



Poetry Rocks!

Take your dreams seriously...play with them. ®

Tool 6

The Observation

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
CONTENT
Subject Matter

PURPOSE

To further explore and develop promising Subject Matter for the content of your poems and/or prose by transforming an observed moment into a poem.

BACKGROUND

Wordsworth's famous poem "[I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](#)" (sometimes called "Daffodils") is a great example of The Observation. In fact, I believe Wordsworth would heartily endorse this particular tool, believing as he did that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility."

You could argue that the vast expanse of daffodils that so inspired Wordsworth would be hard to overlook, but we humans can get so caught up in our own preoccupations that we can overlook almost anything, no matter how poem- or prose-worthy it may be. It's critical for those of us who are poets and writers to lavish attention on often overlooked details, and even entire encounters. For, as writer Natalie Goldberg says in *Writing Down the Bones*, "We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded. This is how writers must think, this is how we must sit down with pen in

hand. We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived. Let it be known, the earth passed before us. Our details are important. Otherwise, they are not, we can drop a bomb and it doesn't matter.”

As suggested in Tool 5, it's helpful to keep a small notebook, or some index cards—or your cell phone—handy to gather interesting snatches of conversation, images, and encounters. Because we not only have to notice moments worth recording, we have to remember them, too, and that's another thing altogether!

WHAT TO DO

Take a small observed moment and turn it into a poem.

1. To quote poet Miller Williams, “First, notice everything.” Yes, “noticing everything” is really what to do first, and thoroughly, all day long. For while The Observation involves turning a small observed moment into a poem, if you're not paying attention, you're likely to think that nothing worth observing is happening, which couldn't be further from the truth.

If you're truly noticing everything—and if you add a bit of imagination—any moment of observation can be turned into a poem. Now, on to writing!

2. Transform your moment into a poem by writing it out as it happened, inserting line and stanza breaks in interesting places. You'll have an opportunity in upcoming tools to learn more about deliberately crafting line and stanza breaks; for now, allow yourself to play with them.
3. See if you can include words that provide a sense of place and a sense of time. Also include details that engage the senses. In the next two tools, we'll be focusing on these three ingredients I learned the importance of from Pulitzer prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin, who referred to them as *Geography*, *Chronology*, and *Furniture*.

EXAMPLE

I went on a late afternoon walk with my ears and eyes open, and encountered this tableau, which I rendered with a bit of imagination, metaphor, and wordplay. Note the words that communicate geography, chronology, and furniture. I deliberately wove various “horsey” words throughout the poem. How many can you find?

Under a Sky of Mares' Tails

As I walk by, a woman
is raking autumn leaves into piles
with a grim vengeance—
so much to do by sunset.

Mom? A girl calls
from inside the house, *Mom!*

Her mother's answer
is to rake
even harder, and
which mother among us
could not forgive
the tightness in her lips?

MO-OM!

Here it comes, the snapped whip
of the mother's *What?*

Is it n-e-i-g-h?

The rake pauses
as she puzzles. Nigh?
Like the evening drawing close?
Nay.

For the horse!
You can hear the cantering
in the girl's voice.

The woman smiles
in spite of herself.
Yes, she calls, n-e-i-g-h.

Her raking resumes,
gentler now she is gathering
hues of chestnut, roan, bay.

REFLECTION

What benefits do you see in focusing your attention and awareness on what you see, hear, and experience throughout your day? How might this attention and awareness affect your writing?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

One of the great gifts of being a writer of poetry is the way it inspires us to slow down and live in the moment. A simple, yet profound way to hone your power of observation is to, for at least a week, listen each day for at least one moment worth capturing, and then put that moment into writing. This is an exercise in finding subject matter, too.

As we train ourselves to observe our lives for moments worthy of a poem, we see that they give us wonderful material for writing projects all the time—if we are paying attention. The exercise, of course, is also one in mindfulness.

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