Searching for amen| A year in poetry

Suzanne Therese Schmidt

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Searching for Amen
A Year in Poetry

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Searching for Amen: A Year in Words

Committee Chair: Professor Dorothy Morrison

ABSTRACT

Searching for Amen is a project based on my desire to focus intently in one artistic area: the writing of poetry. My final creative project was twofold: an hour length, independent poetry reading at a small, local museum, as well as a poetry cafe performance by my twenty-three third grade students. My personal work as a poet would inform my teaching of poetry, with a focus this year on revision.

I began with a personal commitment to write every day, including writing without stopping for at least fifteen minutes during each session. The writing took me to the completion of a manuscript of twenty-three poems, most of which were edited by a professor of poetry at Naropa University.

With this work in progress, I took what I was learning and doing into the classroom and encouraged my students to take a deeper look at their work and extend it into other artistic areas, as well. Their final act was a two-hour performance, titled the Root Beer Cafe. It was a grand finale of our three years together. I leave them this June, confident that writing, for many of them, is not only an act, but has become a way of being in the world.
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Searching for Amen

Original Project Intent

The original intent for this project, written while wearing my invisible superhero suit, was centered around authentic writing—my students’ work, as well as my own. Writing authentically is writing through knowing oneself. It is based on experience and on personal knowledge and feelings, rather than a focus on fictitious events or rewriting someone else’s stories. Authentic writing has to do with taking ownership for one’s work. I had already begun dialogue and outlining with a colleague about a professional book on authentic writing. In addition to beginning this book, I had planned on writing every day and sending original poetry off to the wider world of publishing, hoping for an acceptance letter, or at least several more rejection slips to add to my file. Finally, I hoped to support my twenty-three third grade students in further developing their own poetry and revision skills, while documenting their work and progress.

Accustomed to dipping my toes in cold water, entering slowly, testing but never diving in, I selected poetry as the medium for my final creative project. While interested in numerous artistic outlets: painting, getting beyond my “beginnerness” in the cello, dancing backup for Tina Turner, etc., I recognized in myself a tendency to jump randomly, stretching creative fingers outward in all directions, yet never fully immersing
myself. This final project, then, has been the deep dive into one pool—writing toward poetry, with a goal to allow myself to settle in.

**En Route Home**

The term “en route” became vocabulary of choice in my third grade class this year, to describe leaving one place to get to another. It was particularly popular, and then overused by the class collectively, during their first experience of state standardized testing this winter and spring. I believe the original phrase was “Queasy en route to school…” During the final leg of my long route home from Missoula last July, I stopped in Grand Junction, Colorado, to see the Colorado National Monument at sunset and then again the following morning as the sun beat down hard and hot in the layered canyon. Feet dangling over a several thousand-foot drop, I felt brave and thought of children’s author Byrd Baylor as she wrote about the desert in *I’m in Charge of Celebrations*. My first broad look down and I became dizzy, *en route* home. The sound of wings beat past me as I heard the calls of several different birds. These winged creatures looked like bats as they dive-bombed the rocky canyon. I am “cliffwriting” and it feels as such—steep, perhaps bottomless, limitless and large. Frightening too. Sitting on a cliff’s edge became the beginning of this writing year. Senses sharp, I took in the view, cinched into word and considered its translation onto paper. Questions flew like the wings of birds riding air currents, vibrating off canyon walls.
Does noise affect the natural landscape and how it continues to form, or erode? I think of Annie Dillard. How would she describe the place? I had an idea of writing something magnificent in a place of such beauty, yet it was too much to channel through my pen. Is the purpose of writing anything at all beyond pure self-indulgence? Surely any written words I can muster pale thousands of feet above the canyon floor. I leave the Pulse and this national monument with the weighted question—Why Words???

So I began my project, small and unexpectedly, perched on the edge of a steep canyon cliff. The questions continued: Do words help me sink toward center? And if so, is there a bigger audience beyond “self”? A hummingbird stopped in midair, like a word on the tongue, before fluttering its wings a thousand times, beating its elemental beat, then descended the canyon, and I returned to my road-weathered Toyota.

Cliff as Metaphor

Between the canyon at sunset and the next morning, there was a poem, the first in a year of detours:

Salt

I love it when the waitress calls me “darlin’”
It helps forgive the food for tasting Italian
when I’ve ordered enchiladas at the “Pancho Villa”

Not even the black velvet bullfighter painting on the peach wall, or sequined sombreros in red and black felt can make me think “Mexican” as I dig in to dissonance Spanish rice akin to Ragu over a plate of cheap pasta
Longing mixes with a margarita and the salt stings a singular wound of wanting as I read all the table has to offer: paper menu, beer list, leftover local ads in the sleepy town weekly I picked up for company at the door

I wonder through the lettuce, dangling off the fork, if this translucent cocktail shields a murky future surface I am about to walk into like the cartoon coyote walking toward another Saturday morning death Edging toward home, tequila takes me on a detour foreshadowing a change in weather upheaval is an earthquake in my psyche and lightning quarters my heart

Later, my mother prays to Guadalupe on my behalf who is she—a saint or virgin, a savior for I need one she let me down, slipped on a prayer, fudged an answer in my honor. Can saints and virgins err?

Guadalupe, have you ever painted a black velvet paint-by-number, dot-to-dot? Eaten enchiladas at a local dive, or wondered as you wandered through prayer, where words fall to after dinner, when the salt still stings?

Within twenty four hours of my return home I was given the unfortunate opportunity to experience “Crisis” firsthand, the capital “C” crisis Professor Kriley talked about during his Week One class on the intelligences. “Crisis is indeed an opportunity,” he said, and can lead to progression or regression. I got the latter—a deep slide down a steep canyon, and it had only just begun. The man I was deeply involved with left me, quite unexpectedly. My underwear, once revealed, hung out on a line all year, continuing with losing my book-writing partner to administration; health problems; break-ins to home and auto; and a crumbling of our school’s administrative structure, to note a few.

My poetry, then, reflects this year of challenge:
Shit Luck

I’m the Berlin Wall, the boundary cracking space that crumbled wearing a “trespass” sign emblazoned on my chest- BIG FONT boldface and my mental keyboard says nothing of “delete,” go away will my deck of cards somehow stand up against the wind this season seasons turned to three and I’m the weather- uproarious, then calm

I’m a walking dotted line, yellow painted in a passing zone- betray me, spaces wide enough for entry, sign flashes neon like a giant permission slip signed by God while I race around for mortar to press into spaces opened like wounds, like leftovers like a thousand broken records

Aren’t I that, a limb to hang shit luck on?
Week Three of the Pulse began last summer with daily nonstop writing sessions, and a list of instructions for writers. One instruction was to write in a place you are unaccustomed to writing in, and changing the venue regularly, hopefully increasing creativity or at least exposure to the world outside one’s typical confines. I agreed with the premise, for I want to write with fresh perspective. However, I found my living room futon nearly impossible to stray far from after a long day in a character-building year. It was my homing device, a pair of horse blinders placed on the far side of each eye, my nest. And write I did. Daily. Rather than shift my environment, then, I maintained desperately needed consistency and found humor through Annie Dillard’s suggestion that:

The mind of the writer does indeed do something before it dies, and so does its owner, but I would be hard put to call it living . . . It should surprise no one that the life of the writer—such as it is— is colorless to the point of sensory deprivation. Many writers do little else but sit in small rooms recalling the real world. This explains why so many books describe the author’s childhood. A writer’s childhood may well have been the occasion of his only firsthand experience (Dillard, 44).

I reread my writing, highlighting “fifty-point” words, lines or phrases that might feature into poems. At one point, in need of a convincing injection from the pros about writing without stopping, I opened Natalie Goldberg’s Writing Down the Bones, to the chapter titled, “Baking a Cake.” She is quoting Katagiri Roshi, her Zen master, who says: “When you do zazen [sitting meditation], you should be gone. So zazen does
zazen. Not Steve or Barbara does zazen.” She likens this to writing: “This is also how you should be when you write: writing does writing. You disappear: you are simply recording the thoughts that are streaming through you” (Goldberg, 45).

