still be there for you. If it is a place, have that be where you go to sleep. If it is a toy or pet, carry it with you everywhere you go.

If you want, let the narrator announce a few things that didn't happen. "Rachel did not cross the street today / she instead stopped at an ice cream truck / as the birds above her fought for worms / and a big blue car did not run a red light."

It might be best to keep this in third person. Second person if you're daring. Allow yourself some sweetness. We can't drag our mistakes around with us everywhere we go.

Writing Exercise #57

Write a second-person narrative poem about a moment when you were extremely scared/lonely/grief-struck/cruel/free or wild.

Writing Exercise #58

INGREDIENTS:

1. Three humiliations.
2. Three disasters (natural, political, whatever you want)
3. Three discomforts.

Do you know what a curse is? Not a curse word, I'm talking about an actual downhome and hearty curse. If you've never written one, that's okay. You've most likely thought one in response

to someone wretched before. And if you haven't, you probably deserve some sort of medal.

This exercise is about you writing some catalogue verse...a list poem of seventeen curses. The first nine should be pulled from the things you wrote out as ingredients, above. By the time you hit number 8 or 9, you should be on a roll. Which is why I want you to *s t r e t c h* that amazing brain of yours and write 8 more.

The entire poem should not be to one person. Curse anyone and everyone you can think of. I'm thinking Newt Gingrich has an entire congregation of blackbirds waiting to peck out his tongue. Oh, which reminds me. Try to incorporate [groups of animals](#). Or better, groups of [insert horrible thing here.] That animal groups link is my go-to when I'm feeling extra wicked. And don't worry, you can be naughty on the page today, because tomorrow's exercise will totally make up for it.
at

Writing Exercise # 59

INGREDIENTS:

1. Think of someone you have great memories of.
2. List some of those memories. Capture as many quiet/wild/scary/joyous moments as you can.
3. Make up three impossible memories.

Let's write an anaphora poem. [CLICK HERE](#) to learn what one is and, also, to read a few examples. [Ginsberg's "Howl" is a great example, too.](#)

Consider any of the following to be your opening/repeating line:

It seems like yesterday when

No one can take away

Let the last thing I remember be

We dared to

When we were young

Our hearts only wanted to

In 19____

or make up your own. Once you catch your rhythm, don't let it go. Include the impossible memories. Include specific details of places only you and this person could know. It's okay if none of these memories are real. If you want this to be a dream-filled eulogy, do it. But make sure you have some fun.

Writing Exercise #60

Ingredients:

(answer these. NO monosyllabic answers or you will cheat yourself. Oh, and DO NOT move to the next step until you have completed these.)

1. Where will you be in 100 years?
2. Something awful to find in your bedroom.

3. Write down three images from three separate fairy tales.
4. Describe the soundtrack of your childhood.
5. Write the cure for a broken heart.
6. What physical attribute of a celebrity do you wish you had? Include their name in your answer.
7. Write the materials it takes to build an unstable house.

Make sure you've written out your answers before you move on to the next step.
If you read the next step,

you aren't going to be able to write your answers the way you need yourself to.

I'm serious. DO NOT MOVE ON to the next step until you have created the above ingredients.

I'm not joking.

Like, for real.

STOP IT.

SECOND LIST OF INGREDIENTS:

1. Write seven questions you'd love to ask _____. Each question doesn't have to be to the same person. Save one for god and one for your favorite aunt if you must, but make sure the questions are yours. Things you need the answers to. You must be curious about things. You must wonder why _____ happened, or how _____ could have ended differently.

Once you've written out all seven of your questions, answer each one with your first list. Do the best you can to keep them in the same order. I often do this exercise with a partner (we each write down seven questions and seven answers and then I answer their first question with my first answer, no matter how ridiculous, and just go down the line.) Title the poem, "Conversations with _____" and then include an abnormal setting - think butcher shop, think the library at 3:15 a.m., think abortion clinic holiday party. Or, do something else entirely! Remember, there are NO RULES to my exercises. These steps are just to get your gears moving.

