Massachusetts Poetry Festival

Salem, Mass

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**Five Poetry Prompts to Change Your Life**

Sunday, May 4, 11:45-12:45

Hawthorne Hotel, Sophia Room A

Facilitator: Christine Beck

Panelists: Ginny Connors, Ruth Foley, Benjamin Grossberg

A good poetry prompt will take you out of your comfort zone. Even accomplished writers get stuck in a rut sometimes—or can simply come up empty, staring at an empty page. Let us show you five prompts that can help you find what you didn't know you knew! We have used these prompts in our own writing and in workshops, so we know they work. These prompts are designed to help you expand and deepen your thinking about poems, write with compassion about "the other," explore the sonic textures of language, and use lists in new ways.

The key to a powerful prompt is to unlock both the unconscious and the imagination—without triggering panic. The following prompts also have the virtue of being general enough to use again and again. They won’t go stale.

What is the purpose of a poetry prompt? The best prompts:

1. unlock the imagination,

2. allow us to surprise ourselves by trying a new format or idea,

3. help us get unstuck from “writer’s block,”

4. play with words and shake up our syntax,

5. provide enough flexibility to be used and reused.

The ideal prompt should challenge us but should not trigger so much resistance that we shut down.

Each of the four panelists will introduce one prompt that has worked well for him or her, either as a writer, teacher, or both, and discuss an example. The fifth prompt will be for you to design, assisted by the additional ideas attached.

**Prompt 1**

**Ginny Lowe Connors: Beginnings and Endings**

This prompt includes two possible approaches. One is to use certain words at the ***beginning*** of each line in a poem, and the other approach is to use certain words at the ***end*** of each line in a poem.

Here are two ways to find the words for your prompt.

1. Beginnings: Find a haiku poem you like. Make each word in the poem either a beginning word or end word of a line in a poem you make up. Here is an example using a poem by Basho to provide beginning words.

on a bare branch  
a crow has settled  
autumn dusk

*--Basho*

**Basho’s Crow**

On this November afternoon

a smell of snow defines the air.

Bare trees hold up a pewter-colored sky, each

branch remembering the blaze it’s relinquished.  
A stillness as the next thing approaches. Shadow of wing.

Crow, flapping and strutting, haw-hawing. But now the bird

has folded its bravado away. Dark silhouette

settled on a low branch.   
Autumn dreaming into its cells. Flicker of hunger.

Dusk and the golden glow of a window.

1. Endings: Ruth Foley suggests taking a favorite line from a poem and write it down with one word the end of each line. Each word from that line now ends a line in your new poem.

Here's a short one by Ruth Foley, using her favorite line from Thom Gunn (from "The Differences"). The line is "I have not crossed your mind for three weeks now":

**Skylight**

You ratchet down the blinds and I

am left darkened, relegated to the shadows. I have

listed all the things that we are not

anymore—friends, believers, star-crossed

anythings. There is no room for sky here, where your

need for nothing eclipses us. I pretend I don't mind.

It's what you've been searching for,

while I've been painting Orion's belt—three

distant lights shifting across the ceiling in the winter weeks.

I wonder when to paint the sword, if not now.

**Prompt 2**

**Benjamin Grossberg: A Figure of Speech That Turns on Itself**

Write a poem that begins in a figurative mode, exploring a single simile, metaphor, or symbol—and then turns, within the poems itself, to examine and perhaps eventually reject that figure.

This turn will force a poem from a lyrical mode, in which you evoke imagery and “think” by way of a figure, into a more directly meditative mode. The prompt asks you to change your stance within the poem itself, bringing a self-awareness into the act of composition that can complicate and deepen the poem.

Examples:

**Mind**

Mind in its purest play is like some bat

That beats about in caverns all alone,

Contriving by a kind of senseless wit

Not to conclude against a wall of stone.

It has no need to falter or explore;

Darkly it knows what obstacles are there,

And so may weave and flitter, dip and soar

In perfect courses through the blackest air.

And has this simile a like perfection?

The mind is like a bat. Precisely. Save

That in the very happiest of intellection

A graceful error may correct the cave.

– Richard Wilbur

And here's an example by Benjamin Grossberg, from his book-length series *Space Traveler.* In the middle of the poem, the speaker turns on his own romantic figure.