Therein lies my problem. I, Suzanne T. Schmidt, am doing the writing, and it is so very labored. The writing is off somewhere else, laughing, I suspect. I have yet to disappear into words. I write without stopping, and where it leads me, almost exclusively, is to a place poetry won’t touch. Not with a sharp stick, a bribe or a girl pleading on hands and knees most fervently. But Dr. Bolton says it will take me to poetry, and so does Natalie.

I’m a rule follower, a do-gooder, an A student. I wanted this writing process to work for me. The poems didn’t come. Instead, they evaporated like some divine act God the Father ordered before a commercial break in a miniseries. This did not bode well for my Final Project, so I got a tarot reading, which told me to be patient. Finally, I gave myself permission not to follow the writing advice of those before me. This technique designed to clear the air was clogging my writer’s pen, constipating me. It was getting in the way of my work.

Poet and speaker, David Whyte, talks about a man and his hazel wood divining rod in the CD series titled Clear Mind, Wild Heart. This man, with his divining rod, had an almost 100% success rate in finding water (Whyte, CD Number 5). He was a channel, so to speak. Letting go of the “do-not-lift-your-pen-for-fifteen-minutes” writing
sessions got me closer to the divining rod of the written word. The poems did come, finally, though constipated and sporadic. In between sitting, I paced as is evidenced by this February 22, 2004 footprinting journal entry:

Driven to distraction, I sit down to tea already cooling, walking circles between rooms in this old house I both love and hate on Sunday mornings. I walk around my writing like the plague it often is. Sheer pain, too thick for Sunday or any day, really. I think of Annie Dillard—her pot(s) of coffee, now cold on a miniature stove in a tiny workspace in The Writing Life and I feel cold too, chilled deep and it is dark, always, in this, my projection of Annie on a writing day. I think, “Annie, you’re insane.” Absolutely. I murmur in distraction around the edges of my journal, knowing my own growing link with this disease called writing, or, attempting so. I am again struck by the seeming selfishness of writing. Writing, I think today, may be the most self-consuming act a girl can practice. It feels like mental vomit.

I kept The Triggering Town nearby, moving it from room to room to remind myself of Richard Hugo’s words that “lucky accidents seldom happen to writers who don’t work. Actually, the hard work on the first poem is responsible for the sudden ease of the second...Get to work” (Hugo, 17). Through the course of the year, then, I continued dog paddling toward a few good poems.
The Bearing Walls Come Down: Revision

As I look toward revision I am plagued by questions of ego and writing. Is it not pure self-indulgence to take my work to another and take from them their time to edit and guide me? Can I afford it, financially? Emotionally? Luck (or something else) had the Chair of the Poetics Department at Naropa University in our school building one morning in February. Batya Greenwald, my colleague both at school and in the Pulse, made a segue which concluded in his offering to look at my “manuscript.” I didn’t at that point, know exactly what a “manuscript” was but pretended and asked later. As Dr. Bolton said, “Be open to the opportunity that you have to turn it all over.” I was fully open, though admittedly trembling, as I passed off twenty-three poems a month later. The head of poetics at a university with a very well respected poetics department was looking at my work. I felt honored by his offer and also quiet, internally, as I waited four weeks for the return of my manuscript. In that time I wondered what “fat” he would cross out, as Dr. Bolton had stated over the summer. I felt certain he would, at the very least, respond positively to the poem I felt was the strongest in my collection (or maybe just my favorite). I kept Annie next to me in bed and reread passages from The Writing Life, reveling in her brilliance:

. . . because acting (writing) is better than being here in mere opacity; the page, which you cover slowly with the crabbed thread of your gut; the page in the purity of its possibilities; the page of your death, against which you pit such flawed excellences as you can muster with
all your life’s strength” that page will teach you to write. There is another way of saying this. Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block (Dillard, 59).

In that month of simmering, I contemplated each poem and wondered what would fall from the axe. I was anxious, but more than that, I was excited. The Stephen Taylor was looking at my work. I looked forward to what he had to say.

Economy of Means. The work returns to me. This was a rare moment of not delaying my gratification. I took the linen folder of poems with their edits and opened it instantly, as I walked down the hall to return to my classroom. The second sentence read, “First off, I hope your heart doesn’t sink when you see how I have scribbled all over your poems” (See Appendix B). Ultimately, reading that sentence was the only sinking part of the process. I was honored to have his feedback. And what’s more, he quoted famous writers, some of whom he has worked closely with and whose names I knew—Allen Ginsberg, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Ezra Pound, Jack Kerouac—as well as someone I probably should know but don’t: Charles Olson. Something about the names and quotes was a thrill to me, like showing up at a cocktail party on paper, to schmooze with the big “C”s, as Kriley would say. Stephen wrote about paying “attention to economy of means” like Annie Dillard says, “There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck” (Dillard, 4).
Pulse student, Robert Gardner, spoke last summer about a piece finding “its own integrity.” My challenge, then, was to maintain written integrity during revision. How would I integrate editorial feedback with my own personal vision of a piece? I simmered in language, reread Stephen’s words and tried many of his suggestions. I negotiated between the original work and multiple revisions, sometimes settling into the result, though not always. Nostalgia dies hard. Like teaching, revision is an unending process, and I learned not to make assumptions about the finality of a poem (See Appendix B for multiple edits on “Heartache Miscellany,” as well as page 40 in Appendix A for the current version).

This writing year also confirmed for me how highly uncomfortable revision is. And how demanding it can be. It tugs at emotion, pushes into intellect. Putting a piece on the chopping block is a letting go of ego. I find myself struggling with many of the cuts, feeling loss during revision. I also have a fear that my collected body of work could easily be re-shaped and crystallized into a few succinct pages. Time spent, I think, is inversely proportional to the length of a final piece or collection.

Editing off paper. On my sixteenth birthday I received a Pentax ME Super SLR camera, my first and still only. It quickly became an appendage, and an addiction. I could only see the world through a square frame. Every vista, every view, became mentally composed within the confines of a lens. After years and thousands of photographs, I missed the view and quit the camera. As a writer learning to revise, I am growing a new limb, an editorial lens. It races with the writer, just a half pace behind.
can no longer read or write, without the reviser interrupting, insisting on being heard. At
times, I am grateful and feel like Pinocchio when he attained humanity, while I
alternately curse the voice that won't be quieted. I even edit things having nothing to do
with writing—food, scenery, a bird in flight. Maddening. On paper it looks like a maze
of arrows, carat marks and cross-outs. In a recipe, for example, I will add and delete
spices and other ingredients before any attempts at cooking. It is a strong-willed beast,
and I will have to admit defeat and shake hands with the creature I've become.
Some people eat to live while others wake up each morning, thinking, "I have three meals ahead of me to enjoy. This will be a great day." I used to be the latter, though food has lost some of its appeal. My final performance, of necessity, fell into the "eat to live" category, with staging and presentation taking a back seat to endurance. By Sunday evening, April 18, I had already begun succumbing to my absurdly challenging year. Getting onstage at the hip, centrally located Boulder Museum of Contemporary Arts was an unwieldy step forward but still, I made the leap.

