

"A book that deserves a place on every poet's shelf
. . . Its copies will become well-worn and dog-eared
from future service."—X.J. Kennedy



unlocking the poem

by ottone m. riccio and ellen beth siegel

Samples of what you'll find in *Unlocking the Poem*

Ricky's Ramblings on Poetry

Like all the arts, true poetry is a milieu in which to immerse oneself. A commitment that is partial or occasional won't do. One learns to think, live, breathe, sleep poetry. Anything less than total commitment, total involvement, is going to make the work of the poet more difficult, if not impossible.

The intention of *Unlocking the Poem* is to provide stimuli—prods, if you will—to engender in the reader not only the challenge to produce good poetry but the earnest desire to do so. The many assignments will show some of the ways poems can happen and be realized—including ways that do not coincide exactly with the criteria provided in the assignment text. We consider this fortunate. Rebellion in the practitioners of poetry is an asset. We don't want writers to be reluctant to take risks. Who wants an automaton for a poet?

But our intention is to be of help. New poets are looking for direction. Seasoned poets will benefit from the refreshments this book offers. Poetry is a vast area. We can all use some assistance at times.

Poets are artists of the word. And like all artists, poets are magicians. The poet will take on the challenge to attempt to express what cannot be expressed in language—a gross irony, since language is the poet's primary weapon. When a poet enables the poem residing in her or his subconscious to surface, and helps it shape itself and take on public existence, the poet knows this truth: what has been expressed is not the core of the poem. The core of the poem remains inaccessible; its roots go on living in the poet's subconscious so that each time the poem is read to an audience or appears on the printed page, it will regenerate itself from those residual roots.

What is it that is expressed, if not the core of the poem? The poem retains its core for its own nurturing. What is expressed is an approximation of what in the poem demands expression. And this always happens in an oblique way. When we speak directly, we're *saying* something. When we present a poem, we're *showing* a happening, and without our saying anything we communicate across the poem's possibilities in a way that leaves the listener/reader *knowing* the poem and not aware of how that *knowing* takes place. The language we use in poetry is not discursive. That is the province of prose. Poetry language is radiational—each image; each metaphor; each simile; each line, phrase, and word, operates in an outpouring of sensed reality, in all directions at once.

Poetry is all the other arts combined. Its language, rhythms, rhymes, and images all have about them the auras of painting, dance, music, structural architecture. As magicians we organize (not strictly true; our subconscious does the real organizing) the elements the poem

offers us for its manifestation and bring to the poem a viable existence. We unlock the poem's *life*.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

The poem is an idea waiting in our subconscious. Language elements are *assembled* to give physical form to the poem. Considering this process provides us with a reliable *key* with which to *unlock* the poem our minds already know. Unlocking the poem-idea allows it to become manifest. In the process of unlocking the poem we discover it is *constructed* with words, phrases, lines—the *building blocks* that give the poem its form, and by extension, indicate its substance. We know that form and substance are one; our ingenuity in assembling (selecting, arranging, etc.) the language and structural elements enables the poem to *stand*.

We have a variety of building blocks available. First, let us consider the *arrangement* of the poem. The traditional poem arranged in metric design utilizes the stanza or canto as the major physical building block. In free verse—verse that does not follow any pre-set metrical, rhyming, or rhythmic structure—the basic structural element is the verse paragraph. In projective verse, it's the word cluster. These terms are related to the way the poem is set out on the page.

Other building blocks include rhythm (meter, cadence, beat, syncopation) and sound (rhyme, melody, percussion). We also have emotional and ideational building blocks: diction; imagery; pattern; tone and style; typographical construction; line art with text; division (spatial, stanzaic); implied pacing; and so forth. We will describe (and use!) these building blocks in the sections that follow. What is important to keep in mind, at this point, is that the mere fact that so many building blocks are available to us suggests a certain tension coiled in the waiting poem; the poem is ready to burst out, it is anxious to assume its place in the world of poetry and literature, as soon as we unlock its door. When we unlock the poem, we also unlock its confines and reach our knowing of the poem by, in part, recognizing its construction and analyzing its building blocks. The grand paradox of poetry is this: When we make the poem manifest—when we give it its bounded, physical form—the poem becomes boundless.