This is just one fun way to get juicy non sequiturs. This is how I come up with lines or images meant to unsettle the reader in the middle of a stanza. To remind them they are reading a poem

and not the newspaper. Because isn't a poem about going to church better when "Marilyn Monroe's pinky finger" finds its way onto the collection plate?

Do whatever you want with your questions and answers but make sure it is something you would not have thought of yesterday. If you're still superduper stuck, let a Traci Brimhall poem [fix you](#). [BAM!](#)

Writing Exercise #61

Write a poem that re-tells a family anecdote. If you don't have one, think of one you've heard from someone else. A story that has never left you. Let the last line be what you learned from this anecdote; a power you now have, or a black hole you avoid.

It's not as simple as it sounds. Trust me.

Writing Exercise #62

INGREDIENTS:

1. Write down three spectacular moments you have witnessed.

2. Write down three things you wish you could do for three other people.
3. Name three things you've done in a rampage.
4. Name three things you've done for love.
5. (This might be hard.) You have to come up with ONE WORD that best describes you.

What you wrote down for #5 is your title. Have the next lines or stanzas be its numerous definitions by using the moments you wrote down for 1-4.

(This exercise was inspired by the spectacular [poem "Mean" by Colette Labouff Atkinson.](#))

Writing Exercise #63

INGREDIENTS:

1. List three specific tasks required of those who work in a uniform.
2. Write three specific tasks different animals do to survive.
3. One thing a president or dictator or person of power does in the first hour of waking.
4. List three tasks performed by people who have white collar jobs.
5. Something only a lover would know.
6. Something only an enemy would do.

Write about something monumental that happened to you, even if it's one line. Then include how all of the people from your lists continued their tasks. Consider this a poem about how the show went on. Make sure you articulate how important these tasks were in keeping their world afloat. Which is, of course, your world, too.

Writing Exercise #64

I've never used a word pool for an exercise on this blog, so let's start now:

messy
ceremony
clamp
anchor
insect
brine
legacy
suffocate
borrow
turbulence
cannon
devote
burden
detangle

Feeling like you still need some extra voltage? [READ THIS POEM.](#)

Writing Exercise #65

INGREDIENTS:

1. Write down three historical moments that have happened during your life.
2. Create an image log for each event. If you want to focus only on one, make sure it's the most vivid.

Write about a first experience you've had that parallels with the historical moment. Write it as if they happened at the same time, even if they didn't. Write it as if they happened just a few yards from each other. Or, get wild, and be what caused the event. Just remember to keep it classy.

Writing Exercise #66

Haven't done a ghost line exercise in a while. If you don't know or remember the rules, it goes like this. You/I pull a hot line from a poem or story of someone else's, then make that the "invisible" first line of your poem/story. You essentially build off the line, and your second line is the "visible" first line of your piece.

Today, I'm feeling: Each front porch holds a chair where no one sits," " from the poem [Our Lady of Perpetual Help](#), by April Lindner.

Writing Exercise #67

Write a list poem made completely of alternate endings. (I'm sure you have a zillion things you'd like to change. I have a zillion and one.)

Writing Exercise #68

INGREDIENTS:

1. Write down a place of dread. It's tax season, I'm sure you can think of something. If you hate the dentist, go with that.
2. Think of an infamous asshole. It could be someone from your personal history. Or it could be a former president.

Have the asshole come in desperately looking for services from #1. Perhaps it's at a dentist's office. If so, what was found in this person's teeth? If the place is an accountant's office, consider making the asshole create a spreadsheet. A breakdown of all the terrible crap she/he pulled on people. What they owe in return for their bad behavior. Make stuff up. Go bonkers, have fun.

And if it's too early to feel inspired, [read this amazing poem](#) by Cindy Goff.

Writing Exercise #69

INGREDIENTS:

1. Make columns for each of the [Five Senses](#) and beneath each sense, write the things that turn you on. For example, for SMELL: a sweaty man or the name of your wife's neck.
2. Write down the animal of your love. I'm sure your love is either a wild beast or a soft animal.
3. A quiet place.