Invitations were sent to twenty-five people, wine and cheese purchased, entertainment (a harpist and a keyboard player, ages eight and eleven) hired, and my outfit pulled off its closet hanger. I had walked the stage several times since writing a hefty check to the museum for the rental time. Mostly, I felt naked and numb, feelings I recognized well from performances at the Creative Pulse. The wine flowed, and emptied. As the seats filled, I took my place onstage and struggled initially with the lighting. I began. Much of the performance felt like going through a series of necessary motions. Numbness persisted throughout. I hoped for more—an adrenaline rush, relief, pride... The applause went on well beyond my comfort zone, and while I silently prayed for it to end, I was told I received it well. Thankfully, poets don’t typically prepare a poem for an encore. Afterwards I became a one-woman receiving line, as the audience filed through to respond.
Critique

Best of audience feedback
(to include on the back cover of my not yet published first book of poetry):

"I LOVE roadkill poetry!" -Jan May, artist, teacher, hilarious woman

"I found your poems deeply satisfying." -Phil Katsampas, pianist, writer,
master teacher

"We have a crush on you." -Phil and Jan (this from a very gay man
and a straight woman)

"Where have you been hiding such talent?" -Ivette Visbal, university instructor

"I liked you before. Now I love you." -Jan May

"I am blown away." -Sharon, pottery artist

"We all resonate with different poems. I liked the section on switching teams." -Sabine Smead, master teacher,
author, sage

"You should be reading all over town." -Jan

The "Needs Improvement" Section
(I'm not yet the performer I could possibly become)

Things I have learned include not asking for (or accepting) feedback right away.
Wait, regardless of your need to know. Let the event itself take center stage. A mix of
feelings and vulnerabilities will likely follow. Sleep first, ride the waves, then maybe
even have a drink—a nice glass of red. Ask for clarification, if needed. One's mind can
misinterpret another's comments. The initial feedback left an aftertaste in my mouth. I
hadn’t followed the above instructions, and it took me weeks to make sense of the advice I had received.

I have a tendency to “over apologize,” rather than come across strong. My introduction had apologies I felt were necessary, but perhaps, ultimately, were not. As mentioned earlier, this trying year was reflected in the bulk of my current writing. It felt weighted to me, unbalanced, in need of a little levity—hence my urge to apologize for what I felt was a weighted group of poems.

I forgot the staging piece...again. Damn it. I am not surprised, for the idea of being on a stage continues to feel foreign to me. Not being in the Masquer Theatre, our home classroom during the Creative Pulse, to contextualize the performance, my attention to the details of staging was missing. Getting a venue was, for me, a lengthy task and when done, I stopped thinking about anything beyond the setup of food and music before the reading. Point here well taken, on the staging aspect. I did little to consider use of space or setting of the scene. Being a person who fully believes in the importance of presentation, I nevertheless continue to be challenged in bringing this to the stage. Now, nearly two months later, I am still integrating what resonates for me from the performance, and “chucking” the rest.
Poet as Teacher

I began the year intent on having poetry be a part of our daily classroom experience. And then there was state testing—the children’s first experience of taking a standardized test. The preparation was lengthy and significantly impacted our time as poets. What follows is an excerpt from my school notebook, dated September 2, 2003, when we began the creative writing process, before the long hiatus while preparing for the “CSAP”:

To inspire the children to make/purchase their own writer’s notebooks, several teachers and I took turns sharing our own notebooks with the class. The class begged for me to read a poem. I started with one of my first, “The But Poem,” and had them do the sound effects of the words- “but erases”, “but excuses”, “but refuses”, etc. They were fully engaged and delightfully funny. I then read one titled, “Paper Landscape,” about poems flying into one’s head. Instantly, eight kids took off on various poetic tangents including: Hannah F. who had so many poems flying in that she had to use a handheld tape recorder to get them all down (one was about wedgies); HannaH G. writing yet another song, requesting through sign language to work in the hall—her space for inspiration; and, Henry, who asked to rewrite a piece from last Spring. He wouldn’t go to movement class until he had read it to his classmate, Stacey. Andrew wrote a barf poem (popular third grade genre) while a small circle of us practiced sound effects for the ending. We tried to rework Brooke’s poem where she likened poetry to a fireball (she is resistant to editing); Levi received positive feedback on a gruesome, but actually well rhymed poem, etc.
The journals they individually chose came in slowly, each unique. The ownership and pride they had for these writer's notebooks carried into the work, as well. The season of state testing came upon us and it was months before we were able to focus fully on poetry again.

After returning from Spring Break and an outdoor education trip, the class requested daily poetry writing to prepare them for our annual “Root Beer Cafe” poetry reading which promised to be bigger and better than ever. I shared with them the process of writing without stopping, and we began with a “3-minute silent write,” quickly extending it to five, ten, then twelve minutes long. During many of these quiet times, my student, Isabella, would come to me, begging that I hear her latest. Frequently these poems would silence both of us, and I grew to call these interactions “the nod,” for after the poem I would smile, nod, and she would follow. After several rounds, she would leave, because, really, there was nothing left to say. Her poetry is profound and reflects a depth of wisdom and emotion far beyond her years.

We each wrote a poem a day and focused this year, my third and final with this class, on revision. I shared with them several selections from Chapter Five, “Nuts and Bolts,” of The Triggering Town including the following:

Don’t erase. Cross out rapidly and violently, never with slow consideration if you can help it. [Third graders like the word “violent,” whatever the context.] . . . When young it’s normal to fear losing a good line or phrase and never finding anything comparable again. Carry a small pocket-
sized notebook and jot down lines and phrases as they occur . . . Make your first line interesting and immediate . . . Read your poem aloud many times. If you don’t enjoy it every time, something may be wrong . . . Put a typed copy on the wall and read it now and then. Often you know something is wrong but out of fear or laziness you try to ignore it, to delude yourself that the poem is done. If the poem is on the wall where you and possibly others can see it, you may feel pressure to work on it some more . . . [And this, my favorite]: Use “love” only as a transitive verb for at least fifteen years (Hugo, 39).

For the remainder of the year, the children regularly reminded me of the unfortunate creation of the words “like” and “love,” because of the typical third grader’s overuse of each. These notes from Hugo were not new to the class, as we have focused a great deal on poetry. It was, however, exciting for them to hear someone else, a published someone, make similar suggestions. My students know to grab a pencil and notebook as soon as “it happens”—the poem in their head. I have had many parents share with me their frustration at bedtime when “it happened,” and their child refused to turn out the light until his or her poem was on paper.
Trying on an Editor’s Hat at Nine:  
3rd graders and revision

I decided to take Hugo’s advice and asked each child to select a poem they were willing to have others revise. They typed them and left names off so as to protect the writer’s often-tender heart. We began this exercise by demonstrating peer editing with the class, using a poem written by eight-year-old Isabella Soehn. Their enthusiastic participation demonstrated readiness to take their writing to this next level. The dialogue went on for thirty minutes or more. The author responded as I had expected. Initially she was resistant, though willing to listen. She was able, through dialogue, to really get at the poem’s core. Ultimately, days later, she made a few changes critical to strengthening the poem. The rest of us taped our poems on the walls and doors of the classroom and took turns revising. One boy in particular, Stacey, checked several times a day to see if anyone had added new comments. Andrew felt torn because several requests to add a word to his poem did not resonate with him, and he was unsure whether to follow their advice or his gut. I encouraged him toward the latter. This too is my advice to myself. If it does not resonate, chuck it. Each opinion is but one voice. Above all, maintain the integrity of your poem. I witnessed children in tight, focused dialogue with peers they seldom interacted with and others who refused to go to P.E. until they had finished peer editing. Amazing—the whole lot of them.
"Please, oh please, can we write for a day, an entire day, and wear our pajamas to school?"

The children begged for writer’s day, so we took a vote—22:1, and scheduled the date for the following week (See Appendix C). The morning arrived, and so did a great deal of paraphernalia for the event: blowup furniture, fuzzy slippers, dad’s laptop, more journals, great snacks and more. Children turned in permission slips to drink caffeinated tea and we read about Annie Dillard’s titrated doses of coffee:

To crank myself up I stood on a jack and ran myself up. I tightened myself like a bolt. I inserted myself in a vise-clamp and wound the handle till the pressure built. I drank coffee in titrated doses. It was a tricky business, requiring the finely tuned judgment of a skilled anesthesiologist. There was a tiny range within which coffee was effective, short of which it was useless, and beyond which, fatal. (Dillard, 49)

I gave the children a checklist for the day (Appendix C) so they were aware that I actually had an expectation that they write, in spite of their Christmas morning excitement. I reminded them of Richard Hugo’s words, and we read more Annie. I told them the story of her Smith-Corona typewriter blowing up, and then had to give a verbal footnote about what a typewriter was. We read her words on editing and the following hammer metaphor appeared in variations throughout the day:

The line of words is a hammer. You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere. After giving many years’ attention to these things, you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall
down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck (Dillard, 4).

