

Who do not drink their _____, though they always said _____ was such a _____.

Run down into the _____ and bring up the last jar of _____; they are not tempted. _____ them, ask them what was it they said

_____ That time, to the bishop, or to the _____, or to Mrs. Mason; They are not taken in.

_____ at them, get red in the face, _____, _____ them up out of their _____ by their stiff _____ and shake them and yell at them; They are not _____, they are not even _____; they slide back into their _____.

Your tea is _____ now.

You _____ it standing up,

And _____ the _____.

This is a useful exercise because, in my experience, once you're "off the hook" of having to come up with a good idea for a poem, and in a sense have been given a framework, you can pay attention to details that will be useful to you later on in the composition of your own poems. For instance, exact word choice, phrasing, lineation, etc., can be practiced in this way and what's learned can then be put to use when you find the next text on your own.

(The complete Millay poem is reprinted at the end of the chapter.)

TWENTY LITTLE POETRY PROJECTS

Jim Simmerman

1. Begin the poem with a metaphor.
2. Say something specific but utterly preposterous.
3. Use at least one image for each of the five senses, either in succession or scattered randomly throughout the poem.
4. Use one example of synesthesia (mixing the senses).
5. Use the proper name of a person and the proper name of a place.
6. Contradict something you said earlier in the poem.
7. Change direction or digress from the last thing you said.
8. Use a word (slang?) you've never seen in a poem.
9. Use an example of false cause-effect logic.
10. Use a piece of "talk" you've actually heard (preferably in dialect and/or which you don't understand).
11. Create a metaphor using the following construction: "The (adjective) (concrete noun) of (abstract noun) . . ."
12. Use an image in such a way as to reverse its usual associative qualities.
13. Make the persona or character in the poem do something he/she could not do in "real life."
14. Refer to yourself by nickname and in the third person.

15. Write in the future tense, such that part of the poem seems to be a prediction.
16. Modify a noun with an unlikely adjective.
17. Make a declarative assertion that sounds convincing but that finally makes no sense.
18. Use a phrase from a language other than English.
19. Make a nonhuman object say or do something human (personification).
20. Close the poem with a vivid image that makes no statement, but that "echoes" an image from earlier in the poem.

Open the poem with the first project and close it with the last. Otherwise use the projects in whatever order you like, giving each project at least one line. Try to use all twenty projects. Feel free to repeat those you like. Fool around. Enjoy.



Initially, I created this exercise for my beginning poetry writing students who—as best I now recall—seemed to me to be overly concerned with transparently logical structures, themes, and modes of development at the expense of free-for-all wackiness, inventive play, and the sheer oddities of language itself.

I created the exercise in about a half hour, simply listing, in no particular order, a lot of little sillinesses I had seen and liked, or had not seen but thought I would have liked, in poems here and there. Inasmuch as I created the exercise during a semester in which I had decided to do, with my students, all poetry assignments, and inasmuch as I thought a model might be helpful—if only as an example of my own willingness to be ridiculous—I then *did* the assignment myself, again taking only about a half hour. Subsequently, incidentally, my poem from it, "Moon Go

Away, I Don't Love You No More," was published by *Poetry*. (The students *like* that story.)

Generally, I give the assignment toward the end of the term, hoping to bring together a lot of things the class has been doing right along, and hoping to get a little play back into the class at a time when overseriousness and burn-out tend to occur. Generally, I read the sample poem first (never claiming it as my own), and generally people get a big kick out of it. How do you write a poem like that? I ask, then pass out copies of the assignment and the sample poem and send the students off to work.

This has been, far and away, my best exercise—it is the most popular among the students, it's the most widely used (many of my teacher-friends are using it across the country, and they say it's the best exercise they use too), and, frankly, it has produced consistently good student poems, often the best ones written during the term. You might like it, because in some ways it relieves you of responsibility for your own writing ("I was only following orders"). Though, as I said, I designed the poem for beginning writers, I find it also works for advanced students, particularly those suffering writer's block or hopelessly stuck in a single style. Indeed, I've since gone back to the exercise, as have published writer-friends, when I've felt blocked or stuck. It still works for me.

MOON GO AWAY, I DON'T LOVE YOU NO MORE

1. Morning comes on like a wink in the dark.
2. It's me it's winking at.
3. Mock light lolls in the boughs of the pines.
Dead air numbs my hands.
A bluejay jabbars like nobody's business.

- Woodsmoke comes spelunking my nostrils
and tastes like burned toast where it rests on my tongue.
4. Morning tastes the way a rock felt
kissing me on the eye:
 5. a kiss thrown by Randy Shellhourse
on the Jacksonville, Arkansas, Little League field
because we were that bored in 1965.
 6. We weren't *that* bored in 1965.
 7. Dogs ran amuck in the yards of the poor,
and music spilled out of every window
though none of us could dance.
 8. None of us could do the Frug, the Dirty Dog
 9. because we were small and wore small hats.
 10. *Moon go away, I don't love you no more*
was the only song we knew by heart.
 11. The dull crayons of sex and meanness
scribbled all over our thoughts.
 12. We were about as happy as headstones.
 13. We fell through the sidewalk
and changed color at night.
 14. Little Darry was there to scuff through it all,
 15. so that today, tomorrow, the day after that
he will walk backward among the orphaned trees
 16. and toy rocks that lead him
nowhere I could ever track,
till he's so far away, so lost
 17. I'll have to forget him to know where he's gone.
 18. *la grace poulet du soir est toujours avec moi—*
 19. even as the sky opens for business,
even as shadows kick off their shoes,
 20. even as this torrent of clean morning light
comes flooding down and over it all.

COLLABORATIVE "CUT-UP"

Anne Waldman

The idea of the "collaborative cut-up" is to take a text utilizing a vocabulary not your own—such as a paragraph from a *Popular Mechanics* magazine or lines from a medical textbook or from a pop song—and intercut them with lines of your own. You might try literally intercutting line by line at first so that you challenge the logic of your phrasing. Then you might take larger chunks, move them around with more intent, and possibly intercut or add to the ingredients a third text.

The written "cut-up" was made famous by the Romanian dadaist poet Tristan Tzara who suggested cutting up a page of a newspaper, putting the pieces in a hat and lifting out the lines one by one to make a poem. Experimental writers such as William Burroughs have continued the practice to this day (see *The Third Mind* by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin). Of course, from a certain point of view, all writing is "cut-up" and the writer in this line of experimentation works very much the way a filmmaker does, shifting frames and images around, or the collage artist who glues disparate images together to make a cohesive whole.