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"What Do We Do if We Don't Do Haiku?" Seven Suggestions for Writers and Teachers

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In a 1995 article entitled "Who's Afraid of Poetry?" poet laureate Rita Dove quoted Jean Cocteau as saying, "Poetry—merely whispering its name frightens it away." Dove added wryly, "Today, in our country, we could change that remark to: 'Poetry—merely whispering its name frightens *everyone* away'" (40, emphasis mine). ■ As a teacher of writing in a college of education, I have made a similar observation: something palpable happens in my classes when I bring up the topic of poetry. My students plan absences. They forget assignments. They disengage. The English teachers I work with often confess that they hate poetry and that they save poetry for the end of the year, hoping snow days will cancel it out.

I recently came across a list of poetry writing suggestions for high school teachers to use in their classes showing formulas for writing poems—haiku, limericks, sonnets, and "parts of speech" poems (noun / adj., adj., adj. / verb, verb / prep. phrase(s) / different noun), among others. The teachers in my classes tell me that such suggestions are not unusual and that they serve as a "safe" way for those who are afraid of poetry to help their students write poems. As one teacher put it, *"What do we do if we don't do haiku?"*

From my experience teaching and writing poetry, conducting poetry workshops, and judging poetry contests across ages and skill levels, I have become convinced of two things: first, there are some things that writers of poetry can learn—and that teachers of poetry can teach—to make writers more skilled and to alleviate some of the fear that often accompanies the writing of poems; and second, teachers who teach poetry writing are more effective if they write poetry themselves so they can share experiences with their students and understand poetry writing from the inside out. As a result, over the years I have developed my own poetry writing suggestions to help writers and teachers go beyond limericks, parts of speech poems, and haiku. The suggestions are framed for those who are (for whatever reason) trying to write poems, including teachers who are joining their students in the act of learning poetry writing.

1. Reading Poetry: The Company We Keep

I like to begin by telling my students that poets are part of a community and that they have a history and a family tree. I point out that poets have put words together for longer than humans have known how to preserve those words in print. Although *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were two of the earliest poems recorded in writing, Homer (if there actually was an individual poet named Homer) was far from the first poet. He, too, drew on the works and words of the poets who preceded him, as did Chaucer and T.S. Eliot; as did Pablo Neruda and Audre Lorde; as do Joy Harjo, Li Young Lee, Wislawa Szywborska, and bell hooks. Our poems do not begin with us, and therefore we, as writers, are not alone. To ignore the tradition in which we stand is to deny a rich source of poetry and to fail to take advantage of the heritage that is ours.

At the same time, I emphasize that poetry reading is not merely about history. The world is full

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of people who are trying to put their experiences, perceptions, and convictions into words, and as writers we need a sense of the community to which we belong. It is important, therefore, to be exposed to a wide variety of poets, to discover the ones we feel close to—the ones who confirm what we know, the voices that say what we wish we had said and that say it in ways we admire. It is important to spend time in the company of poems that spark our imaginations and fill our souls. But it is also important to read poets who puzzle us, challenge us, make us rethink our assumptions or sharpen our sense of poetic craft. We need to find our adversaries as well as our family and friends through poems.

The point, then, is that being a good *writer* of poetry requires being an active *reader* of poetry. It's important to notice the word "active" in connection to this reading. In order to learn from reading the poetry of others, we need to read *as writers*, paying attention to the ways words work and the ways writers create. Immersing ourselves in reading the world of poetry, finding our history and our community (and learning from both) is the first step in poetry writing.

2. The Process of Writing: Driving a Car at Night

When I teach writing workshops, I'm always surprised that so many of my students assume good writing takes place inside a writer's head and then is translated, intact, onto the page. This is far from the process employed by most writers I know, and the expectation is destructive in that it leads people to assume that if they don't have an idea worked out in advance, they don't have anything to write.

William Stafford, in a poem called "A Course in Creative Writing," wrote about his students:

> They want the wilderness with a map—
> but how about errors that give a new start?—
> or leaves that are edging into the light?—
> or the many places the road can't find?
> (*The Way It Is* 195)

Stafford's point is that creative writing is like a wilderness, and his students look to him for a map. The problem with this approach to writing, according to Stafford, is that once you have the map, it's not a wilderness anymore. The mystery, surprise, and serendipity of discovery disappear.