Assignment Number 9

You are connected with others, standing, and hearing a distant music. You have to strain to hear it. It comes closer, but slowly, and you are impatient, willing it closer, and closer, until finally—after centuries—it penetrates you, you penetrate it, you are the music, the music is you. Any form, any length.

Lily

I. At Park Street Station

Her claret-tinctured voice
spreads

from one cracked vessel to another:
waif-throat to subway tunnel.
We're red-line riders between stations,
taking communion from this sudden singing.
Though a little girl still peeks
from under spangle-shadowed eyelids,
she's vinegared beyond her years,
the diaphragm, that sour sponge of breath
squeezing out notes of leakage.
The stain of her voice carries
heavenward
by train gusts,
rising up to where bare bulbs hanging in cages
sway their electric version of reverence.
A few shopping days till Christmas and we all stop,
let the cars go by unfilled.

II. Running from the Sky

If you heard her voice
there in the subway,
turning graffiti to Arabic
making church of the rush-hour underworld,
filling our bodies with sacred sound
till we're holy riders
silenced from our material thoughts,
you'd be soaking her words into your mouth too,
swallowing her singing,
swallowing till you forgot everything,
forgot me,
till you forgot forgetting.

Lana Hechtman Ayers
Kirkland, Washington

GENERAL MATTERS OF FORM

Poetic form is divided into two main categories: *Fixed Forms* (including the forms we call *Traditional Forms* and that rely on a pre-established structure, such as the *Sonnet*, *Sestina*, *Villanelle*, *Rondeau*, *Triolet*, and *Blank Verse*); and *Organic Forms*, such as *Free Verse* and *Open or Spatial Verse* (also known as *Projective Verse* or *Verse by Field*), which are forms that evolve from within the poems themselves. The longevity of the free verse organic forms rivals that of traditional forms and possesses a more varied history.

Assignment Number 25

Write a poem in couplets, at least six. Keep the couplets separate on the page, but mix closed and open couplets. Use five feet per line. Rhyme is optional. Any subject.

In the following poem, the author chose to vary the length of the lines rather than adhering to the five-foot-per-line limit.

Godot Arrives

Stage right, stage left, who cares! She's here,
at last, we can finish and go to supper. Or else

we can discuss this latest development, curling
each line around another, one wiener into another

like interlocking paper clips, a dizzy progression
not out of step with this production. Where begin,

where end? Start with her looks—she may be divine
but that pink leather coat does nothing for her

feline form and her shaved head blinds the audience
to her considerable faults. She likes to catch

her own eye, breezily unscrewing it from its stainless
steel socket. No wonder they say she has uncanny vision.

I prattle on like a feminist in a bordello, but listen
to this: She, Godot, blushes black and blue when

praised and shivers with pleasure when asked questions
without answers or answers whose questions don't

yet exist. Only today she was arrested for causing
a commotion in a Buddhist monastery. Imagine, whispering

sweet nothings into their sweet minds. She has an inordinate
fondness for middle-aged men who preen before grimy

mirrors in gas station bathrooms. She claims she can provide
what you're looking for. All you need is someone pacing back

and forth, wringing her hands, and mopping up those
artificial tears from her face. It seems like an eternity

since the last time she came. Oh, how we complain. Patience
is a virtue lost on us. On Godot, a simple wedding dress.

William Leydon
Dorchester, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 73

Write an erotic poem in the form of a triolet.

Silenced Guitar

She lies long, pulp of a succulent fruit
He glides up dark behind her
Face in her pillow, her mind fleeing to druid
She lies long, pulp of a succulent fruit
Her back and rump bare, the fine crude
Here's your watermelonman, he murmurs
She lies long, pulp of a succulent fruit
He glides up dark behind her

Mary R. Collins
Brookline, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 81

Write a sonnet—Shakespearean, of course!—on the subject, “Hamlet, The Musical.” You
might also want to try a sonnet on a comic version of another of Shakespeare’s tragedies.

