

### **All is Write with the World: Where Nature Meets Human Nature**

A Writing Playshop led by Poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

For centuries, poets worldwide have written about the natural world's wonders. Thich Nhat Hanh celebrated how "water flows from high in the mountains." Gary Snyder exulted being alive "on a mid-September morn/fording a stream/barefoot." The Eskimos reveled in "the arch of sky and mightiness of storms."

And what about you? You know what it's like to stand beneath a night sky so clear that you want to sing to the stars. You have been humbled by mudslide or flood.

Why not write about it? When we enter the natural world with a pen in our hand, we automatically heighten our senses. It helps us to hunger for detail and thereby better pay attention. Instead of passing the wild rose bush growing abruptly out of a rock, we note it and perhaps find a metaphorical echo in our own lives. A pen can be like a magic meaning making wand: Instead of merely observing the landscape, we interact with it and begin to find resonance.

Oh, but you're not a poet? No excuse. Anyone can write. You've written grocery lists? Some of the best poems are list poems. To write a poem is simply taking the time to engage with the world, be alive to the moment, gather images and then explore what the images have to say about your life.

Basically, poetry is a chance to marry who you are with what you see—whether you see worn sandstone, tufts of thistles, broken glass or migrating cranes. There, in ink, you can connect with all that surrounds you. And the good news is, you can't do it wrong.

There are some ways, however, to do poetry "right." Here are some things we'll explore:

- Start small. Instead of writing about summer in general, try writing about walking outside after a rainstorm or the feeling of plunging your hands into garden soil.
- Use concrete images. Avoid abstract words such as "beauty" and "hope." Focus on details, and use color wherever you can.
- Pay attention to the sounds of words. A sound is the most basic unit of the poem, even more important sometimes than meaning. Compare the rich resonance of May Swenson's phrase, "your pronged gaze makes my eyes gauze" to the stilted sound of "your intent look makes me starry-eyed."
- Read poems. If you like them, think about why. What words appealed to you? Was there a form? Did the poet use repetition? If you didn't like the poem, why not?
- Copy writers you admire. I don't mean plagiarize, I mean echo. If you like "The Road Less Traveled" by Robert Frost, try to emulate it. Good luck.
- Try not to edit as you go. Just get everything down. Read it out loud. But do go back and determine what works for you and what doesn't. Once you're sure you're done, delete 25 percent of your words.

With these things in mind, here are a few exercises for writing nature poems—samples of the kinds of play we might engage in over the weekend. Feel free to break whatever rules I set down here: that’s what poetry is about. I recommend going outside to gather images first, then coming inside to do the actual writing (it’s easier to write on a table than your lap).

### Let the Outside Talk to the Inside

This exercise is based on one of my favorite poems: “Eyesight” by A.R. Ammons.

In Ammons’ poem, he goes to the mountain with a problem. “I missed it!” he exclaims. “Spring came and went before I got right to see.” The mountain offers him advice based on the ways the natural world works: “Try the later northern slopes, or if you can climb, climb into spring.” Then there’s a moral: “But it’s not that way with all things, some that go are gone.”

- Think of something that you have been “working on” in your own life—perhaps a change of career, a difficult relationship, grieving over the death of a loved one ...
- At the top of a page, write down a word or phrase that will help you remember the issue you are working to understand.
- Walk out into the natural world. Spend some time gathering “information” with your five senses. Settle on something—perhaps a tree or a blade of grass or a dandelion or a cloud.
- Tell it, either out loud or in your mind, about your problem. Ask it for help. What advice does it have to offer you? You likely will not really hear voices, you are accessing its wisdom in your own words.
- Write a poem about this interaction. You may choose to write it as a conversation, or perhaps as an observation from your own point of view, or perhaps write the poem in the voice of the grass/cloud/flower.

Here are two more exercises to try:

### Loved one in the Landscape

- Think of a relative who’s been on your mind lately. Put his or her initials in the top right corner of your page. Now forget him or her for a while.
- Collect images of what is happening in the outside world right now. Consider plants, weather, animals, and geography. Be as specific as possible. Write “robins bobbing for worms on the wet sidewalk” instead of “birds eating.” Come up with twenty images.
- Think again of the person whose initials you wrote. You’re going to write a poem that incorporates the images you collected with the personality of the person you selected. On a separate sheet, write a line about what’s happening outdoors. Write the next line about the person. The two lines don’t need to be obviously connected. For instance:

*The swollen San Miguel River breaks its banks  
My lover brushes my hair before bed.*

These two lines are your first stanza.

- Continue this two-line pattern until your poem feels finished.

### When I Stand Very Still

I based this exercise on a title in *Letters From a Stranger* by Jim Tipton.

## Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

*Word Woman*

- Take your pen and paper outside. Go somewhere you feel comfortable sitting for a long time.
- Before you take out your writing utensils, just sit. Take in the world with all your senses. What do you hear? Smell? See? Touch? Taste is tricky, unless you're into eating tree bark. But a well-paced taste can really improve a poem. When you describe the pine tree bark as "chocolate," the image is more sensual than plain "brown" bark.
- Once you've "tuned in," take out your pen and pad and write these words: "When I sit very still." Following these words, write four lines total about what you hear.
- Continue this four-line pattern four times, each time focusing on a different sense.

In the workshop, we will be sharing our poems with each other. If you are writing these poems on your own, you may want to find someone else to write with you and then share with once you've both written. Part of the pleasure of writing poetry is the wedding of solitary time (reflection and writing) and community (sharing). It's amazing how often we see ourselves reflected in the words of others.

If you do try these exercises, I'd love to see what you have written. Please email me your work at [rosemerry@wordwoman.com](mailto:rosemerry@wordwoman.com).

*Poet and presenter Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer is the author of If You Listen, a three-time award winning book of poetry, editor of Charity: True Stories of Giving and Receiving, and leads TAG: You're It seminars on creativity, positive attitude and finding purpose. Visit her at [www.wordwoman.com](http://www.wordwoman.com).*