One name for the kind of exploratory "wilderness" writing Stafford advocates is *freewriting*, and it's given that name for a reason. It can be incredibly liberating to write without a destination, to discover what you want to say as you say it. As one famous poet is rumored to have said, "How do I know what I think until I read what I wrote?"

This discovery approach is contrary to how writing is often taught. Writing students of all ages come to me expecting rules, limits, and minimum lengths. They already *know* how to construct a piece of writing ("tell your audience what you're going to say, say it, tell them what you said"). They've got the terrain mapped—no wilderness in sight. My job, then, is to convince them that creative writing means traveling *without* a map.

I tell my students that the process of writing can take you to places you didn't expect to go—perhaps didn't even know were there—but if you only stick to roads you know, you may miss the unexpected turns and bends along the way. A writer needs the chance to take some interesting detours, to get out at a bridge and sit for a while. A writer needs to explore in writing the places a road can't find.

Recently, in a class I taught called Reading and Writing Poetry with Children, a graduate student who is a third grade teacher wrote the following poem about the process of writing:

> I wonder
> if everyone has a poem
> inside them. Or are only a few
> given this gift. I wonder if you must
> have the desire to open it, or might it
> remain bound by ribbon.
> I wonder why poems make me sing
> and then make me cry. I wonder if a flower
> is always a better poem than a frying pan.
> And why couldn't the fog
> have come on little pig feet?
> I sometimes think
> I see myself in someone else's
> words. I wonder how they stole
> my thoughts and made them
> their own.
> I wonder how poems clarify
> things and just as quickly
> muddle them. I wonder how a poem

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can start out being about a key
and somehow end up being about my mother.

—Emily Brown Wahl

What Emily discovered was that in the wilderness of creative writing, poems don't always do what writers wish for them to do; they don't always go where writers wish for them to go. Time and again she found herself beginning with the class "assignment" and then following her words to the poems she really wanted and needed to write—poems about her childhood and about her relationship with her mother.

For Emily (and for most poets), writing poetry is not a linear process; there are no rules that will automatically make someone a better writer, or even that will make someone a writer at all. Part of the process is learning to love language—its tastes and shapes and sounds. Part of the process is learning to pay attention. Part of the process is learning to recognize and pursue an idea worth developing. And part of the process is being willing to follow the words: to begin writing about a key and to go wherever the writing leads.

One of my favorite quotes about writing goes like this: "Writing is like driving a car at night. You only see as far as your headlights go, but you can make the whole trip that way" (Doctorow qtd. in Winokur). Writers don't need to see all the way to their destination. They need instead to trust the process and allow the writing to find its way.

3. The Practice of Poetry: Shooting Free Throws and Fingering Scales

It's easy for writers to imagine that every piece of writing needs to be their "best" (or at least needs to be "good") in order for it to be worthwhile. But this sort of pressure can cause a lot of writing anxiety and can result in what people have come to refer to as "writing blocks." In his writing about writing, Stafford says about writing blocks:

> I believe that the so-called "writing block" is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance. I can imagine a person beginning to feel that he's not able to write up to that standard he imagines the world has set for him. But to me that's surrealistic. The only standard I can rationally have is the standard I'm meeting right now. Of course I can write. *Anybody* can write. (*Writing* 116–17)

Stafford's often-repeated solution was this: "The cure for writer's block? Lower your standards!"

I tell my writing students that practice writing is an important strategy for lowering the standards in writing, and that such practice is not "wasted time." Think of the hours a basketball team puts into free throws, or the time a pianist puts into scales. Think of gymnasts, marching bands, theater productions. Many things worth doing well require practice—practice that makes the performance better, but practice that on its own is largely unacknowledged and unshared. None of this practice *is* the performance—it's just the getting ready. And it doesn't just precede the performance; it is interspersed with performance, day by day, year by year. Concert pianists continue to practice scales; gymnasts do floor exercises every day.

The same kind of practice is necessary for writers. Like all those who do something well, poets need practice—they need to work with words, ideas, forms, and images in order to develop a rhythm, a style, and a voice. Hardly anyone writes a perfect poem the first time out.

