The Practice of Poetry Study Guide

The Practice of Poetry by Robin Behn

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Practice of Poetry is a collection of over 90 favorite writing exercises from writing teachers and poets. The book explores a variety of techniques and strategies for writing poetry appropriate for students in a class or on their own, or for more experienced writers. It is also a hands-on "how to" manual which will guide beginners and the inexperienced and also serve as a resource for poets and teachers of poetry. There is a lot of variety in the exercises, and many of them are entertaining as well. Some sections start students off with a small list of words to get started and require very little actual writing. Others demand that students become very familiar with a particular poet's body of work and to write deliberately imitative poems as practice. Some exercises will work best with a group while others require significant individual study.

The contributors range from the well-known to the obscure. Students will recognize some names, such as Rita Dove. Readers who are familiar with poetry might recognize names such as Maxine Kumin, Dana Gioia and Donald Justice.

Editors Behn and Twitchell state that poetry takes practice and work in addition to inspiration. Practice gives the writer the tools he or she needs in order to write and practice also leads to inspiration. To provide these tools to readers and to encourage creativity and exploration, the editors have organized the writing exercises into seven parts. The categories are not arranged in order of skill since virtually any exercise can be used by writers of any level experience. Each part begins immediately with an exercise and without an introduction.

These exercises provide nearly guaranteed poetry success. Many exercises provide beginners with a step-by-step process that will result in a poem, and result in one that will probably surprise them. The book provides many "ah-ha!" moments before, during, and after writing poems.

"Part 1 Ladders to the Dark" is subtitled "The Unconscious as Gold Mine". Eleven exercises help students discover and harness the subconscious. "Part 2 The Things of This World" provides exercises in discovering and using the senses and imagery. "Part 3 Who's Talking and Why?" is divided into two parts. "Part A, Aspects of Voice", provides eight exercises, some of which help the writer take on another persona while writing a poem instead of simply charting the feelings of the individual writer. "Part B, What's it About?" suggests ways to arrive at the poem's topic. "Part 4 Truth in Strangeness", has eleven exercises that deliberately mix up an individual's sense of the rational, such as writing a poem by "transcribing" a foreign language poem into English or by using random words. These techniques can lead to poetic insights. "Part 5 Laws of the Wild", helps writers to structure and shape their poems. "Part 6 Musical Matters," tackles the subject of rhyme and rhythm. The last section is titled "Major and Minor Surgery: On Revision and Writer's Block." The first section has exercises in getting started or fixing a problem poem. The second part, "Reflections," is made up of essays by poets on the struggle of writing, crafting, and creating poetry.

Part One. Ladders to the Dark: The Unconsious as Gold Mine

Part One. Ladders to the Dark: The Unconsious as Gold Mine Summary and Analysis

This guide to writing poetry is collection of over 90 favorite writing exercises from writing teachers and poets. The book explores a variety of techniques and strategies for writing poetry for students in a class or on their own, or for more experienced writers. It is also a hands-on "how to" manual that will guide beginners and the inexperienced as well as a resource for poets and for teachers of poetry.

Part 1. Ladders to the Dark

The subtitle to this section is "The Unconscious as Gold Mine" and consists of eleven exercises that are designed to help students connect with their own unconsciousness to find images and ideas.

The first exercise, "First Words" by Ann Lauterbach, is not a poetry-writing exercise as such. The student will not arrive at the end of the work with a poem in hand, but rather is directed to examine initial encounters with language. This somewhat unexpected direction takes the students off the hook of producing something and asks them to interrogate and examine their ideas and assumptions about language.

There are four exercises that are presented as appropriate for group work. Some of the group exercises are not group-dependent so much as they are useful for a teacher presenting in a group. "Translations: Idea to Image" by Carol Muske is one of these. The instructor says a word, such as love, death, etc, and the students write down the image that comes to mind. It is not dependent on sharing with the group, but rather on teacher giving the word to the student rather than the student choosing the word.The teacher, Carol Muske, encourages students to be honest about the images, even if they may seem ridiculous, then gives an example of someone seeing Brussels sprouts when they hear the word "self." The idea is not to dismiss a seemingly silly idea, but to pursue it and find out where it leads. The second half of the exercise uses four lists, each composed of four "abstractions" such as rage, order, justice, and common. The student takes one word from each column, and then writes down all of the non sequitur images for each word.

Other exercises make use of dream notebooks ("Dream Notebooks" by Maxine Kumin) or already-written journal entries ("Only Connect" by Sydney Lea). Students are instructed to use the dream journal to get some understanding of how the unconscious works. In "Only Connect", students are instructed to use journal entries that are at least four days apart in order to avoid finding a specific theme at first, and instead to work through and create connections. Using dream notebooks or personal journals will also

provide some surprises, especially if mined for imagery rather than emotion. By using three journal entries as is suggested in "Only Connect," connections will be made between ideas that seem to have no connection.

At least one exercise, "Chanting the Flowers off the Wall", will serve to disconnect students from the original meaning of a word, as children often discover when they do this on their own. "Chanting Flowers off the Wall" will seem bizarre as an attempt to write poetry, but is more useful as a warming-up exercise at the beginning of a class or workshop. Saying one word over and over again for twenty minutes in a group of people saying their own word, also over and over again during the same twenty minutes, will require a lot of nerve on the part of the teacher to keep the class engaged and focused. Some students might outright rebel at this technique and there are no suggestions given about how to lure defectors back to the fold.

"A Journey to Nowhere" by Susan Snively directs the student to write a poem about taking a trip to an unknown destination. The poem has to end with the writer in a very different place from the beginning of the journey, one that is strange, or in the middle of discovering something about one's self. The poem begins with a problem and should be long (at least sixty-five lines long) and should adhere to a rhythm structure. Snively also suggests taking a long time with this poem; days or even weeks. If students decide (or teachers assign) a longer period of time to complete "A Journey to Nowhere" by Susan Snively, then the writing of the poem will itself become a kind of journey. The end will be a mystery at the beginning of the process, and may change course a few times depending on what the student discovers as he or she writes.

Part Two. The Things of This World: Image and Metaphor

Part Two. The Things of This World: Image and Metaphor Summary and Analysis

"The Things of This World: Image and Metaphor" consists of eleven exercises which emphasize the senses and imagery. The exercises vary in difficulty from exceedingly fun and easy ones that can be performed in a classroom in a few minutes, to exercises that will require reference books, studying, and time. They all make the writer focus on specifics and detail. Exercises include list poems, fill-in-the-blank, poems that require detailed study. The poetry exercises in this section use some of the techniques explored in the previous section. Much use is made of dream imagery and randomness. There are many poetry exercises which turn students in a direction they might not have been expecting. These challenging exercises will give writers insight into their own process and introduce beginners to successful writing strategies.

Many beginning poets need assistance in using specific images in their poetry, especially if they are accustomed to writing poetry mostly to express personal feelings or are used to poetry only in the form of song lyrics. Beginners also might be confused by the phrase "imagery" and need some direction in what this means exactly. "Five Easy Pieces" manages to "sneak" the process of discovering imagery into the exercise. This exercise by Richard Jackson really has seven pieces, the first being to remember or imagine a person, the second being to put that person in a particular place. Right away, the student has a rich source to draw from in both the recalled person (a parent? A teacher? Captain Jack Sparrow from Pirates of the Caribbean?), and the location (the kitchen? A dockside bar?). The details will spring to mind instantly. Steps one and two involve describing the imagined person's hands and what action they are engaged in. Observing and describing hands (even if they are fictional hands) is a short-cut to character, not unlike describing facial features but in a way that will very quickly tell something about the person, even if the hands are quietly folded in a lap or resting on a table. Step three asks for the student to use a metaphor to describe an exotic place, leaving room for the student to decide what "exotic" means. Step four asks the writer to frame a question to the chosen person, a question that uses what was written in steps 2 and 3. The final "piece" of this exercise provides a built-in "turn." Poems are often stronger for reaching some sort of conclusion, resolving a posed question, ending a situation—in short, having a plot or an arc like a story. This exercise will result in a poem that is very much like a short story (or a television show) in that it has a character and narration; both essential elements of story-telling, along with setting (the exotic local). Jackson says that this exercise is one of the most successful he's used in beginning classes. It is also an exercise in discovering that poems can have narrative structure and characters, just like a novel or a short story.