- - - - -

Write a ghostlove poem. It could be the voice of your actual ghost, or the ghost of your love. Let it or you take on the characteristics of what you chose for #2. Now place the ghost of your self or love in the quiet place. Let it roam and wander, searching for the things listed in #1. Perhaps this is what your love does while you are sleeping. Or what you would do with the person you loved if you left this planet. Just be sure to allow yourself and/or your love its proper wildness.

This exercise was inspired by the number 69.

Writing Exercise #70

Some of my most favorite poems or short stories are less than twelve lines long. Consider the heartbreaking short story by Ernest Hemingway: *For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn*.

Write a poem or story in eleven lines or less. Write it as if you were writing a photograph. You can make the moment personal or choose to write from fiction. What was that moment like, the second your firstborn child came from his mother? Describe the moment you heard terrible news. Or Goldilocks, when she first woke to find herself surrounded by three grizzlies. Let images take the place of feeling. Let the atmosphere set the tone. I know I say that a lot, but I mean it EVERY TIME.

This exercise was inspired by one of my favorites, Adonis, an Arab poet, and his poem "[Song](#)"(as translated by the equally masterful poet [Khaled Mattawa](#))

Writing Exercise #71

INGREDIENTS:

1. List anything you have an illogical fear of.
2. Three shames.
3. A small hiding place in your house.

Write a poem or small story about avoidance. Have everything in #1 and #2 be trapped in #3.

Writing Exercise #72

Today is the year anniversary of my cousin Jennifer's death. It was an unexpected occurrence (she died of complications from pneumonia,) and it is one I have yet to really deal with properly. Most days, I forget she's gone. A luxury of living so far from my family, I suppose. Jennifer left behind four beautiful little girls. She was 32 years old.

The last three years have been exceptionally rough. Five of my friends have died and two of my family members have been diagnosed with terminal cancer. My niece passed away from a rare and aggressive cancer on February 15th. She was 23-months old. There isn't an actual word for what it feels like. The loss. "Grief" hasn't enough letters. Not enough syllables. It is so much bigger than that word. Wilder.

A lot of my writing exercises request the writer to create from a sorrowful place, to try and build a thing of beauty from within that space. I believe, as artists, we should allow ourselves the opportunity to elevate our survival and hardships to a spectacular and artistic level, otherwise, we have not fully acknowledged what we have endured or suffered in the first place. Of course, there are some things that cannot be written, and we must be respectful of this. I have several "can't go there" subjects as well. I don't believe in re-triggering ourselves for the sake of art, and I have always taught my students to be aware of how important it is to withhold. "Keep something for yourself, always." But there is definitely beauty in the aftermath. In the rebuilding. And in knowing that we are not what happened to us.

Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh said, when speaking to those in hospice, the thing that brought them the most comfort was this: "Don't worry. The body that is dying here is not you." I've held onto those words a lot, especially lately. It reminded me of an old exercise I used to give students. A poem in the form of a living will. Only, instead of tangible items, I wanted the writers to pass on favorite physical traits, or portions of their character they were proud of, or the fiery parts that a different person might need. Memories. Anecdotes and useful regrets. Of course, you can choose to leave things to non-people as well. My most favorite line of all time was from Marta, who said, "I leave the hills my nothingness."

Today's exercise will be a variation of the living will. What I want you to do today, dear writer, is write your life in reverse. Start with where you might end, and everything you have carried with you, and get rid of each thing, in whichever manner you choose. Like an un-doing. Get younger with each thing until you are back inside your mother's belly. Close with your first thought.

(This exercise was inspired by my friend, [Sammy Parker, an absolute hero.](#))

Writing Exercise #73

Please write a poem or inner monologue in the voice of your favorite movie character. Please put them in a "regular people" setting. Please choose someone other than Marilyn Monroe.

Writing Exercise #74

I keep forgetting all of the images I've put aside over the years for a prompts. So, here goes:



Writing Exercise #75

INGREDIENTS:

1. Three things that were taken without your permission.
2. Three things you would keep in your own private tree house.
3. Three places animals hide/live in.

For those of you doing the [30/30 challenge](#) for this here National Poetry Month, you're either on a roll or you've lost some gas by now. The sixteenth poem is usually my least favorite of what I put out. So I'm going to try my best to write you an exercise that will, hopefully, spark SOMETHING that has gone untapped this month.

