



(Getting) That Poem-Writing Feeling

by Layli Amerson

I had given up on my poetry. The poetic world was already bloated, and anything of my creation would be trite, an empty restatement of thoughts and feelings crafted already by writers better than I was. But now I was writing poems again, and not just for assignments. I was starting to feel that poem-writing feeling, a weightless exuberance that drapes even the most mundane subject in an aura of breathless beauty.

This past summer, I enrolled in Northwestern University Center for Talent Development's (CTD) three-week summer course in creative writing for high school students. Seventeen other students and I embarked on a period of rapid, productive creativity under the guidance of an instructor and a residential teaching assistant (RTA). We studied three genres of creative writing: poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. The intensely focused program boosted my confidence in my writing, and challenged me to reconsider what I thought were my limits.

Observation

Our instructor suggested that we carry small notebooks and jot down overheard snippets of conversations and interesting images to draw from in our writing. I've never been a notebook fan, but every day I dutifully recorded tidbits of things that captured my attention. Although I was in an urban setting, I was particularly aware of the Evanston wildlife. Walking to class one morning, I noticed what appeared to be shreds of white paper on the shady sidewalk in front of me. As I approached the litter, I realized they were actually dead moths. Why were so many moth corpses in one place? The vision of the tattered white wings and still bodies stayed with me.

A few days later, I wrote a short story, "Moths on the Sidewalk," from the perspective of three people who came upon the dead moths on the same day. The encounter with the moths was the common thread in their separate lives, and their reactions to the moths

served as the exposition of their personalities. By using a real experience, I was able to build a complex yet believable story.

Another day, as I was waiting to cross the street, seemingly out of nowhere a doe ran through a group of students on the other side of the street. I thought I was hallucinating, but I saw other people staring at it, too. As I walked to class, I glimpsed the doe on the lawn in a quiet part of campus. Perhaps I'll find a way to incorporate the cosmopolitan deer into a future story. Using an artist's eye—trying to see the world around me, not just passively look—helped me strengthen my writing by using what I saw to create an alloy of reality and imagination.

Inspiration

One of the techniques I learned was free-writing, which is continuous writing about any thought that floats into your head. The first time we did a free-write, our class walked down to the student union and then dispersed to wherever we felt most inspired. With three of my classmates, I crossed a bridge to a long, narrow island. Giant concrete chunks met us there, an urban beach. Colorfully painted phrases and drawings were splashed across the gray façades. Poems adorned a few. The crashing of the waves of Lake Michigan and the marine-scented breeze completed the setting. We clambered onto some blocks with our notebooks.

Although we hadn't been walking to any place in particular, we had found the perfect place to inspire free-writing. Boats cruised. Airplanes droned. I watched water gush into and out of a hole in a block. I pondered the hole. Had the persistent waves eroded it, or had it always been there? It looked like a hiding place for some shy lake dweller. My surroundings poured through my pencil, spraying out in all directions: my tirade against the motor boats led to a denunciation of masculine aggression; the planes overhead aroused a reflection on my fascination with contrails. It seemed I could write expansively about anything.

For another inspirational outing, our class took a field trip to Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. There, we practiced ekphrasis (from the Greek words for "out" and "speak"), which is writing inspired by or based on visual art. I wandered the museum, waiting to feel inspired. The special exhibit wasn't doing the trick, nor was the odd postmodern film, the mysterious photos, or the abstract sculptures. I was beginning to feel worried. Then I came upon a gallery filled with black paper silhouettes mounted directly on the wall. They offered a wry look at the lives of African Americans in the time of slavery in the U.S. I walked around the large rectangular gallery. The silhouettes were intriguing, simultaneously explicit and indecipherable. I was especially captivated by one of the scenes: a girl was floating in the air with a parachute around her neck, with a man and boy below. I crafted a poem that told the back-story of the mysterious scene, from the point of view of the floating girl's sister.

Child, your sister's died,
said the rumbling voice of Grampa
in the dusty light of the cabin.
I stroked my ragdoll's face
Not understanding his words.

She fell from the tall tree,
said one of the young men
who stood framed in the doorway,
watching me carefully.
She fell from the top and her neck broke.

So I went down to the tree
gazed at the ground.
But she wasn't there.
I looked under the leaves rotting silently,
looked hard, but found no one.

Grampa, where did my sister go?
Well, child, he mused,
I suppose some angels came down,
fastened a parachute 'round her neck,
and blew in it until she flew up and away.

When the funeral happened
there was a casket.
But Grampa and I knew
where my sister really was:
Floating on the breath of angels.



Evaluation

"Revision, revision, revision." This is the echoing mantra of creative writing, and it was crucial to our progress in the class. We engaged in various formats of peer reviews, the most formal of which were weekly workshops. There, we presented a piece and listened without comment as our classmates critiqued it under the guidance of our RTA or instructor. At the end, they asked any clarifying questions.

I wasn't nervous about the dissection of my piece. I was worried about reading my story to the class. I've never liked being in the spotlight, and I'd never participated in a writing workshop before. Wouldn't it just be easier if everyone read the pieces silently? But my instructor explained that reading a piece aloud helps us catch places where it doesn't flow, where the reader has to pause midsentence because something doesn't make sense.

The first piece I read aloud was a memoir. And although I did have a stomach full of butterflies, I survived reading my pieces aloud and received some quality feedback from my classmates. My job was then to decide which critiques to act on.

Revelation

Over the three weeks of class, we studied numerous examples of the various genres. Some of the pieces amazed me with their handling of language, others puzzled me with the questions they raised, and a few surprised me with their content. Robert Morgan's "The Code," a poem about a mole on a mother's arm, fit into the latter category. It was sensuous and strange, and therefore appalling. Who uses a mole to explain their relationship with their mother? After deeper

Photo: Susie Stephenson



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