"One's-Self, En Masse" by Michael Pettit begins with a line of poetry from Walt Whitman. Keeping that sentence in mind, the student writes about an individual in a group of like objects/animals/people/actions. Examples are given but the student is encouraged to find other subjects. This is a prose exercise to get writers used to thinking about individual qualities.

"Intriguing Objects Exercise/ 'Show and Tell' (for a group)" by Anne Waldman is a group exercise. All participants bring an object to class that tells a story. The object is handed around the room while the originator tells the story of the object. Then everyone writes something about any object they choose. It does not have to be what they brought in and it does not have to be a poem.

"Breaking the Sentence; or, no Sentences but in Things" by Roger Mitchell asks for a list of things. That is all. Mitchell includes a section of one of his poems which is made up of a catalog of things on his desk, including a copy of Moby Dick.

"Five Easy Pieces" by Richard Jackson provides a five-step process to arrive at a poem. While there are five steps to the writing, there are first two preparatory steps that the writer must take. Jackson asks the student to first of all remember a person he or she knows well, or to make this person up. Then the student must imagine what physical location this person is in. After these two preliminary steps are accomplished, the poets may proceed with the five steps. The first step of writing the poem is to describe the person's hand, the second to describe what that person is doing with his or her hands. Step three directs the writer to "use a metaphor to say something about some exotic place." Step four asks the student to use steps 2 and 3 to ask the imagined person a question based on those steps. Step five is the last: "the person looks up or toward you, notices you there, gives an answer that suggests he or she only gets part of what you asked."

"As/Like/Finish the Sentence" by Linnea Johnson is a fill-in-the-blanks exercise with twenty sentences with blank space at the end. The sentences are not clichés or familiar sayings, although some of them sound almost like something we've heard before. Students finish the sentences, then picks one or two they like best and use the resulting comparison to begin a poem. "As/Like/Finish the Sentence" is also one of the most appealing exercises in this section. By asking the student to fill in the blank at the end of a sentence, and do it fast, creation and writing will go quickly without too much anxiety. Some of the sentences sound almost like familiar maxims and phrases but with a twist. Some sentences have a surreal quality and invite surreal solutions.

"Quilting in the Ditch" by James McKean requires students to do some research on the history of the language used for a specific item or activity. Students will save three lists, one of nouns, one of verbs, and one of adjectives. From the last, the student writes a poem about something completely different than the original search. For "Quilting in the Ditch," McKean points out that older words and phrases will have more layers of meaning than a phrase coined in the 20th century. "Lathe" or "adz," for example, will be words that extend back to Anglo Saxon and Middle English, while "bungee jumping" is of a more recent vintage. Never the less, the student who chooses to research "bungee

jumping" will not be writing a poem about bungee jumping. This method enables writers to think about metaphor, according to McKean.

"Getting at Metaphor" by Roger Mitchell has three parts. Students are asked to describe an object or scene without making comparisons, use the description to describe a parent, and then finally write a poem that is a description of the object or chosen scene, but is really about the parent.

"A Little Night Music: The Narrative Metaphor" calls for a narrative poem based on a list created from personal intense experiences. Dreams can be used to uncover what these are if the student is having trouble identifying them. Then the student creates an event that is not his or her own experience, but places the event in the setting of the personal experience.

Part Three. Who's Talking and Why? The Self and Its Subjects. Section A: Aspects of Voice

Part Three. Who's Talking and Why? The Self and Its Subjects. Section A: Aspects of Voice Summary and Analysis

At Halloween, children wear masks and costumes and for a time, become the scary monster or princes. Adults at a costume party are given a kind of "permission" to relax and be someone else when they don clothes or disguises in which they would never otherwise be seen in public. The exercises in this section give writers a similar permission to try on roles and personas, and thus extend themselves into new emotional and creative territory.

"Section A, Aspects of voice", has eight poetry exercises to help students write with a "voice," which is something like individual personality. The exercise includes some role-playing based on the figures in an early Renaissance painting, writing a poem by modeling it after a poem of Elizabeth Bishop's, using tabloid headlines, and have an interior monologue with two disparate halves of one's own self.

In "Dramatic Monologue: Carving the Voice, Carving the Masks," students are instructed to write a dramatic monologue in a voice other than their own. They can choose anyone they like; someone from another time or place, or even a fictional character, as long as they try on the person's voice. The author of this exercise, David St. John, recalls a particularly effective poem in which a student (male) took on the role of Amelia Earhart. The class (and the teacher) was captivated; St. John's point being that this is a highly effective exercise. Even though students are adopting another persona in these exercises, the voice they use will inevitably be made their own. St. John says that the exercise helps students get out of the trap they might have created for themselves while trying to forge a poetic voice. St. John also says that poets are always speaking out from behind some mask, so even what an individual considers his or her "voice" are choices and a creations.

In "The Widow" by Maura Stanton, students write a poem from the perspective of a woman who is widowed when her husband drowns. The specifics of the drowning can be invented by the writer. Then the students imagine that the widow, who now hates water, is forced into a situation where she must be near it or in it. This "exercise in empathy," says Stanton gets "beginning poets to express emotion through concrete imagery and details." This would make an especially effective exercise for college students as most will be too young to have experienced the loss of a spouse. The concept itself will pose a challenge to people in early adulthood, and they will be

required to extend their perceptions and imaginations into the mind of someone with whom they think they have little in common.

"Our Suits, Ourselves" by Christopher Gilbert directs writers to create a metaphor that compares the self with an inanimate object. Gilbert suggests a fan or a tire. Questions then arise as to the function of the speaker's body parts. If one is fan, what happens to one's legs, eyes, hands? The writer Christopher Gilbert liked the transformative nature of "Our Suits, Our Selves," and says he has much success with this exercise in his classes of beginning students. The perspective of the world changes when the writer transforms himself into an inanimate object. Gilbert also likes the exercise since it directs the writer away from expressing feelings and into more concrete thinking and observation.

"Letter Poems" by one of the book's editors, Robin Behn, instructs students to write a poem in which "I" am speaking to "you." The poem does not have to be written in a letter format, but the reader should feel as if they have read a letter or are overhearing a conversation. The "I" and the "you" will take on a significant amount of definition as the writer goes through the writing process, and the exercise will develop voice. Behn also suggests changing the setting in which the poem is placed, perhaps by putting a glass wall between the speaker and the addressee so that the speaker cannot be interrupted.

"Tabloid Tone Exercise" by Lee Upton uses a piece of popular culture that everyone is familiar with - the tabloid newspapers from the checkout line of the grocery store. Students chose a story from a tabloid and then write a serious poem in the third person about the subject of the story. Creatures like Bat Boy, the still-living Elvis, or the 32 pound baby are some possible subjects. Instead of writing a comic send-up, the writer must write a poem in the third person about Bat Boy or Elvis and treat that person in a serious fashion. By giving this tabloid person, real or not, some thought and consideration, students will inevitably humanize them and their predicaments, treating them with compassion.

"The Peasant Wedding" by Mary Swander is a group exercise. Students look at a painting filled with lots of people and activity. Swander suggests a painting like Bruegel's "Peasant Wedding," a very lively painting by Dutch artists Bruegel. It should be easy to find a copy of it online for a quick view, although for a class, a large print would be better. Students then pick one of the characters from the picture and invent a background, feelings, likes and dislikes. The students then read the monologue to the class and takes suggestions about ways to develop character. "Bruegel's peasants are painted as distinct individuals, so imagining their lives and thoughts shouldn't be difficult and will probably be lots of fun." Swander suggests that students should spend a lot time getting close to the picture and noticing details. Swander suggests that the teacher asks students questions about their characters, and maybe even ask students to take on a character of the opposite sex. Furthermore, the picture does not have to be Peasant Wedding and she is open to students bringing in pictures.

Leslie Ullman asks writers to get in an argument with themselves in "Estrangement and Reconciliation: The self has it out with the self." Students are asked to imagine two

distinct aspects of their personality as two different personas. Emotions are running high between the pair, so the subsequent poem or poems should represent both points of view. The poem can alternate between the two sides, or perhaps be a series of letters. This exercise provides a way to write about feelings and emotions in a way that is more interesting than simply categorizing them. The writer is under no obligation to be slavishly realistic in portraying these two sides of the self, and invention and exaggeration are encouraged.