**The Space Traveler and the Doppler Effect**

Because waves flatten as they

move past, the falsetto spiraling down

to a gravelly uttered base, I’m hard put

to say how anything sounds—

even the voices of those I know

most intimately as we move toward

or away from each other: approach

and departure distorting the notes

to birdsong or thunder. If two bodies

were momentarily perfectly still,

only then, it seems, could you have it:

the actual timbre. I imagine the two

of us on his floor, for a moment static—

not so much as aging at unequal rates—

and my body arced to receive

every decibel, the full wood grain

of his voice, so I could trace knots,

the looser and tighter lines, finger

years of drier and wetter weather.

I said on his floor, but of course

we'd be on a bed: drifting

in the noiseless vacuum of space,

undistracted even by each other’s eyes. . . .

On his planet there’s no patience

for such romantic claptrap; they

never bothered to outlaw sonnets

because the whole population simply

lost interest in them—but I think he

may be a closet heretic. I think he

still remembers the day I crash-

landed my ship in his drainage ditch,

and he came out with a pailful

of tools and never once appeared

to notice that I was an alien.

Later, on his dark patio, he took

hold of one of my wiry appendages

and told me that he loved me.

But I didn’t catch the words. I didn’t

need to. I was moved to perfect

stillness by his tone of voice.

*Benjamin Grossberg*

**Prompt 3**

**Ruth Foley: Contradictions**

The idea here is to add beauty to a difficult subject or difficulty to a beautiful subject. It can create tension, layers, depth—any number of effects. It also can open the poem up to a new set of imagery, one that likely wouldn't have been found on its own. Finally, it can be a way of writing toward or away from one's obsessions (more on that later). There are likely several ways to approach this when writing a poem; here are three of them.

1. Before you draft, make a list of beautiful words down one side of the page and ugly words down another. Or a list of words describing a beautiful object or event down one side of the page and words describing something ugly down the other. If you've found yourself writing obsessively about the same topic or using the same imagery/setting/what have you, then it's possible to create opposites with those as well. For example, you could make one list of vocabulary that's common to the topic and another that's common to something completely outside the topic. A poem about the death of a loved one could end up using imagery of an Irish breakfast or a camp fire or something else surprising.
2. During revision, actively seek to introduce contradictions by way of descriptors, images, language, or any other means you can think of. This is the technique I use most often. I might combine bits of #1 above, perhaps deciding on a new (surprising, contradictory) controlling image and brainstorming a list of ways to incorporate that new image.
3. Another alternative recommended by Christine Beck is to write about what something or someone is **not,** rather than what it is. In essence, we are looking for what isn’t there. For example, she once wrote a prayer called “This is Not a Prayer.” You can also write an apology called “This is Not an Apology,” saying you are sorry for something you think you are not sorry for.

Here's a recent poem in progress by Ruth that works with contradictions.

**Bullet Fish**

That year, I began sleeping like a shark

finned. I sank, discarded, into something

far away from morning. My trail shimmered

behind me as I torpedoed down—I didn't

know what it beckoned or who would

follow it. I was a submarine gone inert,

its crew unbreathing, their faces porcelain

as if they waited for the pin to drop. I was

the pin. I was an airplane cabin plummeting

wingless to the seabed. Plumes of silt would

lift when I landed, and I would welcome

their gust and bluster. I was ready to be centered

in a sand fountain, ready for someone to

make a wish. Shorn, I might have been

a bullet fish moving forward, only forward,

water freshening across my gills as I

came alive again, restored in the sluice of this

false current, waking in my sleep to brandish

what was missing. I thrashed the places

where my muscle used to be. Each exhaled

stream was my last breath before I found

the ocean floor, the silica settling around me

like winter's dust beaten out of a carpet,

unglimmered and wretched, and acknowledged

I was as useless as I would have been in air.

*Ruth Foley*

**Prompt 4**

**Christine Beck: What Do You Fear?**

Here are two approaches to writing about something you fear.

1. The Triangulation Poem: Write a poem based on vocabulary that you have written yourself in a brainstorm list of fears, desires, and foods. Free-write three separate lists. A free-write is a quick list written without deliberation. The idea is to access your unconscious as well as your conscious fears. Start with spiders, for example, and just write a full page. Don’t stop until the page is full. Do the same thing with hopes or longings and then with foods. Then choose one word from each list and incorporate them into a poem. By definition, if you write a poem that includes one of your fears and one of your longings, you will be tapping into your unconscious. The food lightens (or darkens) the poem, but it forces you to reach. The difference here is that the prompt words are not arbitrarily imposed. They are words that already mean something to you.

Examples:

**Morning Song**

My bed is a warm nest, sun spilling in the northern window,

a streak of red and yellow leaves almost at the height

of saturation before becoming brittle, turning brown.

