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Writing Poems About Objects

The stuff around us, whether it's your junk or someone else's is often a good subject matter for writing.

Choose an object in your surroundings—something from the kitchen or the tool shed. A family keepsake is often filled with delicious memories. This item could be anything at all, but your grandmother's clip-on earrings or your father's plumb bob will have more energy than a spatula, unless that spatula is the one from which you used to lick frosting as a kid. This object might be one somewhat familiar with readers

1. Select your object; examine it. Then record all the qualities of the "thing." How does it feel in your hand; how does it smell? Taste? Does it have a sound? Use comparisons. Does it sound like something else?
2. Describe the object's environment. That spatula: does it "live" in a drawer or in a container on the countertop?
3. Make a list of verbs associated with the object. For example, does it "sway gently" or "stand forlorn?" Does the object act upon something else or is acted upon or used in some manner? Be sure to be original.
4. Look for connections between the object and you on a non-literal level. Question what you can learn from the object. Ask yourself if the object reminds you of an interaction between people, a universal desire or spiritual truth.
5. Introduce your object at the start of the poem. Forge your first stanza with a detailed description of the object to initiate the reader.
6. Develop the body of your object poem. Include the object's environment and actions performed by or upon the object in the second stanza. Describe a single, literal attribute or action of the object in the third stanza.
7. The last words: use a metaphor or simile in the final stanza to relate yourself or humanity in general to the object's attributes or actions from the third stanza.

Some possible ideas: my grandmother's garden hoe. She was a tireless gardener, so to own it now is special. When I use it, my hands take the spaces where her hands rested. The tin box kept in my parents' dresser drawer, one I wasn't allowed to look into. A rolling pin, given to me as a wedding gift; it came with warnings. My mother's crystal jewelry. Sharp and sparkly. Her neck was slender and mine isn't. My father-

in-laws' fly rod—my husband has it. What did it catch (in addition to fish), what does holding it now mean to my husband?

Start making choices. Do you want the object to speak in its own voice? Or are you writing about the object? You choose to write about it in present tense as if in the here and now. "The spatula is" But writing in the past tense is the more usual way of "telling." "The Spatula was"

Begin writing the first draft, allow the object to direct and focus of your words. Notice in each of the model poems how the object remains at the center of the poem, but the poet allows for surprise. Connie Wanek's poem "Girdles" is an example of surprise and the double meaning of what a girdle holds in and maybe—protects.

Three by Connie Wanek

Girdle

In our teens we all bought girdles
with rubber knobs to hold up our stockings.
We wiggled into them, our "foundations."

So many things look absurd from a distance
that people still take seriously,
like whether there's a heaven for pets.

What ever happened to my girdle?
One day I peeled it off for the last time
and all hell broke loose.

Wild Asters

for Laurie Hertzell

When the nights cool
then bloom the asters at the wild edge
of the graveyard.

More white than blue
this fall, half flower, half feather,
a study in modesty.

We haven't time for them,
not that they mind. We aren't the mower
nor the browsing deer.

They haven't time for us.
Quickly now, to seed before

the wind dies!

Jump Rope

There is menace
in its relentless course, round and round,
describing an ellipsoid,
an airy prison in which a young girl
is incarcerated.

Whom will she marry? Whom will she love?
The rope, like a snake,
has the gift of divination,
yet reveals only a hint, a single initial.
But what if she never misses?

Is competence its only reward?
Will the rope never strike her ankle,
love's bite? The ends turn and turn,
two-handed as their arms tire,
their enchantments exhausted.

It hurts to watch her now,
flushed and scowling,
her braids lashing her shoulders
with each small success.

Three by Ted Kooser

Box Turtle

On a mission this day, she lifts her feet
a little higher than she needs to, as if she is
stepping through somebody's flower bed
and knows she has to crush a few petunias,
her head far out ahead of the damage
as if to disavow it, a head like the tongue
of a wagon, the future pulling her forward
jerkily over the uneven yard. Following,
under her shell, is her burden of eggs
pearly as tapioca, and all four legs
for digging, lifting their wrinkly knees.

An Empty Shotgun Shell

It's a handsome thing
in its uniform –
all crimson and brass –
standing guard
at the gate to the field,
but something
is wrong at its heart.
It's dark in there,
so dark a whole night
could squeeze in,
could shrink back up in there
like a spider,
a black one
with smoke in its hair.