*This author drew on Shakespeare’s words, crafting what is, in essence, a “found”
poem:*

Hamlet, The Musical

I order my part be played by Russell Crowe—
I wot he’d make a handsome, stalwart Dane.
For Claudius: a sneery man—De Niro—
that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
Let him wear a charlatan’s wreathy face,
wrapped in wild and whirling words. Let day
be day, night night, and time slant across
this goodly frame, the earth. For who might weigh
a sterile promontory, who might catch

the conscience of a King?

I know *I* would.

I'd find my way without my eyes, and patch
that canopy, the air, with holy rood . . .
for I have that within which passeth show:
these but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Ellen Beth Siegel
Waban, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 119

Write a prose poem about a relationship between humans and animals.

No Feeding

miserly mistress sitting in the park knitting squirrels jumping through hoops *es-tu es-tu* not
for you no no where no means yes crazy linen crazy kitten digging a hole in the sandless
worm warped in space *here kitty kitty es-tu es-tu* a piece for you a piece for me yes yessssssss
s s s s s s

Peng-Ean Khoo
Singapore, Republic of Singapore

Assignment Number 129

Write a sixteen-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the last line, the second line rhymes with the second-to-last line, and so forth (mirror rhyme) *and* the syllable count for each line is as follows: 2 – 2 – 2 – 2 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 2 – 2 – 3 – 2 – 1 – 2 – 2 – 2 - 2. As you can see, the syllable-counts also create a “mirroring” pattern.

Elegy for a Dead Rat

It lies
against
the curb
so flat
it
could be
a mitten
that was
whole house
once fitting,
bodyknit,
a rat
superb

with sense,
heart, eyes.

Frances Downing Vaughan
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 142

Play with language! Read ten poems by Ogden Nash; then, with those poems fresh in your mind, write whatever comes, any form, any subject. The goal is to be whimsical and to twist the language in new directions.

Gynotikolobomassophilia: a desire to nibble female earlobes

Gynotikolobomassophilia
is safer than sex, but sillia.

Joe Haldeman
Gainesville, Florida

Assignment Number 150

Write a “found poem,” any length, using at least five pieces of material you saw *today*. You may hold this material together with words of your own.

Found Poetry from Subway Signs

the destination of this train is.....

summer shack
casual fish house
still the best deal in town
open late
fish is brain food
learn swahili guaranteed
and
you know what they say
about oysters
enrich your life
opportunities are everywhere but
watch your step
depression spoils everything
xontra xontra xontra
make it possible
all year round

emergency unit at the end
peanut butter and peace of mind
delivered to your house

Sheila Mullen Twyman
Scituate, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 162

Think of something from nature; now, describe it, or your feelings about it, in the form of a stele, a seven-syllable poem. Given that you will be so limited in terms of syllables, think about whether you can add to your poem by how you arrange the words on the page. (There will be more on this subject in the section on Concrete Poetry.)

Catch
 perfect
 fruit
Bite deeply.

Giovanna Spadaro
East Arlington, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 180

Your subject: the inventions of man. Write a concrete poem.

(untitled)

Margarita
so much sweeter, sipping lemoncello, slender fingers on the long stem
 crystal glass mirrors circles, under eyes of liquid
 she wonders why
 she is still seated
 on mahogany throne
 one more time
 just one more
 happy hour
 red lips
 kissed
 by sangria
 from Sorrento

Louisa Clerici
Scituate, Massachusett

Assignment Number 246

Write a poem, any form, any length, about invisible words.

Dry Spell

I'm stranded
by silence. My letters
come back
addressee unknown.
Yours are
blank spaces
where words should be—
words invisible as
breath, invisible as
that great pump
anchored deep
in the flesh, doing
its secret work,
revealing
nothing.

Holly Zeeb
Newton, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 253

“Mother.”