After lunch and midday recess, they came in angry that I had insisted they spend time outdoors (otherwise their favorite part of school) on such an important day. They mutinied and refused to go out for afternoon recess. During the afternoon session, I showed the class an art response piece (three dimensional metal screen on watercolor) I had made during Week Three of the Pulse—A Sense of Place—where we were asked to respond to a jazz-drumming fusion CD. I then asked them to do the same with their writing by either responding to a poem artistically or by writing a poem from an art piece. The room filled with paint, clay, wire, glue guns and more. It was gloriously messy. Students from next door skipped their recess time to join us, coming in cautiously each time, notebooks tucked under their arms, finally asking their teacher if they could just spend the rest of the day with us.
En Route to the Root Beer Cafe

This became our big, annual event, after the success of their premiere nighttime poetry reading in first grade. Each year we get more lava lamps, disco balls and groovy outfits. This year, they began counting down the days by mid-fall. We initially planned on taking the event to a local coffee shop, but politics kept us from Starbuck’s (one of my students had protested at the shop for its refusal to offer hormone-free milk or Fair Trade coffee more than once a week), few shops were large enough, and, ultimately, we came to the realization that it wouldn’t, no it couldn’t, be the Root Beer Cafe if we couldn’t make the place our own. So we settled on the open space at our school.

Moments along the way

During a ten-minute silent write earlier in the month, a child wrote a spontaneous poem about ranch salad dressing which quickly turned into the idea of writing a collection of poems around food. These “dinner party poems” became the basis for the first half of the event. Each child was welcome to read two or three poems. Several had additional responsibilities, as well, including lighting, tech support, prep, etc. The evening before the event, my student Henry returned to school, looking for his script as the dinner party waiter, deciding he’d like to type it himself. Henry suffered so much stage fright in first grade that he remained backstage for the entire event. This year he had a lead role. I asked him how he was feeling about the next night’s event, and he
mentioned that he was nervous, though mostly about his outfit, because he’d only
“figured out down to his neck, nothing else.” Hairstyle featured prominently for the
boys.
Grand Finale: The Root Beer Cafe

It's all about the outfits, and, yes, the poems too. Six lava lamps, five disco balls, two sound systems, a stage that looked just like "a real place you would read poetry," a restaurant set and loads of root beer and coffee all helped set the scene. The open space had been transformed, and the children in their bell-bottoms, spiked hair and psychedelic colors, had transformed as well. So, too, had their teacher. As an outrageous gift to them, I went to a local secondhand shop and bought one spectacular 60's outfit, complete with Afro wig, mini dress, fishnet stockings and silver, platform shoes. Think of Beatlemania, and there you have my entrance. The room was filled with eighty people, all of whom shouted, jeered, laughed uproariously and photographed my arrival. It was worth every cent of the $67.00 I put into the spectacle that was me. After the room quieted down, and after a brief introduction from me, the children began the evening by playing two recorder pieces, one through their noses (they'd been anticipating the crowd's response as they each placed their recorder into one nostril). The children ran the show, introducing the dinner party and taking turns giving their order, then reading a food poem. After the "fruit and cheese plate" ending, they moved into the second half of the show, where children read individually, and I followed with a poem I had written for each child (See Appendix D for Cafe Miscellany).

Afterwards there was elation, then sadness, for this was their last Root Beer Cafe, a three-year tradition, and a celebration of their lives as poets. Henry compared it to a
holiday saying, "It's like the day after Christmas. You look so forward to it, and then it's over and something's missing." One child cried the whole way home; most were awake for hours, too amped to sleep. We agreed the following morning that it was the best ever, and I invited them back in future years to read at the next round of poetry cafes with my new class.
My students have been writing poetry since early first grade. What struck me this year was the depth they went to in their work. We have always written. Now we write with a knowing that, yes, we are writers. It is a slow, barely tangible process. Eventually it becomes your skin. While hard to quantify, it can look like Henry and Isabella intently discussing their work for thirty minutes; a group of children refusing to go outside for recess, because their work is too important; the formerly stage shy Andrew saying, “I need some revision. I really want some help on a few things. Can I get that, onstage, when we rehearse our poems?” Or Tori, at first adamantly against any suggestions about her list poem, but returning to school the next day with a piece of writing that she’d put on the chopping block. It is Reece sharing his selections for the cafe, getting to one titled “Suspension Bridge” and saying, “I was going to read it, but it’s not really going anywhere, so I’ve picked “orb” instead— my object poem from the other day.” It is the typically timid Maya, who has left her ever-present teddy bear in the audience, brilliantly belting out her poem “Tiny Dot” as if she’d been born on a stage.

While I continue the self doubt of whether or not I can call myself a writer, I am living the life—late nights, pulling clothes out of the dirty laundry, forgetting to shower, pouring my less-potent-than-Annie’s-coffee-but-still-on-the-verge-of-lethal cups of heavy, black tea. I never forget to shower, and it has been days. I must be taking myself seriously. Going through the motions at all costs has helped me fit into this skin. Taking
Professor Stephen Taylor’s advice, I pay attention to “economy of means” and carry my mental revision scissors with me everywhere. I have a body of work—a manuscript—and while I made a conscious choice not to attempt publishing, I have now done a bulk of work to ready myself for that possibility. The book plan with coworker Phil only took a detour. I’ve begun collecting work samples from my students and have twenty-two signed release forms to use their writing in a future work. My journal notes on this professional endeavor are slim, but worthy, including conversations with students about their writing process, observations and successful spontaneous lessons. Finally, when I stood in a studio full of artists recently and was introduced as “my friend Suzanne, the writer,” I simply smiled.
In Conclusion

Along the way to writing this paper, I received a gift of words from a colleague on my fortieth birthday. She felt her offering was small. Far from it, the words have helped form the conclusion for this paper and have become a stepping off point for my future tenses. What Roberta gave me was a translation by Robert Bly of a Rilke poem. The poem was then extended at length by David Whyte, through an autobiographical story involving a dialogue with a man named “Brother David.” It is about finding one’s path and living it wholeheartedly. Brother David says to David Whyte, “You are like Rilke’s swan in his awkward waddling across the ground; the swan doesn’t cure his awkwardness by beating himself on the back, by moving faster, or by trying to organize himself better. He does it by moving toward the elemental water where he belongs” (Whyte, CD #6).

I am transported back to the canyon walls of last July, my feet dangling over a ledge, watching that hummingbird play its part, its elemental role in the universe, to simply be itself. Annie Dillard speaks of a trick pilot she watched, and later flew with, named Dave Rahm:

Rahm did everything his plane could do... The other pilots could do these stunts, too... but Rahm used the plane inexhaustibly, like a brush marking thin air. His was pure energy and naked spirit... Rahm’s line unrolled in time.
Like music, it split the bulging rim of the future along its seam. It pried out the present . . .” (Dillard, 96).

Dave Rahm flew because he had too. Annie’s words are a cliff from which my heart and stomach leap. Skydiving has the same effect. I jumped out of a plane the same day my friend Roberta shared the above words with me. My wish, then, my hope, is that I may grow to be buoyant with words like the bird rides the currents, like the pilot maneuvers his plane, and settle in.
Bibliography


Appendix A
Poems by Suzanne Schmidt

What follows is a selection of poetry, including recent work and poems from previous years. A majority of the poems, regardless of the date written, were re-worked after receiving feedback from Stephen Taylor. A few recent pieces have yet to undergo the scrutiny of multiple revisions, while other poems failed to survive the chopping block and, hence, did not make the cut.

*Dream Variations-*
*Tina, Mary and me*

Begins in go-go boots,
my mother's, circa 1975,
and ends onstage in front
of thousands, though not
for the crowd

For Tina, for me and vinyl, zipped
or spinning, purely for the dance
the world as my audience
in a fifth grade talent show
grown-up into leather skirts
too short for everything but
the view, and costume changes
with every set. It's all about
the costumes.