Open the poem with the loss (#1.) beginning either with your search for it, or how it felt the moment you realized it was gone. Gather the things from #2 and go live in #3. Decide who is allowed in your little space and who is not. Write what/who you miss. What small thing from home do you dream of? What song do you sing to yourself? What are you the God of in this new and hidden world? What, of nature, is your anthem?

Still stuck? Poet Nicole Homer has [awesome exercises here](#), and then I found [this site a few days ago that BLEW MY MIND](#).

Writing Exercise #76

I like the idea of writing a poem where a person has the unfortunate ability of seeing the future of everything and everyone. It could be you, or your brother or your sad uncle. Imagine the ordinary tasks and emotions that are tarnished due to this unique ability. How even the weather can be a mirror of a wasteland. How love might end abruptly, even when its not been given time enough to fade.

This exercise was inspired by one of my favorite paintings by Rene Magritte:

Writing Exercise #77

Write a list poem that includes the fifteen things you were born with.

Writing Exercise #78

I was in transit all day yesterday, and without my laptop, which was exciting but also a little guilt-making (and trust me, my guilt-maker is put to daily use, so don't feel too bad) because I want to write exercises for those who are stuck and especially those who are churning out poems, daily.

I woke up feeling this line, so I want you to consider using it as either the title or the first line:

"This is Something I Need You to Understand."

You can write a list of things to be understood, or an incident, but make sure it's really what you need to be understood. And make sure it's written so it CAN be understood. I'm going to go write on this right now. Good luck, you amazing writer, you!

Writing Exercise #79

Sorry I've been blogpostnegligent lately. I will catch up by tomorrow morning. Promise. I was in Bronxville, New York & spent a good amount of time at the Sarah Lawrence Poetry Festival for the past four days, and I am giddy to say it was one of my favorite poetic experiences to date. Such brilliant writers who ALSO read their poems perfectly, which isn't always the case, of course. I think it is important to understand your poem's voice and its oral qualities. Assonance. Musicality. Temper, joy. I didn't even want to read when it was time to read. I wanted to go home and write. Or cartwheel in a field.

I'll base my next five exercises on poems from poets I heard over the weekend. Here goes:

Write a poem or story about how others changed your name for you over the years. Consider the "firsts" of things. (My first pet was a carnival goldfish I won. I named him Orange Pill, he lived for two years. A record for any small animal in that house at the time. His was the first death I experienced. I couldn't sleep that night, and wound up watching Johnny Carson with my dad. It was monumental, and I always held Carson in my heart the way you might a sweet uncle. Then there was Shawnie, my first kiss. And Mrs. Clemons who liked to pinch me in class when no one was looking). So:

Johnny changed my name to the pulse-glow-dark of the television laughter. Shawnie's hard kiss in the closet made me want a boy's name. Made me marry girls on the playground. Mrs. Clemons, flesh, thumb and knuckle, put the "ache" in the middle of my name.

If you know the origin or reasoning behind what you were named, include that. But most of all, have fun. There are no rules. Quit thinking there are rules. I'm just giving you suggestions. Flint spark pop wizz.

This exercise was inspired by a tiny moment in [this firecracker of a poem by Joshua Marie Wilkinson](#). BOOM.

Writing Exercise #80

Let's ghost line today. If you don't know or remember what that means, here's the rule: grab a line you like from a poem or song or story and have it be the "invisible" first line of your piece of writing, i.e. the "jump off" point. So, if I use a line from one of my most favorite books of all time "these were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea" (from Moby Dick) whatever I write off of that would be the actual "visible" first line that appears. Today's ghost line comes from [Farrah Field's poem Amy Mounts the Empire State Building](#):

"Someone was supposed to be holding you in the rain..."

Writing Exercise #81

Write a big juicy mythology of someone. It could be a family member or someone you admire from afar, but make sure it's someone who changed a room with their arrival. Even if it isn't true. Be sure to include all five senses when describing their presence. What weather did they induce? What bloomed suddenly? How did the insects react? What bad idea stirred suddenly in someone's mind? What comfort?