Porch Swing in September

The porch swing hangs fixed in a morning sun
that bleaches its gray slats, its flowered cushion
whose flowers have faded, like those of summer,
and a small brown spider has hung out her web
on a line between porch post and chain
so that no one may swing without breaking it.
She is saying it's time that the swinging were done with,
time that the creaking and pinging and popping
that sang through the ceiling were past,
time now for the soft vibrations of moths,
the wasp tapping each board for an entrance,
the cool dewdrops to brush from her work
every morning, one world at a time.

Two by Barbara Crooker

Sparklers

We're writing our names with sizzles of light
to celebrate the fourth. I use the loops of cursive,
make a big *B* like the sloping hills on the west side
of the lake. The rest, little *a*, *r*, one small *b*,
spit and fizz as they scratch the night. On the side

of the shack where we bought them, a handmade sign:
Trailer Full of Sparkles Ahead, and I imagine crazy
chrysanthemums, wheels of fire, glitter bouncing
off metal walls. Here, we keep tracing in tiny
pyrotechnics the letters we were given at birth,
branding them on the air. And though my mother's
name has been erased now, I write it, too:
a big swooping *l*, a hissing *s*, an *a* that sighs
like her last breath, and then I ring
belle, belle, belle in the sulphuric smoky dark.

Oriental Poppies

Lit matches struck in the dark, road-flares
burning, these poppies smolder by the bird bath
where we brought my mother's ashes
when her life wicked out. Each flower
is splotched with black, night at the heart
of burning day. Light shines through the petals,
translucent as skin. At the end, her bones shone through,
the skeleton wanting to dance. The poppies' orange tango,
a wild fandango with the wind. Nothing in English rhymes
with this color, not porridge, not ordinary, not original.
We only have one mother. Reach for a blossom,
twirl it in your fingers, a dancer on an unlit stage.
Every gardener knows about loss: thinning, pruning,
the appetite of rabbits, how frost waits in the wings,
sharpening his shears.

The Bagel

David Ignatow

I stopped to pick up the bagel^[SEP]
rolling away in the wind^[SEP]
annoyed with myself^[SEP]
for having dropped it^[SEP]
as if it were a portent^[SEP]
Faster and faster it rolled^[SEP]
with me running after it^[SEP]
bent low, gritting my teeth^[SEP]
and I found myself doubled over^[SEP]
and rolling down the street^[SEP]
head over heels, one complete somersault^[SEP]
after another like a bagel^[SEP]
and strangely happy with myself.

Blue Willow

Jody Gladding

A pond will deepen toward the center like a plate
we traced its shallow rim my mother steering
my inner tube past the rushes where I looked
for Moses we said it was a trip around the world
in China we wove through curtains of willow
that tickled our necks let's do that again
and we'd double back idle there lifting
our heads to the green rain
swallows met over us later I dreamed
of flying with them we had all the time
in the world we had the world
how could those trees be weeping?

Charles Simic

Fork

This strange thing must have crept
Right out of hell.
It resembles a bird's foot
Worn around the cannibal's neck.

As you hold it in your hand,
As you stab with it into a piece of meat,
It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird:
Its head which like your fist
Is large, bald, beakless and blind.

May Swenson

A Navajo Blanket

Eye-dazzlers the Indians weave. Three colors
are paths that pull you in, and pin you
to the maze. Brightness makes your eyes jump,
surveying the geometric field. Alight, and enter
any of the gates—of Blue, of Red, of Black.
Be calmed and hooded, a hawk brought down,
glad to fasten to the forearm of a Chief.

You can sleep at the center,
attended by Sun that never fades, by Moon
that cools. Then, slipping free of zigzag and
hypnotic diamond, find your way out
by the spirit trail, a faint Green thread that
secretly crosses the border, where your mind
is rinsed and returned to you like a white cup.

Moyra Donaldson

Snakeskin Stilettos

Eight years old, you understand
these shoes are different.
Not for nothing
has your mother wrapped them in paper,
shut them into their box, set them
at the very back of the wardrobe.
Forbidden.

You imagine them—
on their own in the dark,
hissing softly.
Biding their time.