I burrow down. The birds are chirping a familiar family squabble:

*Did you see Connie’s hair? Nature’s got no shade of red like that.*

*Peterson is looking puffy, don’t you think?*

The younger ones are gathered on the arborvitae:

*If he liked it, he shoulda put a ring on it! umbrella, ella, ella.*

I soften my hearing, tune out the discord, imagine it’s

one happy family singing a campfire song.

Then across the hall, my baby wakes, I hear her rustle,

then a babble so glorious, as light as lemon meringue,

airy with radiance, I want to find a tape recorder to

capture it for winter mornings when she’ll find words,

fearful I’ll forget the magic of sounds I can’t transcribe,

a hymn to all creation, the miracle of morning, a chord

that shimmers from her room to mine, invisible, electric,

as if a thousand songbirds perched along the line.

*Christine Beck*

1. Direct Address: Ben suggests writing a direct address to something you fear.  Evoke the thing in all its complexity, beauty and horror.

Example:

Death, be not proud

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow

Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally

And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

*John Donne*

**Prompt 5**

**Write Your Own Prompt**

**You can create your own prompt by working with the following mix-and-match approach.** Prompts can manipulate form, subject matter, or both. To make your own prompt, we suggest choosing one (or more) item from each of these columns.

**Column B: Subject Matter**

Possible topics for your prompt.

\*Who is speaking

\*Who is being addressed

\*Situation of the speaker or address

(such as an Aubade or Serenade)

\*Type of figure to be explored /

features of that exploration

\*Occasion

\*Emotional charge

**Column A: Form**

Possible formal challenges for your prompt**.**

\*Refrain

\*A Specific Line Length

\*Rhyme/Meter

\*Physical Shape

\*Syllabic Count per Line

\*Single Word Repetition

\*Beginning/Ending

Correspondences

**Column C: Wild Card**

A prompt can also be based on some of the features below.

\*Turn

\*Epigraph (real or made

up, from famous people

or intimates)

\*Envoi

\*Particular words that

must be included

\*Particular sounds that

must be included

**Additional Poetry Prompts and Examples**

1. The “list” poem.

Start with a proposition that calls for a list. For example, “Why I like Avocados,” or “Everything I Know About Cars.” Write until you have filled a page. Keep going until you surprise yourself. Even when listing items randomly, you will find your “meaning-making mind” will take over and try to impose some order on your list. Then edit, reorder, and form the list to build to your epiphany.

2. “Meet Me.”

Write a poem in stanzas that all begin with “meet me.” Then write a series of improbably and fantastic places that you could meet.

3. "Dramatic monologue pairs."

These are sets of poems in which the narrator speaks from two opposing characters’ point of view.    For example, you could explore the idea of infidelity from both sides.

4. Ancient Words

Write a poem using ten or more words from a group of twenty-three words that some linguists believe have been in use since the end of the last ice age. These words are surely elemental to us, part of our human history. The words– *I, we, thou, ye, who, this, that, what, mother, male/man, not, worm, bark, hand, ashes, fire, to give, to pull, to spit, to flow, and to hear*–Keep it under 20 lines.

5. Writing "Against" poems (a.k.a. The Gentle Rant)

Find a stance to argue against. You can use that as the title of your poem if you wish, but it's not required (Dylan Thomas did just fine with "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night").

**Examples of Additional Prompts**

List poem:

**Good bye, Good bye**

I’ll miss you like a blue piano.

I’ll miss you the way a healing wound misses its stitches.

I’ll miss you like a letter sent to the wrong address.

I won’t miss the deep water of your silences

but I’ll miss the way your hair floats away

from your head like a cloud.

I’ll miss you as the white fox misses the snow

evaporating into mist.

I’ll miss you hunched behind the wheel

not caring where you’re going.

I won’t miss the shadows under your eyes

that remind me of difficulties

because I never want to admit difficulties.

I’ll miss you like the message in a bottle

lost in a clog of weeds.

I’ll miss you the way a pool hall misses midnight.

I’ll miss your lips floating off to sea.

*Ginny Lowe Connors*

**Meet Me**

Meet me at the slushy, melted end of a chocolate snowball,

where the Bermuda Longtail tucks its feathered offspring,

above the lighthouse,

Meet me in the upper-left corner of the arachnid’s silky home,

underneath the stretchy mozzarella bubbles on a wood fired pizza,

on the legs of a well-aged wine,

Meet me in the calming strokes on the soft spot of brindle between her ears,

among the brandy soaked berries of a red sangria, between the dinghy

and the ocean floor,

Meet me in the crook of the flamingo’s backward bending ankle,

before the last song begins, after world peace,

in the forgotten loneliness of purgatory.