"In the Waiting Room" provides a model for writers, who are encouraged to imitate the poem's tone. They can invent a date and a setting and then place themselves, from the point of the view of the child, into the poem.

Part Three. Who's Talking and Why? The Self and Its Subjects. Section B: What's it About?

Part Three. Who's Talking and Why? The Self and Its Subjects. Section B: What's it About? Summary and Analysis

Section B, What's it about? is about the subject matter of poems. Of the nine exercises in this section, two are best for groups. Some of the poems, even though they concentrate on a sense of self, diverge very much from this first image in the final result.

"Who We Were" by Edward Hirsh instructs the student to write about childhood, starting with a very old memory, and then deciding which tense to use. Will it be present, past, future, or some combination? Hirsch quotes the poet Rilke and reminds students that childhood and dreams are inexhaustible sources for poetry.

"Your Mother's Kitchen" by Rita Dove has two sets of instructions, one for an individual and one for a group. An individual writer is instructed to draw his or her mother's kitchen, with crayons, and to make sure to include the oven, something green, and something dead. Then, a female relation walks into the kitchen. The writer is not allowed to put him or herself into the poem. The second set of instructions is for a group of students who are told to draw the first thing which comes to mind when they hear the word "home." After fifteen minutes they flip over their papers and spend about five minutes drawing the place they live in now. Students take home the drawing and keep it for a week before beginning to write. The use of crayons in "Your Mother's Kitchen" frees students to be creative. Crayons, as everyone knows, are for children, and so the pressure of doing "real" work is lifted, which makes room for creativity. Dove is steadfast in her refusal to let students begin their initial drawing over again, even if they ask for another piece of paper. They are stuck with their first impressions. Dove says that the poems that come out of this exercise are "varied and significant," but often do not mention the drawings at all.

For "The Night Aunt Dottie Caught Elvis's Handkerchief when he Tossed it From the Stage of the Sands in Vegas," students write a poem about a family member meeting or encountering a famous person. The encounter can be real or imaginary, but has to be possible (famous dead people are not allowed) and the family member should be the main person in the poem, not Elvis, The Beatles, or John F. Kennedy. The author should be more of a narrator who knows about the family rather than a part of the story, and the poem should be at least 30 lines. "The Night Aunt Dottie Caught Elvis's Handkerchief when he Tossed it From the Stage of the Sands in Vegas," has very specific instructions beyond writing a poem about a family members. Writers have to concentrate on the

details and are prevented from writing clichés and stereotypes about family members. Wojan says that while many students write about Elvis, others come up with some unique figures in history like Senator Joe McCarthy.

Part Four. Truth in Strangeness: Accidents, chance and the nonrational

Part Four. Truth in Strangeness: Accidents, chance and the nonrational Summary and Analysis

Many of these poetry exercises are fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice. The subtitle of the section, "Accidents, chance and the non-rational" describes both the methods used and what students can expect from the poems they write using the exercises in this part. If there is an operative word for this section, then the word could be "wacky." While poems that result from this section will display varying degrees of wackiness, the first impressions of the exercises will probably be amusement—and relief. Most of the exercises present the student with fun, pain-free romps through language and imagination that are sure to tickle the funny-bone.

"Intelligence Test" by Alberta Turner is written like a multiple choice test, except that the right answers are the ones which are the most nonsensical or preposterous. Question 1, What can you catch on your tongue?, lists these possible answers: butterflies, crows, foul balls, snowflakes or shooting starts. The following eleven questions are in a similar vein, and after the student has answered all the questions, then he or she takes several they wish were true and uses those to write a poem. "Intelligence Test" encourages students to see the difference between two different kinds of truths: factual and psychological. Metaphors that require exploration or explanation ("I can eat bullets," "I could breath fire") will spring into being.

"Personal Universe Deck" supplies the directions for creating a list of words to kick-start the writing process. Students write down as many words as they can on a sheet of paper or directly onto 3 x 5 cards. The words are then categorized, not so much into grammatical parts of speech, but into words of the senses, words that mean motion, etc. The words must be important to the student. Students can then spread out the cards and choose some to form the basis of a poem. Students can also keep the cards with their journals and use the cards to spark ideas. The "Personal Universe Deck" has flexibility. The deck can be spread out like a deck of fortune telling cards, and the writer can choose significant words. The deck can serve as inspiration for journal writing, and can be updated any time. Groups of students can swap cards in a class. It also provides a built-in way to avoid any and all kinds of writer's block.

The "Cut-and-Shuffle" poem requires the production of two poems (or prose pieces), each six to 10 lines long. One piece describes a dramatic scene that is quiet and the other piece describes a scene that is active or full of emotion. The writer then alternates the first line or two from the first scene with the first line or two from the second, until both of the poems have been re-assembled into one. The result will be unexpected since "The Cut-and-Shuffle" poem results in students juxtaposing two completely different pieces of writing. According to the exercise's author, Jack Myers, readers will

see a connection and a tension between the two different aspects of the poem, even though that was not necessarily the writer's intent. Myers says that this poem makes use of the mind's ability to connect and create relationships from what it sees. Students should be surprised and inspired by this exercise and the resulting output.

"Finish This!" by Stuart Friebert is a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay with many of the words taken out. The student fills in the blanks with words which fit and work for them. "Finish This!" is not a test, so it does not matter if students are or are not familiar with the poem. By filling in the blanks, students do not have to worry about the quality of their poem or if they are doing the right thing. They are free to choose words which work for them and to be creative in a small space.

"Twenty Little Poetry Projects" by Jim Simmerman is a step-by-step recipe for writing a poem. Students begin their poems with a metaphor, complete 18 more steps, and close the poem with an image for step #20. Included in the steps is the addition of a phrase in a foreign language, a contradiction, and a personification, just to name a few. This exercise helps students who are having difficulty writing because they are too worried about theme and coherence. "Twenty Little Poetry Projects" will result in a poem even if it does not look like the "little projects" could result in anything coherent. This exercise is probably the wackiest of the wacky (and fun) ideas in this section of the book. When the student starts building his or her poem, line by line per the instruction, they have to concentrate on what is being asked of them. Trying to second-guess the exercise or look at the end will not work as the exercise is a road-map without an end-point in sight. The steps can be mixed up if so desired. They can also be repeated within the poem in any order. Simmerman, the contributor of "Twenty Little Poetry Projects" says this is one of his best exercises and produces some of the best poems he sees in his classroom.

"Collaborative 'Cut-up'" by Anne Waldman is another low-stress, fun activity. Students take text from a magazine that they would not normally read, and intersperse lines they have written with the printed text. The exercise gives students the opportunity to be surprised by the unexpected. Waldman says being able to work with words as if they were objects that can be moved around is often easier than dealing with words one has written one's self. It is as if the words are blocks and the student can stack them any way he or she wishes.

"Found in Translation" and "Homophonic Translation" both use a foreign language. In the first one, students translate a poem as accurately as possible, then freely, and then use the original to write a poem in reply. In "Homophonic Translation," there is no attempt at true translation, but rather in finding the sounds in English that match (or come close enough) to the sound of the words in another language. "Que central le beau" in French becomes "key central elbow" in English.

"Index/Table of Contents Exercise" instructs student to invent an index. The index or table of contents can be for a book that does not exist or be based on a "biography" of a subject of the student's choice. The entries for events and/or people in the person's life, and the number of pages devoted to same, will give an encapsulated view of a character.

"Make Your Own System" by Jackson Mac Low gives an example of an acrostic-like system that Low invented. First, he chose a newspaper article and then a "seed word" from the story. He uses the first letter of his "seed word" to pick out a phrase from the story where the word in the phrase begins with the same letter. Then he moves onto his second letter and finds a second phrase, and so on. This is probably the most opaque of the exercises in the section. Words like "acrostic" and "daistic" may send students scurrying for the dictionary. Furthermore, Low insists students devise their own method rather than using the one he provides as an example. He is also insistent that students stick with the method they devise, after they devise one, to maintain the "creative tension" between the method and what it produces. The point of this is for writers to break free of the confines of thinking they are unable to make radical changes on their own. The main point of this exercise, according to Low, is to become aware of what one is doing and what one can do in the realm of writing poetry.