The hi-fi on shag carpet and the world
is a small disc on which I spin
gloriously into the river of my dance.
I am ten and she is alchemy,
turning rhythm with thighs into gold

And I have a dream, not for limelight,
purely for the dance, *behind* the lead- those
synchronized, well-practiced moves, outfits
changing between sets, and sweats
Glory is the word, the pulse onstage
is the dance, the music so loud
all I hear is sweat, all I feel is God
because isn't that it?

A pulsing, frenzied dream
put to music on
a life-sized stage

(2.18.02)

Peas Pockets

Underpants with pockets for the little ones
living on the first floor, pockets for
peas passed quickly between
the glaring gaze of nuns- four eyes
each for seeing vegetables despised
A successful sweep into pocket unseen
and miracles do happen through
an omnipotent watch of sisters and
their habits during dinner.

(10.01)
The Roadkill Diner

A mechanized, techno-evolutionary addition
to the food chain- the automobile,
driving Darwin awry

Skunk steak served rare today at the Roadkill Diner
hunted by a single wheel, road rot tomorrow
flesh and fur mix for a tar burial ground

Mechanized predators built by the millions
union made, factory born, overpopulating the earth
steel belted talons, swift kill with a roadside guillotine
from den, burrow, nest. hole, tree
to a foraging death march

The two-legged way to reign supreme in our
human world of small souls
leg a’ deer, side o’ coon
highway recap on a roadtrip headed home
they, the sacrificial lambs, we, the unconscious slayers

I propose a union for beasts- quadripedal road rage
save their children, park your car
stand witness to the dead

(7.98)
which brings me to coyote

and its haunting inside me, lying
opposite the unwritten poem I cannot dare to
write, hook with a string- noose around coyote’s
neck in that swift instant the wheels caught and
dragged it underneath like bleeding paper

Wind picks up debris and sends it fluttering down, while
the speed and rotation of a wheel at 65 sends a body flying
upward like an exploding fuse, blood in all directions
rendering this picture in 3-D.

I wait for silence after screaming and
the body of the animal that was
unfurls beneath two more rush hour cars
and we keep on moving as if
the world hasn’t ended we
accelerate toward future tenses
though paler and smaller
having witnessed the obscene

Natural selection ain’t so natural behind the wheel
of a SUV or a Ford and coyote’s one now with
the pavement, fur filling cracks in the asphalt
cementing our connection to the natural world

(1.13.04)
The back hoe pulled into pre-op run by one of the surgical team guns loaded, grand mass of a bulging belly, monitored, probed greens pulled over bodies too small to compete without accoutrement too ignorant to allow nature its course driven by techno advancement, 

*or is it?*

6, 8, 10... dilation normal with elephantine conversion. Contractions- time them. Regular- yes. Fetal heart tones steady nature attempting a direct route

Ultrasound
  -Stop.

Tread no further
  -Stop.

Monitors read, results just in- breech presentation. Antidote? Cesarean by veterinary team

It takes a gun to put down an elephant on an operating table made of earth four inches of skin and fat protection from human “nature”

Shattered by scalpel running deep morphine drip immoral entry


Crane moves in swiftly scooping infant from mother. Baby in a bucket made of metal and human means gloves removed, arms scrubbed
greens exchanged for unmarked clothing

Mother engorged, maternal, poised
for tending, teaching, raising animal
flesh of flesh
Earth to read earth and
dust to dust

Maternal hear tones- waning
Appetite- none.
Baby-stolen at birth
Time of death- two weeks later
Autopsy reveals nothing unusual

But we know of broken hearts

*Epitaph: Cesarean rate- 22% in America & rising
Medically necessary rate- 4% and steady
Our hands- unclean.

('97)
Splitting

Locked into secret, I
compress into small spaces
And bend, without seeing
while a knot begins to form

Conflict internal, mass of chewed gristle sits
undigested in a corner pocket of my gut,
clamp ing me to "HOLD"

I iron the creases, sweep these crumbs
into hiding beneath the molding on the wall
eggshells crumble underfoot

Living this lie- big, beautiful lie
while my body heaves the deep breath
and I fraction my life into intervals,
dressing one section up.

Pick a piece, any one you want, but only one
or two if you’re a porter carrying the story,
helping hold my weakness

I gather up these pieces and calculate
division as to growing cost.

(6.03)
Beefeater

I eat more of it than your average, heartland-born American-beef.

A 4-letter word whose face never made it on a personal resume, twelve years running for good karma now defying nutritional logic and the AHA poster child for the Beef Council-
a rare converted breed

A 4-letter word and a wedge in my wallet where tofu formerly created only a dent if it made it at all on the plate meat the lead next to starch or grain, now the understudies in a play on food

Beef. Meaning “lamb of God” or bovine Karma or destiny? Did hunter gatherers spear soy, or flesh? New Age food- Darwinian evolution or cultural mutation? Veggie burger a misnomer for the well intentioned karma-chasing slave

Rib eye, sirloin, rump. Ground round, flank shank, roast medium-well, medium rare, bread to soak up blood flesh feeding on flesh in a food chain expanded for the two-legged, formerly lost in a sea of soy

I bow and light the grill.

(4.99)
Sex and the Cello

It's the high and low, the occasional awkward
touch, noses bumping in the dark
rubbing of rosin on silky strings
legs spread wide to hold the instrument
keep it from falling, end pin finds
its place in the rug, the crook of your arm,
holding my weakness

Hair, on strings, on thighs, and we
resonate, off-key but the tune is
familiar and I try to hit the high notes
but tonight I cannot sing

Notes muted on the page,
cello out of tune, needing
more than just a bow, I bow
to the hollow in your back,
to the wood sending voice
out loud as a message
I cannot bear to hear

Hollow between measures, flat like wind
skimming vacant surfaces alone
And this song is naked.

fall/winter
(01/02)
Heartache Miscellany

Where do old poems go?
I swallow the leftovers of us,
fresh in memory as my
heart maneuvers nowhere and I
begin the precarious task of sliding a chisel
between before and after without
more blood loss than a body can recover,
keeping tears at bay in a working world.

Die before me, please. Let
vultures deconstruct you & I
because you weren't the bird I
thought you were, skeleton of a
dream deferred to empty, to one,
me- access denied as I
pick through this rubbish and continue

searching for the hairline crack in the shell-
still, an egg is an egg slammed into a wall
shatters, dripping yolk and questions
drying like tack where fingers stick
to answers not forthcoming... and you
weren't the bird I thought you were

(8.03)
In Absence

This is how I know you in absence-
after 8 months of knowing, feeling, tasting you
with a hunger neither of us finished swallowing
you have become the hollow space in me
punctuated by the tears I spit without warning

In your absence I know you by the half empty
bed I cannot take up space in, forbidden
landscape I cannot bear to visit in its emptiness-
cool, white sheets another void

I know you in the vacant lot that is my heart,
pulsing a sharpened beat of loss as the season
edges to Autumn. Fall, and I
    am

falling
and having fallen to a place where music stops
and eating is a hollow, forced transaction
alone and void of flavor where salt just serves
to sting

Yes, this is how I know you in absence

Holidays become known hurdles to navigate in solo
count on, count down, beg for reprisal, time turned on
end, just this once make a day feel less than three in your
absence I am colder this season

Having shrunk an inch or more in stature, and a great deal more
in girth while the weather outside begs for layers, I have lost
them to your leaving, entering a new season empty handed as
sharp air taunts with winded fingers I, stretch to find a coat

Navigating hurdles, navigating you, in absence,
no calm yet in this storm I dropped into unexpected
and a dead bird sings me into being, out of order
in this waste laid raw. You have become the skeleton
of my longing- absent. And, this is how I know you.

(Autumn 2003)
Faith

I fall to tears the way others settle
into blue jeans, old and worn and
welcome, this act of crying has
become my bones- a liquid skeleton

Living in this compact house of tears
its foundation cracks with moisture over
time and I move to dry land for a season
or an hour

Navigating wet weather, little calm between
each storm, I travel to the border for a glimpse
of the desert and it’s fine, so dry and fine, I
think I’ll take my shoes off and make a wailing
wall of sand, watch it succumb to its collapsing
nature.