Practice writing is the chance for writers to write without fear of failure, without worry about looking or sounding foolish, without concern about correctness or quality or anything else. Practicing writing is a safe way to probe and plumb and prod what's inside. It's raw and messy—a place to get tired and sweaty with the hard work of writing. It's a way to follow Stafford's advice to "lower the standards" and find the freedom to write.

4. Making It Concrete: Chocolate Kisses and a Box of Paints

One of the most common mistakes I see writers make is to let their assumptions about poetry interfere with their ability to write poems. Many of the writers I encounter imagine that poetry is about nature (flowers, butterflies, ocean waves), angst (the death of someone close, or their parents' divorce), or love (the loves that work out, and, especially, the loves that don't). There's nothing wrong with poems about nature, or high emotion, or the vagaries of love; however, in writing about these "poetic" topics, many people write about the feeling they want to convey rather than creating an experience so thoroughly that the reader cannot help but be "inside" the feeling in the poem.

Several years ago, I judged a writing contest for a state chapter of the NCTE, that had entries from kindergarten through college, and my job was

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to read the hundreds of entries and give awards. What I found was that, for the most part, the older the writers got, the more their expectations about poetry got in the way of their poems. The older students seemed particularly intent on *giving* their message to the readers (often in highly artificial "poetic" language—few people say *'tis* in real life!) One of the best poems was only two lines long, written by a first grader, in which she noted that from where she lived, stars look like fuzzy snowballs. There was something so visual and concrete about that image that it has stayed with me all these years.

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In that particular contest, I didn't give a college award—I couldn't find a single poem that let go of clichés and grounded me in something so completely that I felt I was inside the experience with the author. There were a lot of poems that told about friendship in ways something like this: "A true friend is always there / A true friend will always care;" or that said of love: "What is beautiful in life / is to suddenly find love. / Someday you'll be my wife / a pure and holy dove." And there were poems of despair in which writers wrote, "No one else seemed to care / I felt like I was all alone. / There was no one I could talk to / or laugh or cry with / They had all given up." Although the sentiments in each of these poems might have been powerful and true, in fact there was nothing in the poetry that brought an experience into focus, that gave enough detail to recreate for readers the *being there* of the poem.

A few weeks after judging the contest, I taught a poetry workshop for two hundred high school students at a local conference. In planning the workshop, I remembered the contest poems and how far those poems had floated above the tastes and smells of "real life"—claiming the emotions of love and hope and despair and rage without providing any hooks on which to hang those abstractions.

I wanted the workshop to help participants ground their poems, to wed their emotions to concrete objects, to create vivid images that let readers share each writer's perceptions and experience. And I wanted to debunk the idea that poems are always about nature's beauties, or irredeemable tragedy, or love in the abstract. So I started the session by bringing in poems about everyday objects: a toaster, a garden hose, a broken bottle, a radish. Student volunteers read the poems aloud in the auditorium, and we talked about how each of the poems said something "big" by attaching it to something ordinary that we could see or taste or touch. We also made a list of the other poetic devices that made the poems work: the similes and metaphors, the line breaks, the internal rhythms and rhymes, the specificity of language. Finally, we talked about what the poems said and didn't say—how objects came to represent ideas, how love and longing could be unmistakable in a poem where the poet never says those words.

When we'd finished, I set out on a table a series of objects I had brought from home: a teddy bear, a used box of children's watercolor paints, a half-empty bottle of perfume, a child's baseball mitt, a yellow crayon, a half-pound Hershey's kiss, a pair of dice. I tried to choose objects that were familiar, ordinary, yet still potentially evocative—objects that could invite and suggest poems.

After some freewriting, workshop participants shaped their ideas into poems, then reviewed the list of what had "worked" about the early poems we'd read together and went back to their writing to revise. Once finished, the participants shared their poems in small groups. At the end of the session, the small groups sent volunteers to the front to read their poems aloud.

One young woman used the paint box as a metaphor for growing up, writing that "The pictures aren't on the refrigerator anymore" with "the little house, the little sun, the flowers as big as an oak." She described how she and her sister "fought over red," since it was their favorite color, and she concluded the poem by saying that "If life were just a box of watercolors, / I would give you my Barbi [sic] paintbrush / And even share my red paint."