Part Five. Laws of the Wild: Structure, Shapeliness, and Organizing Principles

Part Five. Laws of the Wild: Structure, Shapeliness, and Organizing Principles Summary and Analysis

One of the most difficult obstacles for students is to overcome their prejudices about what poetry and a poem should be. They might adopt a mannered tone or archaic speech patterns, try to rhyme everything, or write long descriptions of people sitting around thinking. Part Five has fourteen poetry writing exercises which will help solve this dilemma. Some can be used in a group but are not group dependent. This section places emphasis on giving poems some structure and shape.

"Block, Pillar, Slab, and Beam" by Deborah Digges instructs the writer to write a poem about building or making something and/or taking the same construction apart. Writers can choose a small object or a large one and need to use specific technical terms where applicable. Other writing possibilities for this exercise include instructing a reader on how to build/take apart the object in question. In that case, the poem can be written in present tense and give directions. It can also be written in the past tense. "Block, Pillar, Slab and Beam" is a chance for students to ignore the emotional content of a poem and concentrate on the process of writing. While Digges does not state this, emotional content will come through anyway. It is not necessary to write "I was scared" if a student is writing a poem about watching his father build a fallout shelter in the back yard, a topic suggested by Digges.

"The Fill-in-the-Blanks or Definition Poem" by Jack Myers is very similar to the previous exercise. Students chose an ordinary object, then list all of the functions of the object. The functions should have a larger significance. After creating a list, students write a poem in a specific sequence. The poem ends with a summary statement about the chosen object and its functions. "The Fill-in-the-Blanks or Definition Poem" will result in the chosen object becoming a metaphor for something else. The sample poem provided in the exercise is about a door, and yet by the time the poem is over, the reader is left with the impression that the poem is about much more than a common door. Students will create a metaphor without struggling to do so, which will probably result in a better poem as well as personal satisfaction and increased confidence.

"Opposites: The Attraction of Titles" starts with choosing words that mean the opposite or almost the opposite. Stuart Dischell suggests a pairing like "calm and calamity" rather than the more obvious "hot and cold" or "good and bad." Students are to use the word as the title and then write two separate poems about each word. To get started, they should make a list of the qualities of each word. The poems could be written in the same style or form, or could be different. In "Opposites: The Attraction of Titles," students are introduced to the concept of the title being part of the poem. This very effective technique is used frequently by poets and helps to direct the poem even if the

poem is ultimately about something quite different than the title. Students learn to think in terms of opposites. Dischell introduces the concept of "imitative fallacy" in this section. The imitative fallacy is when the writer makes the descriptions and narratives sound like the protagonist, or in the case of the poem, the subject rather than the protagonist. The result is a self-referential piece of writing which sheds no light on the subject/protagonist. For example, if the subject of the poem is "calm" and the poem itself is calm (perhaps a list of calm things without any attempt at playing with the subject by deliberately introducing non-calming actions or noises and then arguing that they are somehow soothing), then there is not really much poem there of any interest to the reader. Poets should take heart, however. It is easy to fall into fallacies. That is why we study and learn how to spot them.

"Cleave and Cleave" by Carol Muske uses a similar concept of opposites with words that sound the same (homonyms), like write and right. Students are instructed to connect their choice with a personal and perhaps emotional memory or situation, bringing together the two words and their meanings into an agreement at the end of the poem. "Cleave and Cleave" directs the writer to make a connection within a poem between words that sound alike yet have different meanings. It differs from some of the other exercises in this section in that it encourages writers to use emotion. However, it also provides some structure.

"Matthewsian Invisible Hinge" directs writers to make a major change in a poem from one stanza to the next. The change can be in the subject or in the style of writing. This exercise might seem daunting but the author of the exercises, Pamela Alexander, says beginning students can tackle this one. Students should have an understanding of poetry forms and be familiar with a few of them.

"'Que Sera, Sera' and Other False Premises" instructs students to take a premise or an assertion from a poem they have written or from a poem that they know and then write the exact opposite as the subject for a poem. Since the subject of "'Que Sera, Sera' and Other False Premises" will be about a negative opposite of an assertion or statement, then the poem will mostly likely be about a lack of something or about something that is missing or destroyed. This exercise will be a challenge to an advanced student or someone with some writing experience.

"The Props Assist the House" begins with a "base line" the student uses to begin the writing process. This line could be from another poem or it could be a phrase with some rhythm which appeals to the writer. Students read the line and then write whatever comes to mind. The writing needs to be rapid or maintained in some kind of steady pattern and flow. If the student reaches an impasse, then he or she should repeat the base line in order to keep the words coming. At the end, the student takes out the base line and uses all of the produced material to create a new poem. The repeated base line is a place to pause, to return to, to use as a starting point in the process of finding something to write about. Since the line will have some meter and rhythm, it will influence the rest of the writing that comes about with its use. However, the base line is not the poem. The author of the exercise, James McKean, compares the base line to a temporary support in a construction project, or perhaps the tools used to build the house

or the person who built it. The poem would not exist without the props or the carpenter, but neither are to be seen when the poem is complete.

For "The Familiar," Alicia Ostriker instructs students to write a poem by copying the style of a contemporary American poet, one who writes about ordinary life. Students should choose another location, so if the original poem is set in a bar, they should set their imitative version in a church, gas station, office, or whatever seems like a good ordinary place. If it used in a group, the other students in the class will critique the poem to determine specifically what came from the original poem. While students might be worried about "copying" a poem as per the instructions in "The Familiar," this exercise is useful, rather than being an exercise in plagiarism or an impediment to creativity. Students will analyze what their model poet has done and gain insight into the writing of their own poems.

In "Writing Between the Lines," students will use a poem they like but are not familiar with, type it out in triple space, and then write their own poem between the lines, using the previous line as inspiration. After they are done, they will eliminate the original poem and work with their own writing. "Writing Between the Lines" is a lot like the cut-and-paste, fill-in-the-blank, fun exercises from the previous chapter. And according to the author of this writing prompt, it is fine for poems to be derivative. In fact, he supplies an example of how one of the most famous American poems, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," is possibly derived from a poem Frost would have been familiar with in his youth. "All poets," says J.D. McClatchy in this exercise, "have debts outstanding."

"Poetry Obstacle Course" requires students to write a poem with one object and one action per line. The next line does not have to be connected with the previous one, however, and the lines should make sense in and of themselves. "Poetry Obstacle Course" by Marcia Southwick is indeed a lot like a physical obstacle course that the poet is creating even as she is dodging the obstacles. The idea is to get students away from writing poems that are really paragraphs arbitrarily cut into lines. Poems will "accidentally" make some kind of sense in a way that is not linear and yet is logical.

The word "group" in "Important Excitements: Writing Groups of Related Poems" has nothing to do with working in a group. Students write a proposal about what they are going to write before beginning the poems. There should be at least five and no more than twelve poems in the group. The poems should be written over the course of a class rather than all at once. "Important Excitements: Writing Groups of Related Poems" will encourage students to broaden their range over the course of a term or a semester. Writing multiple poems on a single subject will provide students with the chance to hone their craft as well as experiment with many different aspects of writing poetry. Students will also learn what they personally are obsessed with or captivated by. Students might resist the "proposal" aspect at the beginning of writing this series of poems and feel that it interferes with creativity. However, as we see in many exercises, guidelines and rules often result in greater creativity rather than less as students struggle with the imposed boundaries—and are freed by those same boundaries.

"The Short Narrative Poem" gives students the tools to write a sonnet without calling it a sonnet or worrying that the form is too difficult for them. The poem should tell a story and be eleven to fifteen lines long. If it is not a true story, then it should be a believable one. The lines of the poem must be from nine to twelve syllables, but not all the same number of syllables. Students do not need to try for iambic pentameter or rhyme. Strategies for this exercise include extending the action beyond one line (rather than sentences ending at line ends) and writing a paragraph first, then re-working it into the format. Students do not need to write a "poetic" poem.

Students write three short poems modeled after William Carlos Williams's cat poem in "The Cat Poem." Each poem is one sentence long, describes an action made up of smaller actions, and the poem should mimic Williams's poem. Since the end result from "The Cat Poem" will itself be very short, it will be easier to talk about why each word of the poems matter and how they help or hinder the creation as a whole.