(11.03)

"Take"

Footstepping a quiet pulse amid
skyscraping bamboo groves,
soon a clamor bespeaking
incoming weather

Cracking thunderstorm of a bamboo forest
sharp wind on a sunny, dry sky day
shattering serene, speaking in
sharp and sudden tongues
vibrating music in a swaying
motion

Wind cracks the day, waking senses
whipping the afternoon alive, noise
shaking beauty through ear and I
footstep, quiet, amid bamboo

(3.27.04- Kyoto)
Landing

Gravity pulls in a circular motion
Plunging to a bottom I cannot see
a language I cannot speak, pin
pricked on a globe repeatedly spun

Day turns to day turns
to dark, black night.
The spot on the palette comes alive
that dot on a paper map, a
twirling globe, breaks like
water from a skipping stone
into mass.

I prepare for landing, latches
firmly locked overhead
tray in upright position,
seat belt fastened.

My parachute lands and I
cumbered with it, this
spin of the globe slapping
my green grass world

Globe becomes breath, a living
ticking land beyond the coffee table
magazine paid for with a Visa

This well-studied shape on paper
becomes form, form becoming movement,
air that wrings out into liquid,
and stench, the smell of a nation
under siege of poverty

And noise, brown-skinned
shoeless feet slapping on a midnight
sidewalk, noise jolting senses dulled
by the circular cabin of flight

And the hot city night is a claw
at our throats, keeping air at bay
breathing stiffens while eyelids
widen to take in the pin prick
we now stand on.
Hearing more precise, palette ready,
climbing while gravity pulls
in a circular motion. And
movement becomes form.

(‘97)

Framed

The Mona Lisa has ears and a litany of
phrases collected from tongues. Because the paint
has long since dried she knows exactly who
she is, yet in the painting process, it is just that
and still unkempt, in search of question, direction and
open to wide interpretation. Yes, Mona Lisa has
ears and opinions, modestly kept to herself
unlike the masses, outside the frame, ready to
share their opinion like an eager gospel Sunday

I am a stranger in the frame of my existence
with a well-stocked audience of hecklers providing
their litany of well-intentioned guesses, theories
steeped in a need for definition of sex and the self

I am the paint but not the painter, portrait changing
with the regularity of brush strokes each time I begin
to settle in

(3.04)
Polyester

I sit in interval, my life fractioned into
awkward spaces unexpected like
the moment behind the wheel of my Toyota,
on a rush hour Monday when it hits me that I’m
straight and no one knows the world has become
shattered glass and this, the latest shard unearthed
now from hiding, has become a present tense

I’ve just arrived at “normal” and it feels like polyester
Or a joke. Like, in the 5th grade, when my sister borrowed
red synthetic pants from the girl down the street, who
actually wore them. Lisa wrapped them as a gift, eager
for the outcome Christmas morning, knowing the
visceral would shake me, polyester untouchable to my
psyche. Like men, all those years.

Yet, now, you could wrap me in bolts of them while I
breathe in deeply, whispers becoming shouts of hallelujah
and I slowly stop self-editing thoughts to conform to
non-conformity and swallow “yes” as I enter into longing
my life fractioned into these spaces unexpected

(Spring '04)
Pronouns change gender, wearing boxers and/or briefs
we- pronouns and I- stare uncomfortably toward one another
a new language I must learn to speak in this, my native tongue

Reaching for a guide, something to pull off a shelf to
check out with a card, I end up like a teenager
mirror of myself, her ready body mimicking my own
much older one.

And I am seventeen now as I walk
toward 40 this June like the fruit tree
taking years to produce something of its own
become itself, strong and rooted

He, him, his... Pronouns change gender as I
navigate through words, foreign and domestic
looking for verbs to add, complete the sentence
pluck the fruit from this tree- he, him, me.

(11.12.03)
Crayola

Wanting is a tunnel underground and a
diesel engine roaring over that space
to keep conversations lively
in these limbs of discontent... I

would outline you with my fingers
forget to stay in the lines, out of bounds
pray to do the right thing then
beg to do wrong, silhouettes
lose form and I stumble in uncertainty
weathering this season of longing to

color a life I’ve only seen in two dimensions
only wondered at in passing like a
scene reviewed with caution, I
select a crayon from the box of 64
to drag across a clean white page
allowing color where before was question

Wanting is a tunnel underground as I
select a crayon to bring desire into being
through these limbs of discontent

(4.04)
Reluctant Heterosexual

Settles in to unsettle me
a body dropped into chicken pox-
itchy, yet compels me to scratch
below the surface, dig in to destiny
with untied shoes

Second child, second helpings, these wings
unfold after seasons as I simmer in a knowing
not yet form and I wait in possibility, rise into timing
with a thick sense of smell. Fire before the match
and a cloud just shy of bursting, a pin pricked on skin

I yield to an internal barometer, pressure rises
awry, like grasping at fireflies, empty handed yet
relieved and not relieved to capture a momentary glow
or crush it between these palms to discern
the yes and no of it all, or nothing.

This body itching unfamiliar, compels me toward
seasons hinted at in dreams and deposits me into want

(1.04)
Falling Into Print

I've never used a diaphragm, or considered reading Cosmo, but standing near the checkout, plucked by headlines promising the kind of sex I've never had while my body unfolds into layers, I almost buy one, but instead my opposable psyche clocks out and it is me, just me.

The conveyer belt of boxes, perfect fruit & cream slide forward. I smile, answer "Fine," like we really fucking care, and I choose plastic. Fitting Then I pay. And I'm reminded of the TV-a Master card commercial, only it really buys me nothing. Guess that means that I am priceless. Or a fool. In linen pants. And basement thoughts who cannot see the stairs to climb out, or up for air. As I bag my own groceries, wheeling a stainless metal cart through the surface of my present tenses, senses, reeling, alone.

(4.8.02)
falling into season

No longer a fruit, though
I laid down in the big apple
I am untenable at worst, and
hungry for the punch line

Having read the wrong book
far too long, I weep instead
for battles lost in this
history of skin

I am taut, weathered leather
a bud falling into season
unmeasured, sweet cherry
dropping into autumn

Tension flickers into form
as thunder bisects
a blackened sky,
wet with rain

Split me wide
like a melon
surface too
stretched to yield

Open me, jar wound
tight and I am hungry

Hurry.

(Fall '02)
Voice from the hall, deep
and I quicken to footsteps arriving and the crack
widens, at the door

Wicked in parentheses
comma, pause... packing
punctuation, redefining
my desire with a comma
or a quote

Putting on parentheses where
others put on coats. Hiding
(begging) eyes fight to stay in
focus, not read between the lines
of your body, blue jeans and beneath
any unintended meaning,

Turning period to comma
(read “hope”) while I
self-edit this desire
before it spills on the rug
and I am “it”- caught, shit.

Alarming, disarming and undoing me. Consuming
unassuming this pulse
in my head, mental action
diverts small talk and daily
interactions, platonic but not really for...

footsteps pause, comma, beckon
and I quicken to your voice, deep
for I am, wicked in parentheses.

(Spring '03)
Appendix B
Response from Stephen Taylor

Dear Suzanne,

Thanks for showing me the work. First off, I hope your heart doesn't sink when you see how I have scribbled allover your poems. This is my way of working with poetry. I figure more response is better than less response, and I always give myself a free hand to play with the work. It's very spontaneous and is not meant to be authoritative in any way. Your poems are very strong.

I will try to tell you something of my thinking about poetry, of what I have learned from my teachers, and I will address your work in particular. This will ramble because it is poetry mind; there is no linear way to come at it.

I enjoyed reading your poems. You will see that I have rewritten lines and stanzas, and have deleted whole sections, but I do this not to insist that you change things, but to try to show how the energy of the poem may be worked with in various ways. Poetry can often be strengthened by attention to economy of means. In other words, by trimming and fine-tuning the line, by cutting syllables that seem extra to the case, we often improve the music, charge the image with more impact, and at the same time compel the reader forward. This also has to do with knowing how much to spell things out and how much to leave to the reader's own imagination and intelligence.