(This exercise was inspired by the extraordinary Vievee Francis and her breakneck poem [Say It, Say It Anyway You Can.](#))

Writing Exercise #82

I wrote a poem about my most favorite performer from the silent era, Mexican actress Lupe Vèlez. I think it's time we pay homage to old Hollywood. Those poor f*ckers. They had it rough. So start digging, dear writer. Check out [this forum](#), if you need. Wiki or Google Fatty Arbuckle's victim, Clark Gable's secret daughter. Write them a blessing or a curse. Give them the voice they never had in life.

Writing Exercise #83

Today, one of my toddler daughters had the end of a stick in her mouth. I said, "Stop eating that stick! We don't eat sticks, silly!" and my 4-year old daughter said, "Yeah, Lulu. If you eat sticks, you will get old."

So let's riff off that. Write a poem built out of four (or however many) cinquains that tell the story of someone getting old. Make sure one of the things that made them old was something they ate. Something they saw. Something they heard. Something they felt. A fragrance. Have the first line be the person's name. If you want each cinquain to be about a different person, cool. Oh, and if you forgot what a cinquain was, here's the format:

line 1 - 2 syllables

line 2 - 4 syllables

line 3 - 6 syllables

line 4 - 8 syllables

line 5 - 2 syllables

Writing Exercise #84

I like the idea of writing a [ghazal](#) with a slang refrain, like "yeah, whatever" or "psssh, I don't think so." I don't know why I have never written a ghazal. I have a dozen pantoums and sestinas, but no ghazals! I better get crack-a-lackin!

Need some inspiration? It's not a ghazal, but [it's HOLY.](#)

Writing Exercise #85

Write a seven section poem with small vignettes for each deadly sin.

(This exercise is inspired by a set of poems in Stephen Dobyns' book "Griffon," most particularly, [this one](#).)

Writing Exercise #86

My most favorite form in the world is the [PANTOUM](#). I am a sucker for rhythm and repetition, when done well, and I [tend to write them when I'm outraged](#). Weird, I know.

Write a pantoum where each line is either a bad excuse (i.e. "She meant nothing to me") or any quote or cruddy pick-up line that has ignited the angry bone in you to spark some fire. If you want to get real deep, you can make the pantoum be a collection of the worst things you've said to a lover/family member/friend or vice versa. Just remember, the first line of your poem is the last line of your poem, so make sure it has resonance.

Writing Exercise #87

Okay, loves, this is the 30th exercise of National Poetry Month.

Write your shrine. The thing people might build when you leave our planet. What is the saddest song in the world playing? What is the shrine's house made of? What object represent you? What memories paint the walls? What is made from your bones? Your hair? Your teeth? Need inspiration? [Read the poem that inspired this exercise. But brace yourself - it's a doozey.](#)

On Reading Other Poets

I often forget, during poetry workshops, to talk about the importance of not only reading other poets' work, but their interviews as well. They are usually quite insightful, and often lend clues to the background or inspiration for poems that have mysterious edges to them.

I recently did [an interview for Indigo Williams' blog "Ask a Poet"](#) and mentioned synesthesia. I've since received three emails from people who did not know there was an actual name for this thing they've experienced since childhood. I ended up writing back-and-forth for a week with a woman, talking about the sounds of colors and colors of letters and how imagery in our work was driven by synesthesia. It was exciting. And comforting.

On that note, I have decided to post numerous interviews from some of my favorite writers. I hope you read them. And I hope you come away inspired.

[Tennessee Williams](#)

[Anne Sexton](#) (interview is near the bottom) and there is also a partial interview [here](#).

[Gwendolyn Brooks](#)

[Gabriel García Márquez](#)

[Philip Levine](#)

[Arthur Miller](#)

[William Faulkner](#)

[Pablo Neruda](#)

[Alice Walker](#)

P.S. While I was in Austin, TX last week, I bought a couple sheets of [the Poets Stamps that the USPS put out](#). Get yours before they're gone!