"The Seduction Poem" is an exercise in persuasion. It can be sexual or not but needs to be in tetrameter couplets, which means that each line will have three beats (tetrameter) and the lines will be a series of rhyming pairs (couplet). The poem does not have to be serious but it does need to be written on a subject about which people care.

Part Six. Musical Matters: Sound, Rhythm, and the Line

Part Six. Musical Matters: Sound, Rhythm, and the Line Summary and Analysis

Part Six. Musical Matters: Sound, Rhythm and the Line

The sixteen exercises in this section acquaint students with some of the more technical aspects of poetry.

"A Lewis Carroll Carol" encourages the use of unfamiliar words. Students go through a dictionary and pick out words they do not know without looking at the definition or understanding what part of speech the word might be. Students use the words in a poem and use them in whatever grammatical fashion they choose. They should pay particular attention to sounds and can make their "new" words into adverbs by adding -ly or any other suffixes or prefixes. Karen Swenson invokes Lewis Carroll in "A Lewis Carroll Carol" because probably most students will be familiar with his poem "Jaberwocky," in which there are several made-up words that sound enough like real words for the poem to make sense. That is the aim of this exercise, along with development of the ear's sensitivity to sound in poems.

In "Emotion/Motion/Ocean/Shun," Susan Mitchell asks students to write a poem featuring "nesting rhymes," an example of which is the title of the exercise. The other term for this style of poetry is "diminishing rhyme" since the words get smaller and smaller. The poem should be eighteen lines long and made up of three stanzas and will feature three different words used in their "diminished" form. Students might worry that they will not be able to find a word that works, for "Emotion/Motion/Ocean/Shun," and the author took all of the good ones. However, all students need to do is begin a search - and they can start with the directions for the exercise. "Impossible" has "possible" and "sibyl" nested inside. "Sibyl" will work for this exercise because the sound is within the word "impossible" even if the spelling is not.

"Patterning" instructs students to come up with a phrase, a saying, or a style of speaking and then repeat it within a poem. The motif/phrase should be easy to recognize but should be varied somewhat so that it is not identical (it should be familiar but not a repeat). The poem cannot rhyme at the end. The exercise "Patterning" teaches the use of rhythm and sound in free verse. However, the requirement in "Patterning" is a little more subtle than some of the previous exercises. It would be a good idea to seek out the examples cited by Stephen Dunn, which is what he does when he teaches this poetry exercises.

Students write a long poem of about 50 or 60 lines that consists of one sentence in "Breathless, Out of Breath." The sentence must be grammatically correct. "Breathless,

Out of Breath" will give students the opportunity to write a poem in which the sentence does not stop at the end of the line since this long poem must also be one long sentence.

In "Free-Verse Lineation," students begin with two poems with which they are not familiar, and which someone else has typed up for them into prose format. Students chose one of the poems and then try breaking the lines at different lengths and putting in different breaks until they are satisfied with the result. Students should strive to maintain a consistent rhythm and scheme. After trying this with another writer's poem, then students can try this with poems they have already written: retype them as a chunk of prose and then try different line breaks. Variations include choosing a piece of prose text (not a poem re-written as prose) and trying for different effects by using different strategies. In "Free-Verse Lineation," the words are already in place for this exercise and the student can concentrate on how a line is constructed or how rhythm works. Sharon Bryan says of the exercise that people who use it are surprised to find out that line breaks are not random or arbitrary. For the variation with the (non-poem) prose text, two more concepts of line ending are introduced by poet Jack Myers: the Transformative Line Ending and the Emphatic Line Ending. What makes the Transformative Line Ending a true transformation is the manipulation of the text to create a meaning or suggestion quite different than the original piece, as is the case with the example in the book. In the Emphatic Line Ending, the prose is re-written to include enjambment, and the breaks provide some surprises for the reader which do not exist in the prose version.

'"Lyric Poetry" by Dana Gioia is a two-day process of thinking about a popular song and coming up with new lyrics for it, keeping the words in your head, and then waiting another day before writing them down. After writing down the lyrics, evaluate the poem on its own, without any thought to the original melody. Students compose their poem "in the air" rather than by writing down their ideas in "Lyric Poetry." This will help students to concentrate on sound and also improve memory. Using a popular song makes the exercise relatively easy. Since poetry was first orally transmitted before writing became commonplace, this is also a good lesson in the history of poetry.

"Shall We Dance?" directs students to write a poem using a dance rhythm. Musical forms not strictly for dancing can be used. The quickest dance form that might spring to mind for "Shall we Dance?" is the waltz. It has three beats (also known as three-quarter time) with the stress on the first beat. Students familiar with other dance forms might find those to be accessible rhythms for poetry writing using this exercise.

"Short Lines and Long Lines" takes two weeks to complete. The first week's assignment is to write a poem where every line is seven or fewer syllables, and the next weeks assignment calls for a poem with every line longer than seven syllables. The instructor (if this exercise is executed in a class) then directs students to look at issues of imagery, rhythm and enjambment. Students will notice that short lines can be jarring and long lines imitate prose. "Short Lines and Long Lines" might be better suited for a classroom with a knowledgeable instructor rather than poets working on their own. If you are a beginner, you need the direction, feedback and instruction that a teacher can provide.

"Word Problems and Science Tests" asks writers to focus in on encounters with mathematics and science by, at first, free-writing for ten minutes. The free-write should focus on contacts with math and/or science principals. After writing, the writer should look for words and phrases which appeal and begin work on the poem. The author of this exercise, Robin Becker, advises using verbs and images to make the poem more interesting. The first draft should be fifteen lines long. "Word Problems and Science Tests" asks writers to explore a topic they might not consider on their own as a subject for a poem. This "quirky assignment" teaches that poetry can truly be about anything.

"Anglo-Saxon Lines" uses the Anglo Saxon style of writing poetry. Each line is made up of two short lines and there is much use of alliteration (first words starting with the same consonant) but not much rhyme.

"Sapphic Stanzas" is based on a form invented by Sappho, the Greek poet. The stanzas are made up of three long lines and one short one. The metrical structure of the line is not iambic pentameter, the most familiar rhythm in English. Therefore, students should strive to follow the pattern, using the provided example in the poem "Effort at Speech" to help with the writing. The samples in "Sapphic Stanzas" are a little confusing, as are the instruction. The samples do not conform exactly to the given pattern. However, what writer Judith Baumel wants students to get out of the exercise is mostly the way the stanza is constructed, with three lines that work together and a fourth, much-shorter line that changes the direction of the previous three, introduces some new quality, or somehow comments on the earlier part of the poem. Baumel stresses that getting the fourth line correct is the most important part.

The "Pantoum" exercise requires the writing of a poetry form in which lines two and four of each stanza are used as lines one and three of the next stanza. Lines two and four of the last stanza of the poem are lines three and one from the very first stanza. The pantoum is a well-known poetry form and can result in some very long poems indeed if the writer wishes. The consistent repetitions coupled with the changes will result, according to exercise author Judith Baumel, in puns and word play, even if that is not the writer's intention.

"Attempting a Villanelle" explores another kind of repeating poetry form. The villanelle is made up of five stanzas of three lines each. The first line of the first stanza becomes the last line of the second. Further rules are explained in the text. Students do not need to try for a "significant" or "important" line, and Molly Peacock's instructions suggest some fairly mundane subject matter. There is some good advice in "Attempting a Villanelle": draw a chart to stay on target with this particular form of poetry.

The ghazal is introduced in "Ghazal: The Charms of a Considered Disunity" by Agha Shahid Ali. It is from Persia and was invented by a poet name Hafiz around the time of Chaucer. The poem is a series of couplets in which only the first pair rhymes. The second line of all subsequent couplets will end with the same word at the end of the line of the first couplet. Furthermore, there must be a secondary internal rhyme in the penultimate (next-to-the-last) word of the second line. Finally, it is traditional for the poet to work in his or her own name into the last couplet. As Agha Shaid Ali points out in

"Ghazal: The Charms of a Considered Disunity," once the writer has decided on a system for his ghazal, he is then enslaved by the thing he has created. This realization will also occur to students who are working on pantoums and villanelles. This exercise also provides some diversity and history with the description of how poets and audiences interact with one another in a tradition Americans are not accustomed to. It should also be noted that the ghazal, while Persian in origin, is also popular in Urdu, one of the languages of India. The author of this exercise says an unrhymed form of the ghazal as practiced in American poetry lacks something, and that he prefers to see the rhymes intact.