Sneak in, creak open the door,
lift the lid and let them out,
untissue their fear.
Run your fingers
against the fissley scales,
press the fangs of the heels
into your palm.
Something
you've never felt before.
These shoes are live and dangerous.

Theodore Roethke

The Bat

By day the bat is cousin to the mouse.
He likes the attic of an aging house.

His fingers make a hat about his head.
His pulse beat is so slow we think he's dead.

He loops in crazy figures half the night
Among the trees that face the corner light.

But when he brushes up against a screen
We are afraid of what our eyes have seen:

For something is amiss or out of place
When mice with wings can wear a human face.

Richard Jones

White Towels

I have been studying the difference
between solitude and loneliness,
telling the story of my life
to the clean white towels taken warm from the dryer
I carry them through the house
as though they were my children
asleep in my arms.

Joan Mazza Ode

Ode to Sewing Baskets

In dusty attics or basements, wicker confections
wait to be rediscovered by new owners. They appear
at yard sales with flat squares of tailor's chalk,
darning eggs, and pin cushions that look like apples,

a strawberry dangling free, stuffed with sand
for sharpening needles lined up on a scrap of felt.
Or needles stuck in thick red wool from a double-
breasted coat someone tackled with help from a teacher.

Threads and floss in various colors, wound on notched
cards, buttons sorted by size in tins that once held mints.
Rusting pins on cardboard, along with hooks and eyes.
Pinking sheers and scissors, better than you can buy now.

Best of all these devices is the notion
of a seam ripper— original tool to un-sew
what you closed in tiny stitches and want
to undo, undo! A chance to do it over.

Tyehimba Jess

mistress stella speaks

you think i'm his property
'cause he paid cash
to grab me by the neck,
swing me 'cross his knee
and stroke the living song from my hips.
you think he is master of all
my twelve tongues, spreading notes
thick as starless night, strangling spine
till my voice is a jungle of chords.

the truth is that i owned him
since the word love first blessed his lips
since hurt and flight and free
carved their way into the cotton
fused bones of his fretting hand,
since he learned how pleading men hunt
for my face in the well of their throats
till their tongues are soaked with want.

yes, each day he comes back
home from the fields,
from chain gang fury,
from the smell of sometime women
who borrow his body. he bends
his weight around me
like a wilting weed
drinking in my kiss
of fretboard across fingertip
'til he can stand up straight again,
aching from what he left behind,
rising sure as dawn.

The Traveling Onion

Naomi Shihab Nye

"It is believed that the onion originally came from India. In Egypt it was an object of worship —why I haven't been able to find out. From Egypt the onion entered Greece and on to Italy, thence into all of Europe." — Better Living Cookbook

When I think how far the onion has traveled
just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise
all small forgotten miracles,
crackly paper peeling on the drainboard,
pearly layers in smooth agreement,
the way the knife enters onion
and onion falls apart on the chopping block,
a history revealed.
And I would never scold the onion
for causing tears.
It is right that tears fall
for something small and forgotten.
How at meal, we sit to eat,
commenting on texture of meat or herbal aroma
but never on the translucence of onion,
now limp, now divided,
or its traditionally honorable career:
For the sake of others,
disappear.

On the Sadness of Wedding Dresses

James Galvin

On starless, windless nights like this
I imagine
I can hear the wedding dresses
Weeping in their closets,
Luminescent with hopeless longing,
Like hollow angels.
They know they will never be worn again.
Who wants them now
After their one heroic day in the limelight?
Yet they glow with desire
In the darkness of closets.
A few lucky wedding dresses
Get worn by daughters—just one more,
Then back to the closet.
Most turn yellow over time,
Yellow from praying
For the moths to come

And carry them into the sky.
Where is your mother's wedding dress,
What closet?
Where is your grandmother's wedding dress?
What, gone?
Eventually they all disappear,
Who knows where.
I saw one wedding dress, hopeful at Goodwill.
But what sad story brought it there,
And what sad story will take it away?
Somewhere a closet is waiting for it.
The luckiest wedding dresses
Are those of wives
Betrayed by their husbands
A week after the wedding.
They are flung outside the double-wide,
Or the condo in Telluride,
And doused with gasoline.
They ride the candollescent flames,
Just smoke now,
Into a sky full of congratulations.