Writing Exercise #88

Happy National Poetry Month, ladies and gentlemen! This is one of my most favorite times of the year - when many of my peers embark on the 30 poems in 30 days challenge. I'm behind on putting up prompts, so I'm going to put up three by the end of today. Here is the first for 2013:

Let's start with a word pool:

crawler

thicket

borrow

honey

riddle

fertile

hundred

perfumed

fingers

Write a twenty-line poem, each line 8 syllables. Use every word in the pool.

Writing Exercise #89

INGREDIENTS:

1. At your worst, you are what?
2. One of the most memorable punishments you received when you were young.
3. Something you got away with.
4. A punishing last line you have hurled at someone else.

This is going to be a poem in three stanzas. I'll help you out with your first stanza, but you'll have to fill in a few blanks for the rest.

Stanza 1:

Line 1: Your worst self.
Line 2: The punishment and what you learned.
Line 3: What you got away with and what you learned.
Line 4: The punishing last line.

Stanza 2:

Line 5 (repeat of line 2 in stanza 1)
Line 6 (new line)
Line 7 (repeat of line 4 in stanza 1)
Line 8 (new line)

Stanza 3/Last Stanza

Line 9 (line 2 of the previous stanza)
Line 10 (line 3 of the first stanza)
Line 11 (line 4 of the previous stanza)
Line 12 (line 1 of the first stanza)

By the end of it, you will have a pantoum. Exciting!

* * *

This exercise was inspired by a moment in [this poem](#).

Writing Exercise #90

Write [an acrostic poem](#), using this chain of words:

B
L
O
O
D

I
S

T
H
I
C
K

B
U
T

W
A
T
E
R

S
W
A
L
L
O
W
S

B
A
C
K

Writing Exercise #91

In honor of the late great Roger Ebert who left his cancer behind this morning, let's write a poem about your first _____. Write it in third person. Give it a soundtrack. Give it a villain. Include stage directions. Pull back and fade to the next stanza. Make it an epic.

Writing Exercise #92

Here's a new wordpool, friends. Write a poem containing every word. Let the poem be fourteen lines long, each line containing fourteen syllables.

contagious

voices

meadow

wrist

forty-seven

evidence

heat

ants

window

claw

parade

muscle

Writing Exercise #93

We're going to use a ghost line today (where the first line of your poem is pulled from someone else's poem and remains unseen)

INGREDIENTS:

1. the one that got away (don't write the name, just describe them ALL THE WAY)
2. a memento from when you were small
3. an animal you love(d)
4. an animal you fear(ed)
5. the sweetest thing they ever said
6. an object that reminds you of them

7. what you do when you're nervous
8. a place to hide love

Today's ghost line is from Anne Sexton's [THE ROOM OF MY LIFE](#). The line is:

"Here,
in the room of my life"

continue from this line. Include everything from the Ingredients list. What would #1 be doing? Where would #5 be standing? Or would it be floating? Webbed in a corner? Huddled in a drawer? Which animal is doing #7 now?

Writing Exercise #94

Sorry I've fallen behind in posts. I was at the Mission Creek Poetry Festival for the past three days in Iowa and had not anticipated the 72 hours of debauchery coming my way.

Now that I'm back, let's have some fun, shall we?

Write a poem of twelve lines, broken into four stanzas. For each stanza, have the lines split up by:

- 1 - what did happen
- 2 - what should have happened
- 3 - what could have happened (in an alternate universe, of course)

If you need a push, try reading the poem that inspired this exercise, [by the ever-talented Jennifer L. Knox.](#)

Writing Exercise #95

Write a poem using one of these chapter titles from Baum's classic *The Marvelous Land of Oz* as the title of your poem:

The Marvelous Powder of Life

The Awakening of the Saw-horse

A Nickel-Plated Emperor

A Highly Magnified History

The Prisoners of the Queen

The Riches of Content

Of course, there are NO rules to my prompts. They are free to you and you can do whatever the heck you want with them. Remember (and I say this every year) there is no right way to answer a writing prompt.