"The Meter Reader" is a poetry exercise that takes place over a four week period. The first part instructs students to write a poem with regular syllable count, rhyme and an "odd animal or unusual plant." For Week Two, students write a poem with a regular stress count, some thyme, nearly total enjambment, and a symbol. Two weeks later, during week four, students will combine the techniques practiced in weeks one and two, and will "translate" the animal or plant into an idea. In "The Meter Reader," it is important to note that author Thomas Rabbitt assigns two poems using very different metrical constructions: one that counts syllables, and one that counts stresses. Note that they are not the same thing. Following the instruction is a short but detailed discussion of syllables, stress and accents. Thomas Rabbit acknowledges this might be the first time the student has encountered these concepts. This exercise is also heavy on technicalities and students should acquaint themselves with the terminology.

Part Seven. Major and Minor Surgery: On Revision and Writer's Block A. Exercises

Part Seven. Major and Minor Surgery: On Revision and Writer's Block A. Exercises Summary and Analysis

"Writer's Block: An antidote" takes the writer through a three-week course. There are specific instructions for each of 21 days. Instructions include reading poets and then writing in the style of that poet. "Writer's Block: An antidote" will cure writer's block if followed exactly, due to the large amount of writing required of the blocked poet. This is an extensive exercise; a do-it-yourself poetry boot camp that will result in 18 poems, almost one for each day of the program with the exception of the three days devoted to Irish poet Seamus Heaney..

The instructions for "Smash Palace" are to take ten well-known lines of famous poems and then ruin them by adding exactly the wrong word or punctuation mark. Students are instructed to try and use the smallest change they can find to ruin the line. The purpose of "Smash Palace" is to see how important the smallest things are in poetry such as commas, words of one syllable and three letters, and word choice. Deliberately wrecking classic lines of poetry will give insight into how to create poetry.

"Rhapsodizing Repetitions" instructs students to employ repetition in a poem, but a repetition of meaning rather than words or sounds. "Rhapsodizing Repetitions" is a subtler exercise than some of the others presented in this section. Students must decide what they mean by repeating the meaning of a line rather than finding a rhyme or repeating meter. Lee Upton provides a section of a poem by John Ashbery as a sample of repeated meaning within a poem. Upton says that one of the results of this exercise is to create a poem with a sense of déjà vu.

"Stealing the Goods" works with a failed poem. Writers choose a line they like from a poem of their own that does not work and use it as the first line of a new poem. If the writer does not have a failed poem, then it is acceptable to use a line from an already-published poem. The goal "Stealing the Goods" is to keep students aimed at a high standard in their writing. This poem is also good at helping students move beyond their own experience in their writing. Students also need to be aware of where they lose the momentum of what they are writing.

"Jump Starting the Dead Poem" instructs students to write the exact opposite of one of the older poems of at least twenty or thirty lines. So if the original poem mentions the month of April, the new poem should take place in October (exactly six months earlier -

or later - than April). It is fine if the writer can only manage the first couple of opposite lines in "Jump Starting the Dead Poem," and another poem entirely begins to take shape.

"Scissors & Scotch Tape" is a cut and paste exercise in which a poem that is not working is cut into pieces and re-assembled. The poem should not be cut all the way down into individual words but rather phrases or apt groups of words should remain together. The writer can then take these pieces and move them around. Perhaps something that was at the end works better as the first line, or perhaps, just by placing two sections together, a relationship between words that was obscure will become clear. The new structure of the poem should then be taped together with the knowledge that it is only the general outline of a new poem. "Scissors and Scotch Tape" is a major reassessment and re-imagining of a poem which has problems or is not working for the writer. This exercise reminds writers that their poems are not carved in stone and that there is plenty of room for change. The exercise also acknowledges that it is sometimes hard to let go of a poem written in a certain way in favor of allowing it to become a better poem.

"In a Dark Room: Photography and Revision" suggests ways to revise a poem by adopting different perspectives. Students find a photograph that has some meaning for them. It can be any kind of photograph, good or bad, professional or amateur; it does not matter as long as the picture is significant. Students spend time examining the photograph and writing down everything they can about it, then go on to write five different poems about it from different perspectives. Alternatives include a change in the perspective of time, such as writing about what happened just before the picture was taken, just after, or what is happening outside of the frame of the picture. "In a Dark Room" helps students to make revisions, something they might not be willing to do with their own poems. Students are more accepting of the changes that have to be made to get a good photograph, such as taking the picture from another angle or asking the subject of the photograph to move a little bit.

"The Party of the Century" works best for a group. Writers first collect words from sources, such as magazines, that they are not familiar with and that have a particular vocabulary. Each person writes a poem called "The Party of the Century." The poems are collected, shuffled, and distributed among the students who continue writing the poem. The process is repeated one more time so that each student has a poem that has been partially written by two other people. The poem is now the property of its third owner who will treat it as if he or she has written everything so far. This person will complete the poem, re-writing it onto a new page. Students then read and discuss the poems. Since all poems have the same title and use the same "word hoard," there will be common connections amongst all of the poems. However, since there is lots of revision going on, students will see that revision can accomplish quite a bit. Since no one has complete "ownership" of the poems, students will feel much less intimidated in making revisions than they might be if they were trying to do something similar with their own work.

"The Shell Game" instruct students to take one of their own free-verse poems and re-write it in formal verse.The Shell Game works very well, according to author Thomas Rabbit, because students have a framework for poems that perhaps suffered from a lack of focus. This is the last exercise in the book and Rabbitt says students should now understand that sometimes you have to make major changes to a piece in order to save it and that "not being afraid of the art or the craft" is what the whole poetry writing process is about

Part Seven. Major and Minor Surgery: On Revision and Writer's Block B. Reflections

Part Seven. Major and Minor Surgery: On Revision and Writer's Block B. Reflections Summary and Analysis

Five short essays make up the last portion of the book. These are not exercises but rather reflections on the use (or uselessness) of poetry exercises, the value of revision, and what writers can expect from the process. Stanley Plumly in "The Rewrite as Assignment," thinks that writing exercises are worthless but that re-writing is the best part . Lynn Emanuel takes a different approach, considering the re-writing to be the worst part, when the process of writing poetry moves from fun to the potential for punishment. Donald Justice feels that revision is easy since it is simply a matter of taking out the bad parts. Susan Snively, in "Waiting and Silence" says that leaving the poem alone for an extended period of time is often the best remedy for a problem.The various essays in this last section contradict each other and sometimes, the rest of the book. Lynn Emanuel's essay seems to suggest that everything that has come before in the book on the subject of revision (and perhaps the entire book) is terribly wrong and that most students and writers let themselves off far too easily without working. Stanley Plumly feels poetry writing assignments are not helpful. Richard Tillinghast, in "Household Economy, Ruthlessness, Romance and the Art of Hospitality" advocates for faith and hope, but not charity. If something needs to be cut from a poem, then it needs to be cut. Donald Justice gives advice in "Of Revision" and closes his essay by wishing he had followed more of his own advice. "Waiting and Silence" by Susan Snively gently tosses the poet back on his or her own resources and judgments with the advice to wait —months or years, if necessary, until the right words arrive.

Characters

Robin Behn

Robin Behn, one of the editors of this book, was teaching in the Masters of Fine Arts Program in writing at the University of Alabama when this book was published. She had published one book of poetry at that time, Paper Bird, and the book won an award from the Associated Writing Programs Award Series. She had another book due out the year following the publication of The Practice of Poetry. Behn contributed one of the poetry exercises to this book, "Letter Poems" in Part Three, Who's Talking and Why? The Self and Its Subjects, Section A Aspects of Voice. Behn likens the feeling of reading a "letter poem" to the guilty pleasure of reading something one is not supposed to read and compares the reader of the poems to an "eavesdropper." Behn instructs students to "ground themselves in specifics" for this poetry exercises, specifics such as the settings, the circumstances, the time, and any events that might be relevant to poem; the "why" of who is writing what to whom. Behn also stresses the importance of understanding the audience, one of the most important aspects of any kind of writing. Even though the exchange within her "Letter Poem" exercise is between two people, the readers (eavesdroppers) must be able to have some idea of what is going on. The poem needs specifics, otherwise the reader might feel they have walked into the middle of a foreign film in an unknown language without subtitles. Behn says of "Letter Poems," even though the "I" of the poem is not necessarily the writer, the writer's own voice will come through and he or she will avoid the "generic voice-of-poetry that is so dull and is so often the downfall of beginning writers." Behn provides examples of poems to read for this style, including Maxine Kumin, another contributor to this series.