Meet me as the sun sets on the turquoise water,

beyond the smell of eucalyptus, in the belly

of a busy hospital, while the scared sip their black coffee,

*student poem*

"Dramatic monologue pairs”:

**From the Water**

I look at the black lid of the Hellespont, wondering

if it has closed on you, or if you are close. When I see

you coming in the tower’s light, I will run down

the steps, though when I become visible to you,

I shall begin to walk very slowly, so the moonlight

catches the wind in my hair, and makes me as beautiful

as Andromeda, waiting out on the rock for the dragon.

I know what it means, you coming here—what risks

you take—and sometimes I decide for myself

that our love is worth those risks to you, and sometimes

I decide that our love is safe, protected by Aphrodite

and Eros, by the Fates, because it is true, and that Ocean

himself moves underneath you, mirrors your movement

to keep you from harm. Should I come as Andromeda,

or the one who wept so much she was turned into a wet

stone? The decision remains yours. I’ll give you

whatever it is you come for, which isn’t fear

that you’ll die. You’re too young to die. The sand

is warm tonight, and soft, and will be our bed until dawn.

I have a piece of coral for you, which I found walking

today, two cold apples and clear water. Also, I have me.

You must not think I don’t know the distance from Sestos

to Abydos and how it changes in a thunderstorm;

that is why I love your arms most, and shoulders, why

I pray for them separately. Though I don’t cross

with you, my risk is wedded to yours, and I don’t sleep

for hours after you go, until I’m sure you have reached

shore. It is warm tonight, and the Hellespont is clear.

When I see your hair in the light, that’s what we’ll

talk about. We’ll sit on a black jetty, and look at the moon.

**From the Shore**

I am fighting this Hellespont—a great definition of black

space below me, which I have traveled during storms,

and on those few nights of the year it is cold. It continues

like a familiar argument to which there can be no logical

resolution, except those which contain their own undoing,

as the journey to Sestos necessitates the journey back,

and that, the journey out again. It is warm tonight, past

time for moonlight; I can still see stars when I turn

my head for breath, against the black sky, which

somewhere becomes the ocean. Miles from either shore,

sometimes I forget if I am heading to see you, or away,

though this traveling is always about you, and the salt

water seems to smell like you, and the wave swells feel

like you turning beneath me. Such swimming will take

my life eventually, in a storm I can’t control, or by

the throwing up of hands, when I realize it’s impossible

to mediate this distance between us and impossible to live

half the time with you and half away, and think always

of the black water and my arms which will eventually

tire. I thought tonight, before diving off the cliffs

of Abydos, about the lighthouse and you, and life

between two cities as different as sickness and health,

and decided to stay. But I found myself anyway

immersed in the water. I cannot remember if I have

seen you this evening, but I am sure you look—

or have looked—beautiful, that you felt as cool

and forceful as the strait, that the sounds you make

will be as constant. I have no doubt I love—or have

loved you—and also no doubt about the sand I will

catch my breath on, or the deep, black Hellespont.

*Benjamin Grossberg*

**Ancient Words:**

**Impossible**

I hear the memory of you. It sounds like ash

falling from a log after the fire burns low.

I remember this tree warm in the sunlight,

the bark pulling slightly away.

That which burns transforms itself.

A woman once burned all the pictures of her man

but she could not

unsear his image from her brain.

Her skin would not give up the language of his hands.

She turned her life inside-out and over

on the advice of a worm.

That which turns and turns transforms itself.

It is an old black art, to pull the nutrients of the dead

through a tough sod. To make of it

air, space, a rich abundance.

Who can do this?

I would do it if I could.

*Ginny Lowe Connors*

Writing "Against" poems (a.k.a. The Gentle Rant)

**Against Mnemosyne**

Today, I'm choosing chaos—each

circle of the fan becomes a new

surprise, each feeling of surprise

a new emotion bubbling from

the spring. Each blink will bring

a new spring, a new season of

forgetting and discovery. Each

blink is new, each eyelash,

every dark flash an awakening.

The bird—I will not know it

is a bird, or what flight is, or

landing, or recognize the branch

or that it is a branch or a maple—

can have a new song with every

breath. Its unnamed flutter

can match my magic blood.

The cars will not be cars, the

highways will not point anywhere.

I will gladly lose my direction,

not turn myself to where you

are lying, not think about what

time it is there or how you slowly

peeled yourself away from time,

sleeping in the morning, sending

messages all night across mountains

you would never see again: *I miss*

*you. I remember. I miss you*

Ruth Foley