5 o'clock

she's been buried in her house for so long with all the dolls the pacifiers the tiny teacups she's tied to the highchair with invisible threads she's glued to its tray with dried-on pablum she eats alphabet soup chicken-and-stars she speaks in babble the windows they're darkening with grime she's so tired she sits down on the food-stained couch she's so tired she can't get up the couch's fabric opens the big soft sofa takes her in and its cloth closes swaddles her its fibers brush her face she takes everything out to the curb every toy every plastic trinket she drags the juice-stained sofa out the wide front door shimmies into her scarlet dress slips into her strappy pointy shoes runs teetering down the walk gets into the gleaming waiting car then in the bar she drinks miraculous liquid dances away every skinned knee every sticky handprint spins and spins gauzy ribbons plaster dust they fill the air she wobbles topples wakes up on the tear-stained couch the sound of the baby shrieking in his crib

Martha Miller
Newton, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 324

“I give you back to your self.” In writing this poem, make sure you use variations in the shape of feet and stress within lines; use rhyme, if possible. Note that “your self” is two words; how is that different from the single word, “yourself”?

(untitled)

You promise the rain,
the floods of Siberian springtime,
the sunbathed moon,
the light of every star.

Your arm stretches,
and look—
winter morning, pink-edged sky,
and trees’ naked elegance.

In how few hours, at
your fingertips, intricate
interlocked movements of
planets—amethysts, emeralds.

And now, you offer me
my whole, my
vast, my untouched, my
true-singing Self.

And I say, Sweet
One, how I have loved
the shape, loved the gestures
of your empty hands.

Nancy Stevens
Dorchester, Massachusetts

Assignment Number 338

Write a poem about the process of writing a poem—any form, any length.

How to Cook Me

Rinse quickly
otherwise sensitivities
are lost
Soak in the momentum

to write poems
Mix well with people
Pour in white wine
to flatter
Put in a generous pot
Stir occasionally
and cook
until tension
is broken
Serve warm
Garnish with
words of cheer
and freesias
if you like

Chisato Kohmura
Hokkaido, Japan

Assignment Number 368

Write a poem of twenty-six words, each word starting with a different letter of the alphabet—in order! (You may “cheat” by using a word, for “x,” that starts with the x-sound rather than the letter itself.) You may arrange the words in any number of lines.

Assignment Number 417

Using the following as your title or first line, write a poem in any form, up to one page in length: “*Do not give me things unbroken.*” Alternatively, you may use that as the subject of your poem without using the actual words.

Assignment Number 437

Write a nine-line poem on any subject. Put it away for one week. Return to it and reduce it to three lines. Put it away again for another week. When you return to it again, reduce it to a single line. Put them together to make a single poem.

After-Word

So, there it is. What you have probably discerned, by now, is that the poems are *there*, just waiting to be discovered, waiting to be unlocked . . . waiting for *you* to breathe life into them in your own particular way. We have offered 450 possible keys. The poems you unlock with them will be your own, different from the poems anyone else may unlock with the very same keys.

Don’t be afraid to experiment. Find more keys of your own. You might begin by “mixing and matching” the elements of the assignments found in this book. Take a subject from one place

and a form from another. Or, you might use the structure of assignments found here to create entirely new assignments of your own. Put together a random list of words and see what you can make of them. Challenge yourself to write a poem within a limited amount of time on the incongruity of something you find that seems out of place.

Think about where the assignments in this volume might have come from. Do some of them have a dream-like quality? Maybe you can create an assignment for yourself from one of your own dreams. Are there assignments that call upon knowledge garnered from the news, from research, from what someone else has already written? Pick a headline in today's newspaper, a paragraph in the book you just finished reading, an article in the encyclopedia, and look there: isn't there a poem waiting?

Set yourself free. There are poems waiting in tomorrow's newspaper, too, or in what you overhear in the check-out line at the supermarket, or . . . well, you get the idea. Don't be afraid. Above all else, don't be afraid. If you give yourself room, you'll find ideas calling to you from a painting you visit in a museum, or in the arc of a baseball over the left-field wall. The point is, be open to all those ideas, all those sources of ideas. Don't be afraid to play—with words, with poetic forms, with the pliancy and music of language itself.

For those of you who wish to add other resources, Ricky's web site offers more assignments and the opportunity to have your work critiqued; please visit at www.ottonemriccio.com regularly. You're also welcome to visit us at www.unlockingthepoem.com with thoughts, comments, questions, whatever—we'd be happy to talk to you.

And please: Play. Have fun. And: write!