Chase Twitchell

Chase Twitchell, the other editor of this book, has published three books of poems as of the publication date of The Practice of Poetry: Perdido, The Odds and Northern Spy. Twitchell contributed one exercise to the book, in Part Seven, Major and Minor Surgery: On Revision and Writer's Block, Section A, "Scissors & Scotch Tape." Twichell stresses the importance of letting go in this exercise, letting go of what the writer thought was maybe the best part of the poem in favor of discovering what the poem is really about. The scissors and the tape make this exercise amusing. Twichell especially wants students to make cuts in the poem at the point where "logic is the splice." Twichell asks the students to take a lot of risks. Taking a poem apart and then trying to make some sense of it might seem too anarchic or random for some people, although it is not really random at all since the exercise stays within the poem. Furthermore, Twitchell believes that the writer of the failed or stalled poem will find something of value that had eluded him or her before: "Do two or three of the pieces suddenly seem the strongest, the most vibrant, vivid, mysterious, powerful?" She reminds the writers to forget about the old poem and to not be afraid of the "violence done to the poem with a pair of scissors" since all that is happening is that the poem is being reimagined rather than destroyed.

She also counsels "detachment" from the initial version to achieve a better result the second time around.

Judith Baumel

Judith Baumel is the author of three poetry exercises, "Anglo-Saxon Lines," "Pantoum," and "Sapphic Stanzas." All three exercises are in Part Six, Musical Matters: Sound, Rhythm and the Line. Baumel places a lot of emphasis on the technical and formal matters of poetry by encouraging students to explore forms as a way to write poetry that is just as personal and strong as free verse.

Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop did not write any of the poetry exercises, but she is mentioned by several of the writers as an example for students to follow. Her poem "One Art" is not only cited as an example of a villanelle, but is also mentioned frequently as an excellent poem. "In the Waiting Room" is re-printed in this book in its entirety and is also the model for a poetry exercise in Part Three. Who's Talking and Why? The Self and Its Subjects, A. Aspects of Voice.

Rita Dove

Rita Dove has published many books of poetry and a novel. At the time of publication, she was a professor at the University of Virginia. Her intimate and personal style is reflected in her contributions to the book, "Ten-Minute Spill" and "Your Mother's Kitchen." Her poem "Dusting" is mentioned as an example in one of the exercises.

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia contributed " 'Lyric' Poetry" to the collection. The word "lyric" in the title is a play on words and also places emphasis on the nature of this exercise, which is to substitute one's own words for the lyrics of a song. In addition to being a poet, Gioia is a businessman in New York. He's a frequent contributor to magazines like The Atlantic, The New Yorker, and The Nation.

Richard Jackson

Richard Jackson wrote three exercises for this book, "Five Easy Pieces," "Breathless, Out of Breath," and "Shall we Dance?" The last two are in the same section, Part Six. Musical Matters and Jackson concentrates on the almost-musical rhythm and pace of poetry. "Five Easy Pieces" is one of those sure-fire poetry exercises that might surprise and delight writers. Jackson is an experienced teacher, scholar, and writer.

Donald Justice

Donald Justice has taught at many colleges and universities. He is a prolific writer, hence the publication of his book A Donald Justice Reader. Justice has an essay in the last section, Part Seven. On Revision, Part B, Reflections. His essay, "Of Revision" suggests that poets need to cut out the "bad parts" of failed poems, but does concede that the trick is to recognize the bad parts.

Maxine Kumin

Maxine Kumin was once the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. Her poem, "How It Is," is cited by one of the contributors. Her own contribution to The Practice of Poetry is "Dream Notebook" in the first section Ladders to the Dark: The Unconscious as Gold Mine

Carol Muske

Carol Muske has written both novels and books of poetry and is a professor. She wrote three of the exercises in this book, "Cleave and Cleave," "'In the Waiting Room,'" and "Translations: Idea to Image."

Objects/Places

Unfamiliar words

The instructors encourage students to use words they do not understand. They also encourage students to use the words in creative and imaginative ways rather than simply expanding their vocabulary.

Dreams

Writers are encouraged to keep track of the dreams and use the material for poems.

Risk

Writers need to take risks and not fall back on clichés, especially if they are writing about family members. It is easy to write about "grandma" as the sweet old lady who made cookies even though one's own grandmother was nothing like this.

Making things up

Writers are not hampered by "what really happened." It is perfectly acceptable to take images, memories, and events from entirely different places and then weave them into a narrative poem or a poem with some type of story line.

Family

Family is a touchstone for poets. At least three exercises use family members in either real, imaginary, or metaphorical situations.

Opposites

Writers are asked to write lines or poems that are the complete opposite of the words already in place, or to work with statements that make no sense.

Failed poems

Failed poems. All writers have failed poems hidden somewhere and these are very useful for creating new poems.

Repetition

Many poetry forms use the repetition of entire lines within the poem to create a hypnotic effect. If a line is repeated, it also takes on an importance even if the writer did not see the importance to begin with.

Strangeness

By deliberately working with an image that is impossible (catching golf balls on the tongue, for example), students can come to understand psychological truth.

Familiar words and images

Familiar words and images. Poets can keep track of words they use frequently or also images. These words and images might be collected from dream notebooks, free writing exercises, or exercises in making lists. The words can be moved and shuffled, however, so that they are used in ways the poet did not consider until seeing them in a new context.

Themes

Free writing

This useful and often-used technique for writers helps poets and would-be poets discover something to write about. It is often as simple as sitting down and writing whatever comes to mind on a particular subject, but is more focused than what is often called "automatic writing." Aids to free-writing include objects and photographs and include detailed descriptions and writing to the point of exhaustion on a particular image or theme before ever beginning a poem. It is the "home work" for at least one exercise. Other variations on free writing include "The Peasant Wedding" where students look at a painting that is filled with characters and actions and make up dialogue and background stories for the people portrayed in the picture. Free writing gives writers permission to go ahead and write without judging the end product themselves or worrying about how others will judge what they have written. It is like brain storming, either in a group or on one's own. That is one reason Rita Dove has her students draw pictures with crayons in "Your Mother's Kitchen." If students are not worried about how well they are writing since they are too busy drawing, they will be more relaxed about the process and will quite likely do better work or arrive at interesting topics to write about rather than experiencing feelings of being hemmed-in or unequal to the task.

The subconscious/unconscious.

The first section, subtitled "Ladders to the Dark" is about helping writers access the hidden parts of their mind. Poets make extensive use of the subconscious; their own or those of others. The fastest route to the subconscious is keep track of dreams and this can be accomplished through keeping a dream notebook to record. "Chanting Flowers off the Wall" is a kind of unconscious exercise. By saying words over and over, they are robbed of their meanings and take on another shape the poet must discover for him or herself, just like the poet must interpret his or her own journeys into the unconscious. In "Ten-Minute Spill," Rita Dove assigns her students ten (and only ten) minutes in which to write a poem. She provides them with eight words for starters, five of which they must use in the poem. She says that what comes out of this exercise are "scary and wild chunks of psychic landscape," or perhaps images that the student would not admit or realize are in her mind until the poetry exercises forces them out. Using several days of journal entries will also reveal what might be just under the surface of a writer's mind. In "A Poem that Scares You," we have another technique of connecting to the parts of the mind not normally given much freedom to express themselves. "Scary" does not have to mean horror movie scary.

Revision

The poets in this book are pretty clear about the need for revision, even in sections not dedicated specifically to the topic. All are clear that the first draft of a poem will not be the last and that often the first draft or even the beginning inspiration for a poem will not longer be recognizable by the time the poem is complete. Just because a poem only takes 15 minutes to write does not mean it is good. But none of the writers suggest that there is a sure-fire way to tell when a poem is complete. It is too subjective an area for there to be any one standard.

