

It Happens This Way ...

1. Show up and pay attention – with feeling and empathy!

A Few Words About Inspiration

It happens this way: the day collects stuff:
a squirrel in rigor on a cottage stone,
chem trails staining summer's sky,
a white spider on the TV screen.

A toilet flush, furnace fan, cars crunching down
a crumbling road, planes nicking clouds,
sunrise bouncing off the house
lighting daisies in hinoki shade.

Every moment something new appears,
each longing to be raked, piled, flamed
into lines that may, as Frost dictates,
begin their slide toward wisdom from delight.

Wouldn't he love the smallest architect
taking a spinning-break from web design?
Work needs a few deep breaths, he'd say,
and time to hear the neighbor's scythe swish
beyond unmended walls, to smell apples
basketed for market or cider press.

He'd stop at gashes near the squirrel's heart
and confer with Steller's jays.
This death? No accident, they'd claim.
What mischief in a creature that carves
red marks, then skulks away?
What would wisdom say?

The sky cleansing itself,
the spider coaxed out the slider door,
intrusions of sounds and light – up for grabs.
What mystery designed earth to spin
into a perfect prompting place?

-- *These Fragile Lilacs*

The Fly

I empathize: six days stuck inside our house.
Believe me, I've tried to snatch you in mid-flight
and walk you out the door, but your agility
far out paces mine.

Rest assured, the swatter is in the garage
and, in accordance with my beliefs,
you don't deserve to die. I suspect
you've a mate somewhere who's frantic
for your return and sent out an APB.

This morning you browsed the mail
with special interest in my timeshare's dues –
they're about to rise again – and the pleas
charities send out at least ten times a year.
You also scanned some phrases for poems
I scratched out yesterday.
I couldn't tell if they impressed.

Have I mentioned we've had frosted nights
and our maples are in autumn bloom?
The slugs have planned their Thanksgiving feast
and the juncos and jays are eating seeds
as fast as I can fill their feeders up.

Anyway, before you go – and I hope
you'll find the open window soon –
I want to thank you for motivating me.
After chasing you from room to room
several times a day, I've taken
a mild interest in mild exercise.

– *The Dime Show Review*

Homework: Begin a poem with *Today collects stuff* ... and start collecting what you see, hear, smell, taste, feel in the world around you. See how images rake, pile, flame into lines of a new poem.

Go back through your own poems that already use multiple images. Are any of them calling for a poem of their own?

2. Cut up and re-arrange.

Variety Is ... and 21 Other Proverbs

Variety is the spice, cleanliness is next.
Heaven helps those who don't bite the hand that feeds them.
People who live in glass houses should hope for the best.
There's no place like home for a free lunch.
Necessity makes the heart grow fonder.
A watched pot never spoils the broth.
One man's trash is in the eye of the beholder.
If you can't beat 'em, practice harder.
Honesty is the best policy until it isn't.
You made your bed, now scratch my back.
If you want something done right, lead a horse to water.
Don't cry, don't count: milk and chickens are here today, gone tomorrow.
Familiarity breeds the best things in life.
The pen is mightier than a squeaky wheel.
An apple a day is worth a pound of cure.
When in Rome, keep your friends close.
You have to kiss a lot of toads to starve a fever.
Loose lips make mountains out of molehills.
There are two sides to every story: cross the bridge.
When the going gets tough, make love.
There are two theories about arguing with a woman: try putting the cat back
in the bag or—the greater part of valor— get out of the kitchen.
When all is said and done, what comes around goes.

– *Rat's Ass Review*

from "90+ Titles Appropriated from *Poetry 180* Hosted by Billy Collins"

One morning walking home through the meadow –
the green one over there – God said yes
to me and the heat and the blue willow
and the hard shadows and the red wing.
How bright it was: this unconditional day,
this moment, the summer I was sixteen.

*

The courtesy of the blind:
the Cape May Warbler who flew against my window.
She didn't mean to do it.

*

You're so beautiful it's starting to rain:
a love song for my daughter
on a summer day

– *Otis Nebula*

Homework: Google lists of anything that interests you: The most popular movies of (decade). The best songs of the (year/decade.). Famous last words. The 50 most quoted lines of poetry. The most famous songs by a single artist.

Print them out. Cut them up. Rearrange and rearrange ...

Go to the table of contents of a book that interests you. Scan, print, cut, rearrange.

3. Pile up words and play.

from **Stirring**

1.

Juncos stagger through
sun-swirling firs, praise
the revival of day.

2.

The alarm commands,
Out of bed!
Curiosity waits.

3.

Headlines disquiet.
Not even a mouse
expects peace on earth.

4.

Music hops the fence
from the neighbor's yard.
My coffee's hot. Who cares?

5.

Recipes demand *beat*,
mix, blend, fold, whip, whisk.
Soufflés require nuances.

– *Abstract Magazine: Contemporary Expressions*

The Chinwagger's Complaint

These fopdoodles don't know diddly-squat.
Their cattywampus minds can't distinguish
diphthongs from dongles, doohickeys from fartleks.
They confuse the mythical with the actual,
mistaking the Washington snallygaster
for snollygosters sitting on their fence.
A two-letter switch defines their ignorance.

On weekends you'll find them at shivoos
where they'll divagate about the demise
of jackalopes and kerfuffle about
gobbledygook. Where one word would do,
they add hundreds more and multiply
syllables. These humblebrags conversate
like klazomaniacs – a spot-on clue
to their snarky brainlessness. A heads-up:
they can't define any word within these lines
so decode as you like. Purse-proud stampcrabs
will whiffle-whaff about your intelligence.

– *The San Antonio Review*

Homework: Open a dictionary at random, pick out a word that has multiple definitions, and play with them.

