

A SNAPSHOT IN TIME

One of the things that is hardest for students is to describe people or experiences, because they want to describe too much. This exercise teaches how a great deal can be both learned about a person by isolating a single set of moments, and letting them stand for something larger.

Begin by asking the students to imagine some people they know: father, mother, sister, brother, uncle, friend. Then ask them to pick three of these people, and ask them to imagine them involved in doing something very particular. Stress that it should be something normal, something they've observed many times before. For example:

Mother, Ironing a Dress
Mother, Brushing My Sister's Hair
Mother, Putting Away the Silverware
Mother, Frying Bacon

Father, Changing Spark Plugs
Father, Sharpening His Pocket Knife
Father, Tying His Tie

Betsy, Saddling Her Horse
John, Making a Jump Shot in the Driveway

You get the idea. Something specific.

Ask them to choose one of these instances, and write it down as a title. Then, ask them to spend five minutes imagining this scene as vividly as possible, and write down a list of nouns and verbs and adjectives that might have something to do with it. Have them write very fast, without worrying whether or not they repeat themselves. For example:

MOTHER, FRYING BACON

skillet cast iron fat fork knife cupboard housecoat flannel hot grease spit spatters hands hot wrist flicks
father table curlers wet cigarette smoke ash rain cold fireplace morning dishes plates fork dry porcelain
eggs over-easy yolk toast kids asleep still in bed place swirls refrigerator shells flinch jerks jumps curses
mutters loose belt counter crumbs black hum refrigerator white confused place spot location chair scrape
coffee sugar milky lumps toast swirls random exact dust burned bread still cat loves likes hates
indifferent alarm early slides in front across contract deal marriage over divorce announce undone
scalded pot sweet stink of burned milk cocoa rain roof leaky pots floor drip dark winter hiding cat work
boots wool socks cracked hands ring hidden fat

Next, have them go through and circle 14 words [or fewer, if you want a shorter poem], more or less randomly. Tell them they can circle them for the sound, or the shape, or for any reason at all, really.

Next, have them write each of the 14 words at the far right of a clean sheet of paper, like this:

cast
grease
flinch

loose
place
swirls
coffees
still
dishes
dry
likes
morning
across
marriage

Next, tell them to compose a poem describing the activity of the title, leaving each word in place as they do so. They have to write in complete sentences. Here are three examples, which you can pass out:

MOTHER, FRYING BACON

She is stirring curls of fat with a fork in a cast
iron skillet heavy as her mood. Black grease
spatters her wrist. She doesn't flinch.
The curlers in her hair are loose.
She won't look at my father, waiting in his place
at the table. Smoke from her Camel swirls
across the pan. Ash falls among the cracklings. Coffee
cools on the counter beside her. Her children are still
in bed. Already she is dreading the dishes
they will dirty. Already she is feeling dry
as the meat she parcels onto a plate. My father likes
the yolk in his eggs unbroken. This morning
she will serve them scrambled across
the dry toast of their marriage. —Sam Green

Sam Green

GRANDMA FRYING FISH

Her hands are as smooth as the oil
She pours in the bottom of the pan. The kitchen
Is sprinkled with simple spices and Japanese tea, warm
As any room she enters. In the cupboard
there are packages of dried seaweed, a small
Memory of the times when meals were humble
And her family's small house was filled
With smells of saltwater breeze and steaming rice.
This is the fish her mother used to cook
In Hilo, when the family shop was closed
And her husband came home from the cane fields,
Tired and thin from the heat of the day.
This meal of fish and rice preserves
The stories of a family who is growing older. —Emily Cohen

MOM WALKING THE DOG

She stumbles down the hall, wearing her big black coat.
She lectures the dog eating
dead birds. She marches through the rain
in her big brown boots, hoping
they don't get dirty.
She stomps through the mud, bushes, and puddles,
while tugging aggressively at the leash,
denying the dog a chance to run wildly at a deer.
She guides the dog to an open field. No trees
around, so he can run freely. She walks
him whether it is rainy, snowy, windy, hot or cold. — Daniel Mcherney, Island View