



# WINGBEATS:

Exercises & Practice in Poetry

Edited by  
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## For Beginning Poets

**Note:** These exercises would work especially well for students in the early stages of writing poetry, though we recommend them to all poetry writers, regardless of level of achievement. Please note, too, that many K–12 students would be capable of tackling even the most challenging exercises in *Wingbeats*.

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## Rube Goldberg Poems

**T**he idea for these poetry exercises came from watching a video of a Rube Goldberg machine in action. It's a marvelous thing to behold. In this particular video, a ball bearing falls into a bucket. The bucket, once delicately counterbalanced, descends with the new weight of the ball bearing onto a catapult-like device. The catapult fires a wet sponge onto a sheath of paper towels hanging from a toy car. . . .

The genius of the Rube Goldberg machine is its complex machinations in order to achieve a menial task. In this example, the task was to feed a parrot a cracker. What a marvelous metaphor for the process of writing. There are complex rituals that a writer must perform in order to convey a thought, an idea, an emotion.

At about the midpoint of the academic session, I like to give my students an assignment based on Rube Goldberg machines. It's a good assignment to spring on students when they are in the doldrums of the academic session. I change the parameters for this assignment from year to year, but the spirit of the assignment remains consistent—it's a problem-solving/critical-thinking task. What follows are two variations on the Rube Goldberg exercise.

### **Variation I**

Students must write a narrative poem with the following components:

**1. The poem must be about a memory or event from childhood.**

The structural scaffolding of the poem is the first component. The memory becomes the task that needs to be achieved like the goal of a Rube Goldberg machine. All the other components are devious instruments that slow down the process but eventually become integral moments. When you watch a Rube Goldberg at work, you remember the catapult firing, or the ball bearing weighting down the bucket, but you don't necessarily remember there's a parrot at the end of the machine awaiting his cracker.

**2. The poem must contain a scent that speaks.**

The second component is an interchangeable one. I suggest using some type of prompt that provides students the opportunity to use synesthesia—the mixing of senses. I've used "a color that sings" in the past, for example.

### **3. The poem must have the color teal.**

The third component is usually a color, but an unusual color. It's far too easy for students to lay claim to colors like red, gold, or blue, so provide them with an uncommon color.

### **4. The poem must include a kitchen tool.**

I like to have a tangible object as the fourth item. Mind you, all of these components are interchangeable with the exception of the first component.

### **5. The poem must include a neighborhood dog.**

The fifth component would not have to be a neighborhood dog. I include one in the requirements here because my memories of childhood are filled with neighborhood dogs. If you can think of a suitable substitute, by all means, provide one for your students.

### **6. The poem must contain a lyric from a popular song.**

The final component provides a type of temporal marker. Students often reflect on what songs were popular at the time of their specific childhood memory.

## **Variation II**

Students must write a narrative poem with the following components:

### **1. The poem must be about a memory or event from childhood.**

Again, the first component is the aim or the goal of the poem. All the other components are there to delay the process.

### **2. The poem must have the title "Self-Portrait with \_\_\_\_\_"**

The second component in this example is a leading title. I've often found that with these exercises, if you assist the students with their titles, the rest of the poem seems to have more breathing room. (See also Lisa Russ Spaar's "The Self-Portrait Poem," page 277.)

### **3. The poem must contain a protractor.**

As in the previous example, I like to have a tangible object present in the poem. It forces the poem to maintain its bearings in reality.

### **4. The poem must have a mythological figure.**

The mythological figure in this example can be used as an allusion, or it can be an actual character in the narrative. I leave that up to the writers.

### 5. The poem must have the color camouflage.

The fifth component in this case is an unusual color, similar to the third component of the previous example.

### 6. The dead must speak in the poem.

Finally, the sixth component in this exercise is the supernatural element of the dead speaking.

## Rationale

This is a good exercise for students at the intermediate to advanced levels in a poetry workshop. It's a challenging assignment that requires students to work on transitions between images. It invites students to explore the possibilities of personal narrative. And it also creates opportunities for problem-solving and critical analysis.

While some students may not be pleased with the results of their poems, it is a good community-building exercise in that it facilitates strong workshop discussions and camaraderie.

## An Example

I've provided an example of a Rube Goldberg poem using the second variation. It was written by Phayvanh Luekhamhan, a student I had for a brief workshop.

### Self-Portrait with Icarus

#### *Richmond Greyhound Station*

Gary, you should have been in the Air Force,  
as your dead father's summoned voice demanded.  
Now you're 34. I am 34, too. We're strangers awaiting a bus  
discussing early retirement and life (if you're lucky) after that.  
How many men have you blindfolded or shot?  
Being a foot soldier is not all you thought.  
What he tried to do: steer you clear of regret.  
But you would not be Laika, eternally voided.  
No, you wanted homecoming's burning off.

You're heading back to your sister's house.  
Colorado City, the old Pontiac, its green paint crusting.

Green: the dress of uniform, of lies, the monochrome of stealth vision,  
of *Oh, please, dear God, no. . . .* The future is the dozen more years  
you'll pack  
into your parti-colored duffel, alongside your toothbrush and Bible.  
My hair is all kinds of grey. Yours will be too.  
You're holding a map of Virginia, its accordion pages wilting.  
Attractions bleed into roads you will not take.

*They treat you like real people, you say, not like the Army.*  
USAF. Shrug and say *it don't matter now*. Your voice  
making precious jewels of your vowels. Both wings and guns extract  
different kinds of freedom. Gary, your father knew  
the exact measure of mistakes. He has set compass and protractor  
to the parabola of your spirit, found your melting point.

*Phayvanh Luekhamhan*

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**Oliver de la Paz** is the author of three collections of poetry, *Names Above Houses*, *Furious Lullaby* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2001, 2007), and *Requiem for the Orchard* (University of Akron Press, 2010), winner of the Akron Prize for poetry chosen by Martín Espada. He co-chairs the advisory board of Kundiman, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of Asian American Poetry. A recipient of a Fellowship Award from the New York Foundation for the Arts and a GAP Grant from Artist Trust, he has had poems in journals such as *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *North American Review*, *Tin House*, and *Chattahoochee Review*, as well as anthologies such as *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*. He teaches at Western Washington University.