One student wrote about "Wind Song"—the perfume that had been in the back of his mother's dresser drawer for more than thirty years, the scent that "has seen / her first kiss / her first date / the job she got at the Tasty Freeze down the street / and when she quit."

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Several students wrote about the Hershey kiss: romantic poems, poems about obsession and passion, poems of longing and despair. One young man played with the last line of his poem, writing, "I'd love to mingle one more time in / her—shey's kiss." Another young woman got even with an ex-boyfriend by writing (and reading aloud), "I'd much rather have the / tear-drop shaped / solid hunk of chocolate wrapped / in silver foil than a / kiss from my ex-boyfriend . . ." Perhaps the most poignant of the poems was by a young woman who chose to write about the paint box, using the colors to represent her attempts to paint her life. She wrote, "Yellow—I remember my birth. I travel through the greens and blues of my childhood. My first softball game is there, and so is my fourth grade teacher. I accidentally drop some angry red into the blue. That was my father . . ." She concludes, "My canvas looks like the side of a Volkswagen Bus. . . . Just before I start to cry, I realize that I have another canvas behind my easel, and I can start over."

I was amazed at the writing these students completed in the short time we had together. Their poems—written in the last half of a two-hour session—were far different from the poems I had judged in the state contest. Many of the topics they naturally gravitated toward were still there: parents, siblings, ex-boyfriends, loves—their feelings about growing up and their uncertainties about the future. But they had found a way to ground those poetic observations and emotions in concrete objects and details that could be seen and touched and tasted by their readers and listeners.

5. Inventing the Truth: Kill the Dog if You Must

When it comes to writing from personal experience—and often we're most comfortable writing "what we know"—it might seem that adherence to "facts" (that is, the exact happenings of our lives) is the only way to tell the truth in poems. If the dog you had as a child was a brindle cairn terrier, then in your writing that dog has to be a brindle cairn terrier. If that dog never bit the mail carrier, it can't bite the mail carrier in your poem. If that dog died of old age, then you can't create a scenario in which the dog is hit by a car.

However, I think there are two kinds of truth in poetry: the kind of truth that sticks to what "really" happened, and the kind of Truth that gives the writing a deeper integrity and honesty, that honors the wider Truth of human experience, even if it departs from the "facts." I believe that if the poem needs for the dog to die young in order to make its True point about faithfulness, grief, carelessness, or a parent's response, then a writer is obliged to kill the dog in the poem. It's the most True thing for a writer to do.

Creative writing gives a writer this sort of permission in blurring the border around truth. Even when writers write from their experience, they still embellish freely—adding, omitting, or rearranging details for the sake of the story they want to tell or the poem they want to write. They're allowed to, sometimes they *need* to, and if they do it well, their readers will never know. Once I taught a writing class in which a woman brought in a piece about the experience her family had adopting a young girl. The entire piece was well developed—dialogue and all—but at one point we as readers told her that we felt like we wanted to know more. It was a real compliment; she'd gotten us hooked. She responded by saying, "I wish I could write more, but I can't because I can't remember. I called my sister, and she can't remember either." *Make it up*, we told her. *It's your story now, and you can shape it however you want.*

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The point is that truth in writing is not limited to what actually happened, what the sky really looked like, whether the tree was an oak or an elm. It means that the writing contains a bigger Truth, something that readers will recognize, something that resonates with the human experience. As writers, we are always inventing the Truth, however true (or not true) it may be. The most truthful we can be in a poem is to craft a world, or emotion, or

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experience (factual or not) that allows the poem to say what it needs to say, and to move seamlessly from literal truth to poetic Truth, so that no one knows where one truth ends and the other begins.

6. Revision: Marble, Elephants, and Stone Soup

I have a favorite saying that applies to revision. I don't know where it came from or who said it, but it goes, "How do you make an elephant out of a hunk of marble? Chip away everything that's not elephant." That seems to sum up the process of revision—it's the chipping and shaping that turns the raw hunk of marble into something that looks like an elephant.

