



WINGBEATS II:

Exercises & Practice in Poetry

Edited by
Scott Wiggerman &
David Meischen

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For the Beginning Poet

Note: These exercises 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 young poets, including K–12 students, would be capable of tackling even the most challenging exercises in *Wingbeats II*.

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Jump-Start that Poem-Making Project: A Repurposing & Caulking Exercise

In her collection of essays, *Proofs & Theories*, poet Louise Glück reminds us that the collaboration of poetry—a beautiful, dynamic division of labor shared by poet and reader—is often prompted by the left-open spaces. Just as the eye fills in what is missing in works of art such as the Venus de Milo and the Nike of Samothrace, so too the reader’s mind fills in the spaces where things are left unsaid by the poet, Glück argues.

This exercise was inspired by an unlikely pairing: the Louise Glück essays mentioned above and several HGTV programs that encourage viewers to repurpose found or soon-to-be-discarded household items and refashion them into repurposed things of beauty. The secret to success with these projects, HGTV designers tell us, is to identify articles that have “good bones,” things we are eager to preserve through this reworking.

Procedure

- I. Take a line from a “good bones” poem, ideally, one by a poet whose work you cherish. Select a line that bristles with vitality, e.g., one driven by a vivid image or wondrous music, one with a hard-working verb.
- II. Re-imagine the key word(s) in the line so that a verb in the original line—e.g., *shield*, *veil*, *screen*—is transformed into a noun (*shield*, *veil*, *screen*) in your repurposed line. Or vice versa.
- III. Use the repurposed line to jump-start your own poem.

Examples

I. I chose the opening line of Kimiko Hahn’s “On Fidelity” from her collection *Toxic Flora*:

Australian magpie-larks that couple and clasp

Repurposed, the verb *clasp* becomes part of the compound noun *clasp-pin*, and the line serves as the beginning of a narrative memory poem:

The Australian topaz clasp-pin, a lark—
extravagantly-throated souvenir:

when she was young, Abuela sailed
to an island where yellow brilliance
was abundant and cut and clear.

II. Similarly, by transforming *blades* from a noun to a verb, I honor and repurpose Lisa Russ Spaar's line from "Mourning" (*Blue Venus*):

this window where green blades

I use the transformed line to create a new vision:

Green blades through the gray
of insomnia, just as Spring
scythes unsparingly, leveling
the dull of winter dreams,
leaving fields of budding news.

III. Or take the first line of Lynda Hull's "Love Song during Riot with Many Voices" (*Star Ledger*):

The bridge's iron mesh chases pockets of shadow

After some initial repurposing, changing *pockets* from a noun to a verb, my version reads:

The shadows I pocket
seep through shirt and jacket.
Even folded memories stain. Dad
chases me long past
his earthly commission,
cables from a sad frequency:
"Take care with those
bridges you're building."

Summing Up

As you draft your poem, continue reading, especially those poems that insist we fill in where things are left unsaid by the poet.

I. Here is the trochaic opening line of Clarence Major's "Heartland Music" (*Configurations*, 1998):

Crickets cranking shifting gears

Now let those cranky crickets provide the music for your own poem.

II. If you find your poetry gears are still sticking, here's a sampling of lines:

“the scar on her knee winking / with the evening chill”
from “Summit Beach 1921” by Rita Dove (*Grace Notes*)

“Three vultures walk the ground clumsily / and hunch their wings”
from “The Intelligence of Scavengers” by Martín Espada
(*Alabanza: New and Selected Poems 1982–2002*)

“He rose on the surface of it like the layer of water on top of a wave”
from “Pain” by Marie Howe (*What the Living Do*)

“I am like a man at twilight—bereft”
from “A Cicada Sings to Me” by Luis Omar Salinas (*Elegy for Desire*)

“a crowd of echoes cries circling”
from “Landscape” by David Wevill (*Solo with Grazing Deer*)

There are many fine places to start!

Pablo Miguel Martínez won the 2013 PEN Southwest Book Award in Poetry for his debut collection, *Brazos, Carry Me* (Kórima). His poems have appeared in *Americas Review*, *Borderlands*, *Comstock Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Inkwell*, *New Millennium Writings*, and other journals. He has been anthologized in *This Assignment Is So Gay*, *Best Gay Poetry 2008*, *Poetic Voices without Borders 2*, and *Queer Codex: Chile Love*. Martínez has been a recipient of the Robert L.B. Tobin Award for Artistic Excellence, the Oscar Wilde Award, and the Chicano/Latino Literary Prize. He has received support from the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation and the Artist Foundation of San Antonio. A co-founder of CantoMundo, a national retreat-workshop for Latina/o poets, Martínez has participated in Sandra Cisneros' Macondo Writers' Workshop. He teaches English at the University of Louisville.