Many students might be surprised by the amount of preparatory work that goes into writing poems. Free-writing and journal-keeping are the means to the end, not the end itself. Likewise, free-verse does not mean "random" or chaotic. Many more students might be disheartened to learn that their poem is not finished just because they have come to the end of the page or they want to share with someone what they have written.

Revision also means the writer might find him or herself in the position of abandoning the line or the word that they love very much. This is known as "murdering your darlings" according to one of the writers. But revision is part of the craft and practice, and writers would not need to practice if they were perfect right out of the gate.

Style

Perspective

The Practice of Poetry is written by poets and for poets. This book is for people who have never written a poem and those who have been writing for years. Both authors have extensive backgrounds in poetry. Robin Behn and Chase Twichell are both poets and teachers. They have each written and published individual books of poetry and contribute to literary magazines. They could be considered working poets since they teach, do public readings, and work on their own craft. Robin Behn teaches at the University of Alabama and has received many awards and fellowships including the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the state arts councils of Illinois and Alabama, and the New England Review narrative poetry prize. Her work appears in the Pushcart Prize anthology, Best American Poetry, and many literary journals. Behn is a graduate of Oberlin College, the University of Missouri-Columbia, and The University of Iowa. Her most recent book of poetry, Horizon Note, was published in 2001. Chase Twichell earned her degrees from Trinity College and the University of Iowa. She has published six books of poetry and her most recent, Dog Language, came out in 2005. Twichell has taught extensively at major colleges and universities. She is married to the novelist Russell Banks and is a follower of Buddhism. Twichell began the Ausable Press in Keene, New York.

Tone

The tone of this book varies a great deal as each exercise of the 90+ exercises is written by a different poet. Some of the exercises are easily accessible and easy to understand, while others need more than one reading. "Make Your Own System!" by Jackson Mac Low is one of the more difficult exercises to understand and needs to be read very carefully in order to make any sense of it at all. There are a few other exercises students might not wish to pursue since, at the first reading, they are very vague and not overly helpful to the beginner. However, some of the exercises are the complete opposite and while the author does not write the poem for the student, the end result will indeed be a poem.

Most readers will be excited to begin writing poetry after looking at just a few of these exercises. Tere is something for everyone in the book. Students and experienced writers are free to pick and choose from the offerings, or just jump in at any point and start. Exercises towards the end do not require a familiarity with exercises at the beginning.

While the poetry exercises can be used by anyone, students unfamiliar with poetry terminology will be at a disadvantage sooner or later. This book does not take new students through the definitions of poetry terms or teach the basics of sonnets. There

are instructions for completing a pantoum, a villanelle, and a ghazal, the latter probably being the least familiar to Western readers.

Structure

As of this writing, the book has not had an updated edition since it was first published in 1992, and there are no Internet links listed. The contact information for poetry books are phone numbers and mailing addresses. However, just because the book was published in 1992 does not mean it is out of date. Regardless of technology, the act of writing poetry has changed very little.

The Practice of Poetry is divided into seven parts and includes two appendixes, contributor's notes, and an index. The poetry exercises increase in detail and complexity as the book progresses. However, anyone can use any exercise regardless of skill or experience. Some of the exercises work best with a group while some can be modified for an individual or for a group.

Exercises in the book teach students how to tap into their subconscious, play with words, gain inspiration from their lives and things other than their lives. The exercises will challenge all writers to work harder at their own poetry than they perhaps have been asked to work before. The craft of writing and the art of revision are very important to all of the poetry teachers who have contributed to this book.

Although beginners can use this book, it is not a book for beginners. Those who are completely unfamiliar with poetry, either reading or writing, will be better served by starting with an introductory book. Many of the exercises assume some familiarity with the technical aspects of poetry, and these assumptions might be confusing or discouraging to some students.

Quotes

"Writing is an intuitive process; we must trust our intuition." Part One, Ladders to the Dark, p. 9.

"Since I think of poets and poetry as increasingly outside mainstream culture, the desire, however inchoate, to write poems and then, perhaps, to become a poet must be predicated on something other than usual ambitions." Part One, Ladders to the Dark, p. 29.

"We live by metaphor, even if we are not given to translating into words those complex combinations of emotions and the sensuous information our brains accumulate." Part Two, The Things of this World, p. 49.

"Poems begin where ordinary conversation leaves off." Part Two, The Things of this World, p. 51.

"Self-importance restricts the writer's freedom to pursue the whole of a situation confronting him or her." Part Three, Who's Talking and Why? p. 68.

"Letting one's writing originate from the perspective of an inanimate thing radicalizes context and empathy." Part Three, Who's Talking and Why? p. 69.

"Ever since Wordsworth, childhood has been one of the great, necessary and dangerous subjects for poets." Part Three, Who's Talking and Why? p.87.

"Write about what you know: this is easily the hoariest of writerly clichés, in part because it's pretty good advice." Part Three, Who's Talking and Why? p. 92.

"The idea of a poem, its subject and theme, profits from having a physical (or physiological) antecedent; a knot in the stomach, a whistle at the roof of the mouth, a yearning or a dizziness somewhere, that instructs word choice, and in turn creates a physical impact on the reader, an emotional music that is the basis of a poem's authority, intimacy, and pleasure, whether harsh or mellifluous." Part Three, Who's Talking and Why? p.102.

"Through inventing your own methods for making poems, you may become conscious of what you have absorbed form your cultural environment and of your freedom to choose other assumptions and other ways of working and making than those you've received without fully realizing it and interjected - unconsciously made part of yourself." Part Four, Truth in Strangeness p. 134.

"A poem is a small or large machine made of words." Part Five, Laws of the Wild, p. 139.

"So each of us writes as we were formed to write - formed by the poems we have, from childhood on, read or studied." Part Five, Laws of the Wild, p. 156.

"Writing well in form requires practice. One must master the rules of a particular meter like the steps of a dance or the motions of a sport." Part Six, Musical Matters, p. 185.

"Oh, one last thing: don't use rhyme until you develop the necessary skills to keep rhymes from distorting your sentences and squelching the discovery process in your writing, a process that is new to most beginning writers and easily squelched." Part Six, Musical Matters, p.190.

"The willingness, the ardent desire even, to revise separates the poet from the person who sees poetry as therapy or self-expression." Part Seven, Major and Minor Surgery, p. 245.

"The most exhilarating, and therefore treacherous, moment in a poem's composition comes when the first draft is done." Part Seven, Major and Minor Surgery, p. 257.

Topics for Discussion

Why do you suppose that most of the students working on Dove's exercise "Your Mother's Kitchen" write poems that have nothing to do with their drawings? Does this mean the drawings were insignificant since few of the poems mentioned them? If the drawings are insignificant, then why does Dove require her students to produce them? Why does she not allow her students to start over again if they are not pleased with their drawings?

Poetry is full of technical terminology. Most of the terminology used in this book is not explained. Look up the definitions for the following and write them down: caesura, alliteration, metaphor, enjambment, scan, virgules and iambic pentameter.

Imagery is an important concept in the study of poetry. Think back to a time in a class when you were asked to identify images in a poem. Does your study of different methods of writing poetry help make the concept of imagery more important? Why or why not?

Part 5 is about structure. How is structure different from form? Or is it the same thing? You might want to define each term for yourself first before proceeding with a discussion.

Lynn Emanuel's essay (pp. 251 - 256) seems to suggest that everything that has come before in the book on the subject of revision is terribly wrong, and that maybe even the whole book is wrong. Stanley Plumly begins his essay by saying that he does not see the point of poetry-writing assignments. Why do you think the editors included these two essays if both seem to contradict the whole point of The Practice of Poetry?

Susan Sinvely says, "The most exhilarating, and therefore treacherous, moment in a poem's composition comes when the first draft is done." What does she mean by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Sydney Lea says "intellectual control of a poem is something to apply after the materials have been allowed to float to the surface." What do you think the phrase "intellectual control" means? Does it conflict with your ideas of what your own poetry should be? Do you think there is a time when "intellectual control" can hurt a poem? Does free verse use "intellectual control"?

When you write a poem, are you trying to say something significant? If a poem is not about an emotion, is it still a poem?

Why bother to write poetry at all?