Revision is the place where everything that has flowed easily and spontaneously through the process and practice of writing gets turned into something that has a form, a shape, and a sense of wholeness. It gets rid of everything that doesn't belong—everything that's not-elephant. Writers know that revision is hard work. However, even though it's hard work, a writing friend once told me that revision is less like a chore and more like a romance. I think what he meant was that good revising is *re-envisioning* (the word "re-vision" is in there)—seeing all over again. It's courting ideas not just the first time, but again and again—paying attention to those ideas, hearing what they have to say.

If it's true that to be a successful reviser a writer has to romance the piece, then I'm not sure what to make of the reality that in order to revise a piece successfully writers also need to keep from loving it so much that they can't let it grow into what it could become. The best way I have for thinking about the kind of love a writer needs to have for a piece is demonstrated in the children's story, *Stone Soup*, in which a hungry stranger comes to town and the villagers hide their food, unwilling to share. The stranger tells the villagers he can make wonderful soup from a stone and asks for a pot and some water. He goes on to ask for additions to the soup—potatoes, carrots, meat—and the curious villagers comply; eventually the stranger removes the miraculous stone, and they all dine on delicious soup, made from a simple stone.

The point I tell my writing students is this: sometimes there's an element that launches us into a piece of writing (a line, an image, a name, a scene). That's the stone. We build our writing around it—writing that, like the carrots and potatoes, makes richer and more varied what the initial stone began. Far into the writing—a now-tasty soup—we may realize that our first impulse doesn't belong anymore. It's the stone in the soup, the thing that started us but that shouldn't remain. So we need to take it out.

It's not easy to take out the stone; sometimes we get quite attached to it. But there are always more pots of soup to be made, so as we remove our precious stone (that line, that image we love so much) we can console ourselves with the thought that it's done its job and may be useful again some time. The mistake, of course, is to be unwilling to take out the stone—it can ruin even the best of soups, and only a fool would sacrifice the soup for the sake of the stone. So that's the paradox: in order to revise, a writer must be ruthless, *not* loving words so much that he or she can't see beyond them, while at the same time, a writer must be willing to woo those words, to love and romance them into being. Going back to the image of revision as finding the elephant in the marble: after the first few chips at that hunk of marble, the sculptor might wish she were finished. She might even be able to convince herself that *this* sculpture—incomplete as it may be—is the one she *really* wanted to do. But the fact is, the sculptor doesn't demonstrate more love for the marble by letting it remain intact; the sculptor keeps sculpting, chipping—not with a soft cloth to make the marble shine (that comes later), but with a sharp chisel to get rid of everything that stands between the initial idea and the finished work of art, between the hunk of marble and the elephant that's waiting inside. And writers do the same when they revise.

What else about revision? I tell my writing students to read poems out loud and listen because words and rhythms are different when they're heard and spoken than when they're read silently. And I advise them to find friends who read. For a writer at the revision stage, friends with good ears are more important than friends who offer unconditional love. Similarly, student writers need writing groups that read each others' work and that are trained to provide honest and constructive feedback—supportive readers who can help each other (in the gentlest of ways) recognize the elephant hidden inside the marble, or find the stone that may be spoiling the soup.

7. Growing a Voice: "The Feel of You"

Lots of writing books and workshops talk about "finding a voice," as if a voice were a single thing,

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and as if it could be—somehow, at some time—"found." When I hear or read about "finding a voice," I always have the image of looking under a rock, or opening a closet door, or saying the right magic words and suddenly having "a voice" appear.

I don't think that's how it happens. For me, a better way to think about this process is "growing a voice"—the metaphor of nurturing a seedling, watering it, giving it air and light, gently pruning it back. It's not easy, nor is it a process that is ever complete; like a plant, a voice needs continuing care.

This is how I put it for my writing students: developing a voice is a solitary thing; your voice is *yours* and no one else's. No one can give you a voice, and though you can imitate the voices of others, you can't build a writing life on the voice of someone else. As you write, you will probably try on a lot of voices. Some will be a better fit than others, but eventually a voice will evolve that is yours. It will occur when you are able to put your own experience, your own feeling into your own words, and those words will, as Seamus Heaney has put it, "have the feel of you about them." I tell students that a voice has many aspects: it's something you're born with; it's something that life shapes through your experiences and observations; it's something you develop through *doing*. As a writer, your voice will grow strongest with practice.