You have the ability to generate intensely focused images, and you have an ear for the music of language. The striking thing is the sudden peculiar shift of focus. It's a sign of an instinct for poetry; and if you develop this it will make your work magnetic.

...just this once make a day feel less than three in your presence I am colder this season

You are speaking of time in a fairly abstract way, how time lengthens in the absence of the lover, and suddenly it occurs to you that you have been feeling cold. People's minds do that sort of shift, and poetry plays on that. That you do this is evidence that you are very good at observing your own mind. It's why many of your endings are so strong. Accurate observation of the movement of thought is crucial for poetry. It's the point where empathy comes in. Poetry has a lot to do with empathy.

Allen Ginsberg used to say that you should write the truth. You can reveal even the most embarrassing stuff if you do it with honesty and clarity and don't try to obscure it. Allen's mother lost her mind and eventually died in a mental hospital. At one point in her delirium, when he was a teenager, she tried to seduce him. That seems like the last thing you could ever publish. But he wrote of it with simple clarity and heart, and people empathized. I have seen audiences weeping over it. Where a lot of poets get into trouble is they make obscure allusions to their deepest experiences, but they don't go clear enough to make it resonate for the reader.

My colleague Bobbie Louise Hawkins says that in every group of poets there will some who write verse so obscure that you can't find a way in. The references are so vague that you get what Bobbie calls a poem that's "all surface." Bobbie says that in many cases this happens because the poet has told herself that there is one thing in her life that she will never write about. And what happens is that she ends up writing about nothing but that forbidden thing, but she does it "in a half-assed way" (Bobbie's from West Texas). So we wind up with these vague allusions that obviously relate
to something powerful, but we can't get hold of it. The solution is to sit down and write about that thing with absolute clarity and get it all out. That way, you will either realize that you can write about it, and do so, or get it out once and for all, and burn it, and move on.

I don't find a lot of obscurity in your work, but I thought that, given the emotional power beneath your poems, this might inform your further explorations.

Ezra Pound said that poetry is language charged to the utmost with meaning. Ginsberg used to say "maximum information, minimum number of syllables." Charles Olson describes a poem as an energy transfer from the writer to the reader. Words either add to the energy charge of detract from it. Those words that detract should be cut. Olson says the line is the dance floor and the syllables are the dancers. And in Tibetan poetics there is the idea that each syllable has to ring like a bell. The idea is that every syllable has to dance or ring, and anything that doesn't do that needs to be cut.

I recommend that, at least as an exercise, you try eliminating punctuation. Gertrude Stein said that a comma is only good for hanging your hat. Eliminating punctuation will force you to combine things with great care, and make you pay attention to line break.

Watch out for long metaphors, and for metaphors and similes in general. Often extended metaphors become laborious and the pay-off isn't worth it.

Jack Kerouac said that when you are writing and you stop to think, don't stop to think of the words but to see the picture better. Sometimes we say "show, don't tell." Don't tell me about how you feel (Bobbie-"nobody cares about your feelings, darling"), tell me what you see that made you feel that way, so I can feel it too.

To take the example of Ginsberg's mother's madness, he didn't say "I'm sad because my mother is crazy." He described the details, She served him uncooked fish. She posed naked in front of him. She screamed about Hitler being on the fire escape. He barely had to refer to himself at all; the reality of the scene hits the reader as it hit him.

This is an objectivist poetics. Objectivism was a reaction against the excesses of late Romanticism.

I have noted on the manuscript that your title style is inconsistent. I recommend that you make your titles in italic type, one size larger than the text type. Any way you do it, they should all be the same.

There are lots more comments written on your manuscript. You don't need to make your poems conform to my taste, but maybe you will pick up a few tips from my response.

Please feel free to email me if you want to continue the discussion. Staylor@naropa.edu. Congratulations on your manuscript. I enjoyed the work very much.

Best, Steve
Where do old poems go, fused to a shattered heart? I swallow the leftovers of us, always fresh in mental memory as my heart maneuvers nowhere and without beginning the precarious task of sliding a chisel between before and now without more bloodletting than a body can recover. I wake up in some memory that keeps eating years of boy in an 80s (or maybe 90s) world. Of you know. I suppose now of various meanings, a working.

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Heartache Miscellany

You have lots of vivid detail & a strong finish here. I wish I could export this economy. My teachers say "use no syllable that doesn't contribute to the whole." "Minimum number of syllables, maximum information." (annecdote)

I will cut radically, hoping to show how less can be more. My habit is to go for what's vivid & eliminate what's confusing or less clear.

One of the things we work with is how much to tell the reader. If you use a metaphor, like an egg or a vulture, it may be best not to spell out what the metaphor means.

You don't need "with caution" because "precarious" conveys that. Blood loss is more direct.

Let vultures do the work. I again is direct. The reader knows what we mean. So cutting from the bird to deconstruction is powerful.

Eight months is a shell speaks of isolation, you don't need to interpret the metaphor.

So I opt for moving on to the next graspable scene — keeping it together at work.
Where do old poems go?
I swallow the leftovers of us
always fresh in memory as my heart
maneuvers nowhere and I
begin the precarious task of sliding a chisel
between then and now
keeping tears at bay in a working world

Die before me please let
vultures deconstruct you and I
skeleton of a dream deferred to empty
to one, access denied, picking over rubbish
for the crack in the world, the egg
slammed into a wall, dripping questions
you weren't the bird I thought you were

Here's my condensed version.

Heartache Miscellany. - 55

55
OK. Try eliminating all verbs that end in "ing." Go for the active voice.

Sometimes, as an exercise, I forbid my students to use "ing" verbs.

Reluctant Heterosexual

Settling in to unsettled me,
like dropping a body into chicken pox.
itchy, but compelling, scratching surface
digging in to destiny with untied shoes

Second child, second helping.
wing unfurled, a first season is not yet...

Yielding to an internal barometer, pressure rising awry, like gathering at fireflies, empty handed and somehow relieved, and not relieved, wanting to capture a momentary glow or crush it between palms, discerning the yes and no of it all, or nothing.

This body itching unfamiliar, but compelling me toward seasons hinted at in dreams, and deposits me into wanting
falling into season

No longer a fruit, though
I laid down in the big apple
I am untenable at worst, and
hungry for the punch line

Having read the wrong book
far too long, I weep instead
for battles lost in this
history of skin

I am taut, weathered leather
a bud falling into season,
unchecked, unmeasured
sweet cherry, dropping
into Autumn

Tension flickers into form
as thunder bisects
a blackened sky,
wet with rain

Split me,
wide
like a melon
surface skin too
stretched to yield

Open me, jar wound
tight and I am hungry

Hurry.

think about it
I'm not sure
whether I'd cut it...

The contraction sounds more natural. Also I like the rhythm.

Tight I'm hungry.
Note Home- Monday, May 17:

Tomorrow is Writer’s Day!

It’s a hard job, being a writer, all day. Think about what you will need to be comfortable, creative and focused. Anything goes, except for bringing your bed (or tub). Slippers, pillows, sweatpants, book lights or small lamps, Maya’s mini couch... whatever, as long as it will help you write and not distract you.

-Suzanne

Writer’s Day Checklist

Happy Writer’s Day!

By the end of today you will have:

* written two new poems ___ ___

* created an art piece with writing that goes with it ___

* edited other people’s wall poems ___

* re-worked your own wall poem ___

* helped someone else with a piece of writing ___

* Conferenced with Suzanne about Root Beer Cafe poems ___

* Read a poem on stage ___
Reminder Note Home, Tuesday, May 25

Root Beer Cafe...

It's all about the fashion, and, yes, we hope about the poems. Spend some time tonight thinking about what you'd like to wear to the cafe—anything goes, but most importantly, you need to feel good in however you dress up. And comfortable, unless you're wearing go go boots which I expect will hurt after awhile though it might be worth it, just this once. You are welcome to dress like a beatnik, a hippie, a groovy girl or boy. Or none of the above. It's up to you. Practice reading your poems out loud. Poets have to do that sometimes. Get a little sleep between now and Thursday. You are going to be great on that stage.