Sign up for Word of The Day (<https://www.dictionary.com/e/word-of-the-day>) and keep a file of words that interest you.

4. Hack the Bible, Fairy Tales, Myths, Nursery Rhymes.

from **Spoiler Alerts**

In this prequel to *East of Eden*, an unrepentant Adam and Eve admit they ate the snake not the apple.

*

After Humpty-Dumpty falls to pieces, all the King's horses and all the King's men celebrate over fish, chips, and micro-brew in a London pub.

*

Three not-so-little pigs are condemned to the weight-list for barbeque.

*

Old Mother Hubbard and Little Boy Blue are covers for a cross-dressing Cardinal.

*

In this sequel to *Water Pail Hill*, Jack and Jill (aka Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette) lose their heads. Severed crowns held up high scan the masses with baleful eyes. You may want to avert yours.

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A year after the royal wedding, Cinderella hurls unwearable shoes into the scullery's hearth

– Carolyn Martin, *A Penchant for Masquerades* (Portland, OR: Unsolicited Press, 2019)

Homework: Revisit biblical, fairy tale, mythic, or nursery rhyme characters. Which ones speak to you and ask to be given a new voice? Google background information that will add new twists to old stories. What do the characters you choose to write about say about you?

5. Hack Magazine and Newspaper Articles, TV Shows, Fiction or Nonfiction Books.

From the Country Called “Abroad”

... many developing countries find that their most lucrative export is people. The foreign workers and their families must grapple with an inevitable trade-off: emotional loss for material gain.

– Cynthia Gorney, “Far from Home,” *National Geographic*, January 2014

Our Filipino priest says remember
why we're here: for plywood roofs, better schools,
clean water taps; for every daily thing
our homes depend upon. And I would say
a TV set to babysit my kids,
new store-bought clothes they'd call their own,
a wife who longs to have me by her side,
not in this heat 4000 miles from home.

He preaches faithfulness. His holy vows
comfort him, but here there's little comforting.
By day we burn our hands on Dubai steel.
By night, eight bodies in one room. We sleep
in shifts. Four narrow beds. To save on rent.
Recruiters call this promise land “Abroad.”
We call it “the prison of remittances.”

Each year my daughters grow more womanly,
my sons play on the edges of the law.
They promise they are missing me, but end
our Facebook chats too quick. They run to friends
they care about more than they care for me.

We can't go back. Our family needs.
That's what my father always said.
I've heard three years of priests
drone about a fixed-up house
I wouldn't recognize, a family
who believes this stranger will provide.

I fold my callused hands and look at
Jesus in desert-blown stained glass.
I can't find words to pray, so I ask myself,
What's a color TV worth?

There are answers I can't bear:
A kid who maybe isn't mine.
A lover who consoles my one day off.
Unfaithfulness on both sides of the world.

– *The Magnolia Review*

Homework: Keep pen and paper near you when you watch TV or read anything. Keep a file of memorable characters, phrases, or ideas that may become a poem or parts of a poem. FYI: Science articles are filled with incredible images like *the sun rings like a bell, cool brown dwarfs, cyan gems*.

6. Nab lines from other authors and see where they lead.

Bad things are going to happen. – from Ellen Bass in her “Relax” became my “What I Know of Good”

... my poor eyesight makes me see everything in a complete fog. – from Monet became my “Eye-Minded”

... never blame the lettuce. – from Thích Nhất Hạnh became my “Blamestorming”

The wastepaper basket is the writer's best friend. – from Isaac Bashevis Singer became my “Resiliency”

You do not have to be good. – Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”

Ain't that a kick in the head!
After all the bunk about straights and narrows,
wrongs and rights, confessionals
where venial sins are laughable,
it's come down to this: we've been duped.
Friday fish, forty fasting days, crownings
in the Mary month of May; rosaries,
callused knees, indulgences that smudge
our sins: they don't add up to *good*.
Neither do tidy rooms, top grades in school,
nor mandatory modesty.

So let's delete the snake behind the apple tree
and every bite of stale theology.
Let's resurrect original wildness
and ramble through valleys scratched and scarred,
down unquiet streams, across raging fields
of blooms disguised as weeds.
Let's celebrate every fleshy flaw,

each mistaken thought that turns out true.
Let's race wild geese to the nearest star,
cheering on imperfect
nakedness with disheveled glee.

– *Gyroscope Review*.

Homework: Reread some of your favorite poems by other authors and pick out lines to agree with or contradict.

Hack yourself! Re-read your own poems, pick out the best lines, and weave them into a new poem.

7. Write a letter to a poet and tell him/her what you like or dislike about their work. Be as specific as possible.

Dear Billy Collins,

If I told you I have five collections of my own,
you would politely nod and act impressed –
you with your fifteen, reams of awards,
and videos on well-lit platforms
where you never need to adjust the mic
because its height is designed for you –
as is the lectern and semi-comfortable chair
where you sit with a practiced host
who asks questions I've memorized the answers to.

That's because I've tracked your You-Tube clips
repeatedly for insights, inspirations, or –
if Truth nudges me hard enough – excuses
to avoid Googling great cities of the world
for images to upscale a mediocre poem
that refuses to say where it wants to go.

You, on the other hand, never fail to disappoint –
like the feral cat who strolls across
the patio and swats the sliding door
or the flicker who delights in my suet cake.

I count on certain things: that noncommittal pet,
an orange feather lying in the grass, and your glasses
that may – or not – stay on your nose
while you read from *The Rain in Portugal*
or from *Sailing Alone Around a Room* –
a nautical activity, I'm not ashamed
to admit, I practice when no one's home.

– *The Blue Nib*