And then, there's one other issue in growing a voice: the fire that compels a writer to write. This is different from the bursts of inspiration that throw a writer into a piece; it's the ongoing sense that there's a story that *needs* to be told, and you, in your own voice, are the one to tell it. There's a quote I love about pioneer women making quilts for their families that goes like this: "We had to make them fast so our children wouldn't freeze; we had to make them beautiful so our hearts wouldn't break." That's why you grow a voice—so your heart won't break, or because there's a poem that needs to be written, and you are the person to do it.

Integrating the Seven Suggestions in the Classroom: Brahms on Sunday Afternoons

In case this approach to writing—the Seven Suggestions for Writing and Teaching Poetry outlined here—seems outside the interest or ability of most high school students, I want to finish with a personal example of a poem written by a middle school student with whom I've worked. Jesse is an excellent student, but he has never considered himself a poet. He lives in a language-rich household (and as a result he is not afraid of poetry), but he has never expressed a desire to write for its own sake. He writes the things he needs to write, and he uses words in a competent and functional way.

When Jesse was in middle school, he had an English teacher who introduced the class to the world of poetry beyond haiku. And the story of the poem Jesse wrote for that class, entitled "Brahms on Sunday Afternoons," exemplifies each of the suggestions for poetry given in this article.

Brahms on Sunday Afternoons

Her gnarled fingers rest lightly
on the keys: a-s-d-f j-k-l-;
and I ask her again, "Grandma, how fast could
you type?"
"Ninety words a minute," she replies softly.
And even though I know it was only eighty,
I don't say anything, trying to keep the light
of Before
lingering in her eyes.
Before.
Before the MS, which she jokingly calls More
Sleep disease,
even though its toll has been much greater.
Before, when she crocheted afghans
and wrote calligraphy in gold ink.
Before, when her fingers still knew the keys
and she played Brahms on Sunday afternoons.

In Jesse's English class, the stage was set for writing poetry long before any writing assignments were given. Students were *reading* and talking about poetry throughout the year, tuning their senses to the craft of poetry and thinking about the forms the craft might take. Throughout the year, students were also exposed to a *process* approach to writing (including freewriting), and they moved pieces of writing through multiple stages before imagining they had created a finished piece. Jesse *practiced* in several ways; first he wrote a character sketch, which provided him with a sense of how to choose particular details to reveal aspects of an individual. As he moved toward the start of his poem, he did some brainstorming and made a web of associations.

Jesse's web included a number of *concrete details*. At the time of this writing, he was taking his first typing class and was struggling with how to gain accuracy and speed. He learned that his grandmother had been a typist earlier in her life and that

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she had been extremely fast and accurate—she had been able to type eighty words a minute. Jesse found eighty words a minute impressive indeed; to him, this piece of family history was particularly poignant, since for all of Jesse's life his grandmother had suffered from debilitating multiple sclerosis (MS). During a phone conversation with his grandparents, Jesse had a chance to ask about the typing. "Eighty words a minute," his grandfather answered, but his grandmother quickly amended the answer to ninety. Jesse also found out more about his grandmother's life: that she had at one time played the piano, that she had done beautiful handwork—embroidery, crochet—and that she had had lovely penmanship. Each of these details became central to the poem Jesse wrote, and each of them grounds the abstraction of the poem (that is, the sense of loss, love, and understanding from grandson to grandmother) in concrete details readers can both identify and identify with.

As for inventing the *truth:* Jesse knew that his grandmother never played Brahms—she played hymns, not classical music. He also knew that she never practiced calligraphy; the handwriting she did was simply script, and it was never done in gold. Those are Jesse's details, as is his perception of the light of "Before" in his grandmother's eyes. When asked about Brahms, he explained that the poem wasn't as powerful if she played *hymns* on Sunday afternoons, so he changed it to make it seem more intense. Jesse didn't feel any dishonesty in inventing his own details for the sake of the poem, and as a result he created a poem that is True in the deepest sense of the word.