-Suzanne

The Root Beer Cafe is this Thursday, May 27
6:30-9:00 pm, in the Open Space.
Place Poems

Untitled

In a place of lichen, rocks and plain
in a place of rain, in a place of bones and bones
in a place of barbed wire fences
in a place of the faint sound of bulls pounding hooves
in a place of the rattle of rattlesnakes
in a place of Pawnee Grasslands

-by Sammy Rose

South Africa

In a place where rusty metal houses are
in a place of poor people in a place
where one car remains,
where a lonely hill sits of rust

In a place of 3-sided houses
in a place of one coin and dirt to eat
all on one lonely hill of rust

In a place of lion’s blood
in a place of animal blood where
one lion sits slurping it up
where many sad things happen
all on one lonely hill of rust

In a place of ragged clothes
in a place of loneliness
All on one hill of rust

-by Isabella
Horses

In a place of horses everywhere, in a place of the sweet salty smell of newborn foals floating in the air in a place of saddles, bridles and grooming tools in a place of stalls, aisle after aisle in a place of whinnies, snorts and stamping of hooves the stables the place I love !!!!!

-by Sammy Rose
The Dinner Party Poems

The Drink of Red Wine

Bitter, yet sweet
the red gushing liquid flows in my cup
bedecking my mouth in flavor
hours later, the zest of grapes still lingers
as I think back I remember the wine coloring my teeth
The wonderful delicacy of wine

-by Tori

Sushi

Sushi's something I can appreciate, for other people, just not great.
Raw tuna, tempura shrimp, anybody who doesn't like wasabi is a wimp.
California rolls, spider rolls, ahi tuna rolls, octopus rolls and...
Oysters, clams, tempura yams, soft shelled crabs if you please,
And deep fried squid tentacles just like these.

--by Reece
Creamy Clam Chowder Soup

The creamy white broth
melts in your mouth
the clams and mushrooms jam my jaw while sliding past my tongue
the savory taste
the creamy broth
the clams, flowing in

a

s e a

t r m

the beautiful white mountains of broth
the brown mushroom tree bark
is what that has made me gobble you up

-Isabella

Fettuccine

I order fettuccine with pesto sauce
and I think, "I can't wait
for the fettuccine to come."
It arrives
I'm surprised
It looks so delicious,
this giant mound of noodles
I dig into it
It's super good
It makes my mouth water
It's garlicky
It's buttery,
parmesan cheese
I eat it all
And I think I want more

-Dylan
Catch of the Day

Flip, flop in the bucket.
Slip, slop on the skillet.
Chip, chop diced and served.
"Here you go", on the table.
And here is some news you should know:
The day's catch has just met its fate right here on your plate!

-by Reece

Coffee

Coffee?
Yes coffee!
The blackness in my cup swirls to creamy brown
as I add cream & sugar
Bitter yet sweet
Delicious and delightful!
It will stunt your growth
"YEAH, RIGHT!"
Coffee makers rule!
What would I do without coffee?
I'D DIE!

-Levi
Pie

Nice and scrumptious
and dessertful like
floating on a
cloud so yummy
like the thin layer of
crust covering the
metal pan and
the warm golden
apples slapping
the inside of the
solid metal something
and smothering
them into the
crust

-by Elizabeth

Bananas

Peeling, peeling almost done
can’t wait for the skin to be gone
finally, it’s in the trash
now for the good thing
big, big bites so, so good
only a centimeter left
oh no, it disappeared
and all that’s left is the
icky banana skin

-by Luna
Orange

A tangy sweetness hangs in the air
and on the tree above me
turning my face upward for a quick
glance at the sky, cloudless and blue
I look up at the taunting, fresh, almost falling oranges
then plop- one single orange falls bull’s eye
into my outstretched hands
As I savor the tangy, juicy orange I lay face up
the orange immobile in my mouth

-by Meryl

Raspberry

You’re sitting there on my plate like a
dream.
I pick you up,
you plop into my mouth
the best feeling in my mouth
an amazing sensation
you roll down my tongue
amazingly, amazing: yummy!
my teeth touch your yumminess
the juice so tangy spurts out into a red
firework in my mouth that explodes!
sweet and just yummy, raspberry

-by Maya
Object Poems

Wooden handle, smooth as stone
with carved writing, “made in Germany”
swirling metal rods
beater of eggs
into the dishwasher with ya
you Wihhhsssk!

-by Levi

Hand

Wrinkles
curving
bending
hand
Picking up
putting down
writing, reading
play hockey
hold the stick
fingers, thumb
snapping
shaking, punching
happy, mad
Hand

-by Andrew
Miscellaneous Poetry

Snow Kids

Ten kids begging to go 
outside on a cold, cold winter day. 
the teacher says, “O.K.”
and the ten kids go running outside 
on that cold, cold, snowy day.
They lay down 
and roll in the fluffy snow 
on that cold, cold winter day.
The teacher counts to ten,
everyone race in,
on that cold, cold, winter day.

-by Addison

Lightning and Thunder

Lightning, a gold flash across my eye.
Lightning so bright it can be seen for miles.
The bolt in the sky goes free, 
as thunder comes after.
Leaving a loud, loud, sound 
that lasts only a second.

-by Orion
Lipstick: 
A poem from a grandmother’s point of view

Grandma in the seat, putting on her lipstick
“Oh dear, I guess we’re at the airport. Got to say ‘Bye’”
“SMMAAACK!”
“Thanks, Grandma!”

Grandma on the airplane, sitting in her seat
Was that too much lipstick?
She thinks… “Nah!,” she says

Back in the car, kids going, “Yuck!,
“Mom, stop smiling- help us!”
“NOW!!”

-By Hannah F. and Camellia

The Wonderful Sun

I know you by the light you give to earth
and making it warm for we earthlings
on earth each day
I know you by the colors orange, goldish and
red the fire flames from the sun
that heats the earth each day
I know you by the one who
lets plants, animals and also people live on earth
without the wonderful sun
we earthlings, plants and animals
would all be suffering or dead right now
but luckily we have the
warm, wonderful, beautiful sun!

-by Hannah M.
My Dad’s Barney

A couple of days ago I met Blinky
Blinky is a clown who had a TV show
like Barney, thirty-five years ago
And now he is a grumpy old man
sitting in a tiny place

-by Henry

Horse

As a crisp, clear, sunny spring day invites a fresh, young, free horse
the horse swiftly gallops through the wild grass and flower country
it cuts through the wind like a black arrow as its mane whips in the wind
and its hooves thump the ground
the horse lightly springs in the air and neighs a cunning note
this beautiful beast dances a strange wild dance in the willows it prances into
the horse neighs an odd but beautiful sort of song
while the willows brush its neck
it laps up water from the moonlit pond
water flies into the center of the pond
making it dazzle and sparkle in the night
the beast nibbles some red, ripe cherry blossoms
as the mist grows dens and low, the horse jumps and disappears
into the midnight glow

-by Ambrose
Raven

From your high perch a journey begins
you’ve sat there planning it for days
now you come down from your perch
and fly like a straight, graceful comet
to a place where every bird can go
to a place all ravens can go
it’s the place you’ve gone
it’s the place all birds have gone
but you’ve chosen the river path
the path of the trout, the place close to a raven
but further on your destination
your raven haven lies.

-by Meryl

A Poem

A poem
like a water drop
on a petal or leaf,
sits on a page.

The words,
a fly stuck in a spider web,
the spider wraps its prey.

The title,
a stick in a pond,
short or long,
depends upon the poem.

-by Aleanna
Tiny Dot!

There's a tiny dot out there somewhere.

Mother Earth, a tiny dot but much more, she holds us people.

Our Mother Earth, a tiny dot, out there somewhere. The only planet with life: a dot.

A pearl and marble so round: a dot.

Always turning: a dot.

A dot in space: it's hard to believe, a place we all know: a dot!

-by Maya