

POETRY FOR WELLBEING
WORKSHOPS

WORKSHOP 5

TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE





INTRODUCTION

Our thanks to John Glenday for writing this workbook for us.


Poetry transforms the everyday into the something else. It does this in a number of ways: it changes how we look at the world by insisting we focus on small, seemingly insignificant details; it refuses to overlook or disregard. Poetry also transforms what goes on in us into something that other people can understand, experience and relate to. The most common way it does this is through metaphor or simile. It's a bit like a currency exchange – the poem changes our interior thoughts and feelings to a form other folk can use and understand.

People usually mourn their faults and tell themselves they can't change, because change is difficult. But the truth is, being human, we cannot help but change. It's how we change that is important. We should also consider active and passive change – do we allow events/circumstances to change us, or do we ourselves make a decision about how we change?

When I was a teenager, I desperately wanted to be a poet, but didn't know how, and now as a septuagenarian poet I still desperately want to be a poet and still have so much to learn. But, because my perspective has changed, I can see how the things I looked on then as challenges, as weaknesses, as faults, even, were actually my strengths: my chronic shyness (made me a great observer); my overly interior life (I read lots of great books); my horrendously poor attention span (I learned about lots of different things); my constant self-doubt (taught me to question the world).

Poetry transforms, too – it transforms experience and feelings into solid things that can be understood by the reader, and is transformed back into feelings again by them.

So one of the techniques for writing effective poetry – and I always go on about this – is to focus on the sensory. Abstract language is so flimsy and untranslatable that it has little use in a poem. And yet the main focus of poetry is our emotional response to the world. That's why we use metaphor: to carry over our feelings and thoughts to a reader outside our context. That's what the word 'metaphor' means, after all – something carried across – and in that crossing it is transformed. A transformation that changes



both reader and poet. It is transformative to know that someone has made contact with our experience by reading a poem; to learn that our words have been heard by a stranger. Both are equally transformative.

TO BEGIN: A POEM

It's important in every session to encourage everyone to write and to share that writing; and to reiterate that it's absolutely fine if you don't want to share because it's private, or because you don't feel comfortable sharing details. But reading out loud is one way writers check how their poems are working, so if you just feel it's not good enough to share, then that's actually a really good reason for reading it out!

Remember the golden rules of writing poetry (yet again!)

- Focus on the sensory – the things we can see, touch, hear, etc
- Don't say too much – leave a bit of mystery in there
- Keep it simple

Let's introduce today's session by looking at a poem which illustrates some of these rules and discussing it as a group.

Read: 'My Blue Hen' by Anne Gray

<https://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-prizes-for-poetry/ann-gray/ann-gray-my-blue-hen/>

EXERCISE 1: SELF AT FOURTEEN (CINQUAIN)

There's a lovely Ali Smith short story called *Writ* where, after an unexpected encounter in the street, a woman gets home to find her fourteen-year-old self sitting at the kitchen table. In conversation, the woman re-explores her – their – childhood, how she changed, what she lost, and when she became who she was.

Write: Write a cinquain in which you give advice to your fourteen-year-old self. What would you say to your younger self? How would you reassure them?

A cinquain is a very simple form, of just five lines and twenty two syllables. You can read more about this form here:

<https://www.tweetspeakpoetry.com/2017/09/04/poetry-prompt-the-crapsey-cinquain/>

And read some examples here: <https://www.cinquain.org/cinquain.html>

EXERCISE 2: READ BACK

Read: 'In that year' by Kim Moore

<https://poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/in-that-year/>

This poem by the award-winning Kim Moore is an almost surreal list of changes a woman makes in dealing with a difficult, strained relationship. Those two pronouns in the first four lines tell us a lot. But she triumphs in the end because, like the women in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, she changes and changes again. This is her strength.

Moore uses strange and disparate images to talk about things that are fundamental, and which allow us to understand the poem from our own perspectives. As highlighted in the workshop introduction, metaphor functions as a currency exchange; it allows us to spend the image in our own country. Poetry can be interpreted in endless ways, and they are all right. There is always a conversation between us and the poem; we bring ourselves to the poem and the poem to us.

EXERCISE 3: DISCUSS JAPANESE WORD SQUARE

This is a late 19th century print to help Japanese readers learn English. It has the wonderful title *A Fashionable Mélange of English Words*.

This was important at the time because Japan had been forcibly opened up to Western trade only a couple of decades earlier. Each square illustrates the English word, and includes the words in two Japanese scripts.

But, of course, each of these squares can be interpreted in a poetic way as well – each is a metaphor. For example, a chicken/rooster can represent dawn or a new beginning; the wild hog might indicate greed or hogging the limelight; a commandant might represent anyone in a position of authority, from a teacher to a king to a parent.



EXERCISE 4: THREE TRANSFORMATIONS

Write: Choose three of these squares (they'll probably choose you, in fact) and take 20 minutes to write a poem with a title which reflects the choices 'Three Transformations' or 'Three Self Portraits' or 'Three Versions of A Stranger'. It's fine to choose a title of your own if you want. Invite everyone to share what they have written afterwards.

If it helps, use the format of either of the poems we've read: '[And if it be a...](#)' or '[And in that year...](#)'. Repeating refrain lines such as these can be a powerful tool in poetry.

You can be as liberal and inventive with interpreting the images as you like – in fact, the more tenuous the link to the original the better. Each verse/image doesn't need to be long.

AN EXAMPLE FROM JOHN

And if the soul were
an element of weather,

and if I were to fall silent,
it would only because

of the snow falling
somewhere inside me

silently remembering
your every step.

The landscape is fundamental to our psyches. Place is fundamental to who we are, and place is all around us, even though we do not recognise it. For example, the suffix, 'ly' or 'ley' means a clearing or a wood. The surnames Oakley, Burley, Birchley all derive from woods.

Read: 'How to Triumph Like a Girl' by Ada Limón

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/149814/how-to-triumph-like-a-girl>

Finish the workshop by reading this poem from Ada Limón.

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