If you need a kickstart, read Amy Gerstler's poem Advice from a Caterpillar (which is the name of a title in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll)

Advice from a Caterpillar

Chew your way into a new world.
Munch leaves. Molt. Rest. Molt
again. Self-reinvention is everything.
Spin many nests. Cultivate stinging
bristles. Don't get sentimental
about your discarded skins. Grow
quickly. Develop a yen for nettles.
Alternate crumpling and climbing. Rely
on your antennae. Sequester poisons
in your body for use at a later date.
When threatened, emit foul odors
in self-defense. Behave cryptically
to confuse predators: change colors, spit,
or feign death. If all else fails, taste terrible.

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Writing Exercise #96

My friend [Beau Sia](#) has a new book out called The Undisputed Greatest Writer of All Time, and in that book is a wonderful poem called [Unloaded](#). It shook me up when I heard it live the other night. There are so many important lines, but the one that sank the deepest was: "let your pain be

a guide and not a source."

It made me think of the nesting poem (sometimes I've called it the "begat poem") I like to build. It's a poem where you open something to reveal something else. I may have posted a prompt like this before, but this time, I am going to add some specificity.

What I suggest for you, dear writer, is that you open a phrase of pain another person has placed upon you. Then write 25 lines of openings. Write until the origins of this phrase bring you to a place of understanding or empathy. Even if it isn't real, I would love for you to create a place of forgiveness or healing. Sounds super granola, right? But I promise, it'll help you.

Here's a short example:

I opened You fat bitch and out fell his teeth.
I opened his teeth and inside was a door.
I opened the door and inside was his bed.
I opened the bed and inside was a small boy.
I opened the boy and inside was a pool of sharks.
I opened the sharks and inside was silence.
I opened the silence and inside was a window.
I opened the window and inside were a row of sleeping pills.
I opened the sleeping pills and inside was his mother.
I opened the mother and inside was a dream.

you get the picture.

Writing Exercise #97

Answer this question in whichever form you choose:

When where you saved?

Writing Exercise #98

[This poem Blood Honey by Chana Bloch](#) is beautiful. Read it, treat this as a ghost line:

We're still at large. We're free

Don't know what a ghost line is? I explain it [here](#). I woke up today feeling extremely lucky, thick with gratitude. I like the idea of writing a poem with "we're free" as the refrain. Heck, knock yourself out and [write a ghazal](#) why don't you!?!

Writing Exercise #99

Write a poem of 14 lines, each line beginning with the word "fix".

Writing Exercise #100

Read [this spectacular poem by Megan Falley](#), then:

Write a poem where you plead your case about falling for someone who eventually broke the shit out of your heart. This doesn't have to be romantic love, of course. It just has to be the truth. The whole truth. And nothing but the truth. (which is a lie.)

Writing Exercise #101

Have I mentioned that I used word pools for 98% of the poems I have ever written? Here's one I hope you'll like. I mined these words from [one of my favorite poems by Frank Stanford](#).

floating

man

driftwood

hooves

silent

rotten

ivory

half-blooded

dragged

fish

lights

wound

rain

moon

liquor

living

goodnights

beat

radio

lantern

marking

Writing Exercise #102

Check out this poem by Felix Pollak:

THE DREAM

He dreamed of
an open window.
A vagina, said
his psychiatrist.
Your divorce, said
his mistress.
Suicide, said
an ominous voice within him.
It means you should close the window
or you'll catch cold, said
his mother.
His wife said
nothing.
He dared not tell her
such a
dangerous dream.

Write a poem "after Felix Pollak" that includes an image from a dream and its many interpretations. I like the idea of incorporating more people. Imagine what the dream of falling is to an actress as opposed to a kindergartner, or a shark to a convict as opposed to a surgeon...

Writing Exercise #103

Write a creepy rhyming poem to the meter of a classic nursery rhyme. Do your best to not make the rhyming words predictable (like rhyming heart with art. BLECH!) Use slant rhymes aka "imperfect rhymes", for example: "I know I get mad easily, this universe is never pleasing me."

* this was inspired by "one, two, Freddie's coming for you..." that was in my head this morning while wiping down the kitchen counters.

Writing Exercise #104

Write a list poem (aka catalogue verse) where every line answers the question:

What was the last straw?