Finally, there is the *revision* process that the poem underwent. Jesse had been working on the poem for several days. Eventually he arrived at the version as it now appears, but he didn't have a title, and he wasn't sure it was finished. He felt like it needed more, and one day as he was walking home from school, he stopped to write this new ending:

> I gingerly help her down the stairs,
> and once she is safely seated on the couch
> she requests, "Play for me."
> I attempt Brahms, and though not as good as her,
> I still feel part of her burden is lifted.
> Once I am through with the piece,
> I look back to see her napping where she is seated.
> More Sleep.

Jesse added the new ending to the poem and was ready to hand it in. For some reason, though, he still wasn't satisfied. He fussed with the poem, adjusting and rearranging the last lines. He explained that he wasn't sure about the ending, since it seemed like the new ending made the poem about *him* and *his* piano playing instead of about his grandmother. Finally, he concluded that the new ending for the poem made the poem worse instead of better. He knew enough to keep carving and went back to the shorter, earlier version.

Some parts of the poem are likely the result of the early web Jesse had made—most particularly, the connections between typing and piano, crochet and calligraphy. There are other things that were pure serendipity (since typewriters and pianos each have keys, the title makes a reader expect piano keys and get typewriter keys, then, later in the poem, expect typewriter keys and get Brahms). In addition, there are many things about the poem that give evidence of Jesse's real care in writing. It was no accident that he chose Brahms as the composer of the Sunday afternoon music; his choice was based on the sound of the word and its rhythm rather than an adherence to literal truth (he noted that "hymns" would not be the same, but he also explained that "she played Beethoven on Sunday afternoons" would not sound the same, nor would Mozart or Chopin or Liszt). The distillation of emotion into the image of "Before" and the notion that exaggerating the number of words per minute would say much about a woman suffering from MS are evidence of Jesse's careful attention to detail—both in the world around him and in the poem itself. It is clear that Jesse is writing about something that matters to him; there is no doubt that he cares deeply about the subject he has chosen and that he has found a way to tell a True story. The *voice* he is growing in this poem is unquestionably his own.

Jesse's poem is far from a "parts of speech poem," or a limerick, or even haiku. Working with a teacher who was not afraid of poetry, Jesse learned to listen to the language of poetry, to trust the process and to practice it, to ground his emotion in concrete detail, to invent a Truth that made the poem honest and real, and to revise in ways that let him chip away the extra material until he was left with the right shape of the poem.

And so, the question: *What do we do if we don't do haiku?* We begin by exploring the rich and wide world of poetry in a way that allows us as writers—and as teachers of writing—to grow voices . . . one poem, one line, one image at a time.

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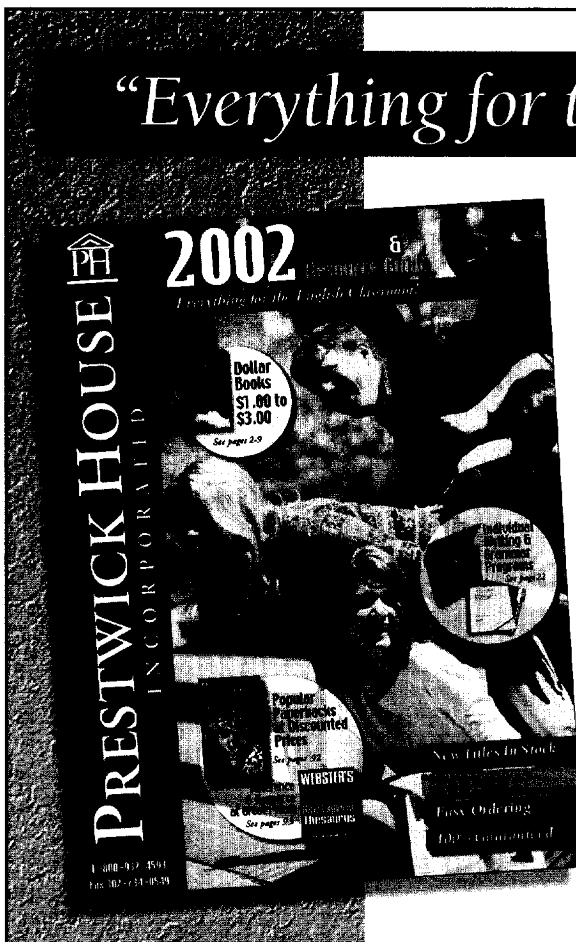

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