

Poetry inspirations

(based on the books by Sandy Brownjohn)

1. I should like to...

The idea here is to think of things you would like to do but which are impossible. This might be things you would like to paint or see or touch but couldn't in real life (such as the buzz of a dragonfly, the heat of a candle, the laugh of a hyena, the coldness of an iceberg, the happiness of a bird, the blooming of a flower.

You might make the whole poem a list of things you'd like to paint, see, hear, or touch, as in this example:

I should like to paint the snowflakes' hearts which are beating away to the second,
The disobedience of a flag that won't flutter in the breeze,
The heat of a candle in the middle of the night,
The happiness of a merry-go round which has started spinning,
The coldness in an iceberg's fast running blood,
The hyena's hysterical laugh when it howls at midnight.

Or, you could mix various things together:

I should like to paint...
to touch....,
to hear....,
to see....
to visit....,
to keep....
to understand....

2. Six ways of looking...

Choose a subject and think of six different ways of describing it. e.g. if you chose wind you might describe the wind in the field, in the mountain, in the trees, over the sea, around a flag, coming through a crack...try to describe each in one or two sentences. The purpose is to have to look really hard at your chosen subject and think about how you might describe it from several angles. Possible ideas are: a type of animal; the moon, trees, light...

3. From every angle.

Look around you and choose something you can see which you find interesting – it can be anything so long as you can see it. Now write down a list of as many things as possible this object makes you think of it. Obviously you need to describe the object, what it looks like, but don't limit yourself to adjectives. Think about where it came from, where it's going, who made it, what its for, what it might be used for, ask questions about it...try to use the object to lead you to some reflections, for example about time, space, meaning, activity, purpose, light, weight, shape....

4. Staring.

This is similar to the idea above, except in this case you are looking at something 'blank' such as a wall, a fence, a railing, a brick, a fire, a cloud, a glass, a marble...stare at the object for several minutes and let your thoughts run...write down whatever images appear.

5. Gifts

Imagine you have been asked to come up with some special, perhaps even magical, gifts for a new baby. This could be a real baby, a baby you know or a baby from history or literature or mythology (King Arthur, Achilles, Bilbo Baggins?). Addressing the child directly, create a list describing your gift (s). Try to make it lyrical, like a lullaby (alliteration and assonance can help here). You could vary the openings (I have brought you; see what I bring, here for you, etc.)

Here are some examples:

I have brought you a fox so you will have knowledge,
I have brought you a wolf so you will have courage,
I have brought you a hare so you will be swift...

I bring you a sea so that you can create
Fish and underwater mammals...

I've brought you a world so you may live in it.
You shall be eternal.

6. Last will and testament

You have been told you are going to die soon. Decide what you will leave behind and to whom. You can be yourself or an imaginary person or historical figure, you can be serious or humorous. Try to match the bequest to the person and how you relate to that person. Try to write several lines.

Some parts example poems:

To my brother I leave my energy
Which I can no longer keep
To my sister my imagination,
Which is of no more use to me....

To my son I leave a choir of nightingales,
But to the enemy I am fighting
I leave the darkness of a hundred generations
And the Devil's curse....

7. Places and details

Write the headings 'Town', 'Country' 'Seashore' on a piece of paper. Write under each heading a list of as many things you can think of associated with that heading. Now, write a poem using the words from the list, but write only one or two lines describing each of your chosen items. In this way, the final poem will provide a detailed description of a particular place, town, country or seaside. When you've completed one, have a go at another.

e.g.

The Beach

The beach is almost empty.
The low-water seaweed strangling the little fish,
The sand heavy with water from the rainfall.
The ice cream van with yellow stripes,
Empty deck chairs sunk in the ground....

The country

Tall trees guarding fields like soldiers on their watch towers.

Grass stalks stand in suspense,
A pigeon on a garden fence
Gently cooing as if reciting poetry.
A goat gnawing away
Through the remains of the past.
A robin hovering.

If you enjoy this exercise, try the same thing with other, more specific headings (the train station, the street, the farm, the market, the river, the village..)

8. Outside, inside

Write the words 'shell', 'picture' and 'jack in the box' on a piece of paper. Choose one of these (whichever you find it easiest to picture in your mind). When you've chosen, write the words 'Outside the..(whatever you've chosen). You have 5-10 minutes to describe what your chosen object looks like on the outside. Next, write the words 'Inside the...and take another 5-10 minutes to imagine what the object is like on the inside (you could imagine you become very small and see inside, and/or you could imagine the object being real/alive, seeing from the inside.

Next, write the words 'My dreams...and imagine what the thoughts of the object might be (memories, hopes, annoyances...)

Then write the words 'If I give you my and describe how you would feel if you had to give the object away (what might you want the recipient of your gift to know about it, or do with it, or not do with it? What might happen if they did/did not follow your instructions?)

Finally, write about how you feel now that you've given the object away. Write the words 'Without my...and describe the feelings, consequences, fears, hopes.

You will have produced a fairly long piece which can be left as it is or edited to take out the best bits until it says what you want it to say.

9. Up on the downs

This exercise is based on a poem called 'Up on the Downs' which begins like this:

Up on the downs
Up on the downs,
A skylark flutters
And the fox barks shrill,
Brown rabbit scutters
And the hawk hangs still,
Up on the downs,
Up on the downs,
With butterflies
jigging
like
costumed clowns.

The idea is to copy the structure of the poem but substitute your own ideas. So, for the phrase repeated in lines 1,2,7 and 8, you might use 'Deep in a cave', or 'Down by the stream' or 'Out in space' – anything you like to set the scene of the poem. If you like, set out 12 lines and fill in this phrase first in the appropriate spaces. Then follow the rest of the structure to fill in the other lines (rhyming 3 and 5, 4 and 6, and the last line – a simile- with the repeated opening. Try to use alliteration and assonance too.

Here are some examples:

Deep in a cave,
Deep in a cave,
A stalactite drips,
And a stalagmite holds,
A rocky wall slips,
And the air is cold,
Deep in a cave,
Deep in a cave,
While the bat
wings silent
like
a black bow tie.

Down by the stream,
Down by the stream,
Where the grass snake slithers
And the flowers shine,
A long branch withers
To a bony vine,
Down by the stream
Down by the stream,
And the sun still shines
like
thick white cream

10. Elements

Take a sheet of paper and write four headings: earth, fire, air, water. Under each, list all the words you can think of suitable for that heading e.g earth: mud, sand, stone, dust; fire: lava, sun, candle, stars; air: wind, breeze, cloud, breath; water: ice, puddle, rainbow.

Now, try to think of an experience you have had (or imagine one) involving one of these elements (being caught in a storm, swimming in a lake, sitting by the fire at Christmas...).

Use the words in the list as a springboard to help you write a poem about the experience. You could try describing a few of your chosen items first, then incorporating these into your poem.

An example:

The candle

Shades of golden thread circle the flame.
It quivers with fright
Each time a draught enters the room.
Slowly the candle shrinks down
Into a bubbling ocean of wax.
It flickers while it fights
To keep its flame burning,
It chokes and splutters
As it meets defeat.
As soon as it is dead
The spirit rises
In a thin stream of smoke.