

'Tension' themed Poetry Workshop

Valentine's at Chez Peur

They'd just served dessert,
when Fear turned up,
greeting me like a long-lost mate:
that unexpected, uninvited, guest –
the gooseberry garnish on my raspberry fool.

He'd been drinking, of course.
Fear's jacket stank of cigarettes,
a new coffee stain cuff-linked his shirt.
He wouldn't look me in the eye,
like when he swore blind he smelt gas.

Why now? I asked. He didn't reply,
just smiled at me in that way
which twists me up inside,
like hair curled round his finger.
Then he leant across to whisper pearl

husks into my ear's waiting oyster.
*Babe, why do you always leave
the window ajar for burglars?*
So there I was, awake at 2am, alone,
shivering in the draught, worrying.

Sarah James

Published in The Mortal Man anthology in aid of The National Autistic Society (May 2013).

Poetry on Tension Exercise 1

Part 1

Choose a tension that you're happy to write about and explore. This might be a personal fear or fears, something you've been through with exam stress, relationship rows and anxieties or some other kind of conflict or situation where you have to navigate difficult binaries, or face up to sexism, racism and other prejudices. Alternatively, it could be based on tensions that you've observed either from close to or at a distance through eg the media or in politics. Or it could be an entirely fictional situation or scenario featuring one or more tensions.

I'd like to start by exploring this setting and scenario. At this stage, what you're jotting down doesn't need to be poetry – though if any lines come to you that's fine. But all it really needs to be for now is notes that can then be crafted into a poem.

So, first write down what you see in this situation/scenario?

Next, what you or your main character can hear?

Then, what you smell?

Can you taste anything?

What textures or movement can you feel around you?

Finally, how do you emotionally?

Poetry on Tension Exercise 1 Part 2

Now I'd like to invite you to spend 5-10 minutes going back through that list and for each of those sense-based observations finding a simile, metaphor or different scenario that it might be likened to.

If you've chosen a naturally fairly dramatic real situation that you want to treat seriously, you may want to keep these metaphors and analogies quite small, subtle or underplayed to avoid the risk of over-dramatising.

If you've chosen a more everyday tension like a row or exams or driving lesson, you might want to consider using very exaggerated comparisons to create humour or heightened drama.

Once you've done this, I'd like to invite you to start crafting a poem with a few lines at the start setting out the conflict situation or source of tension.

Then either focus on one sense or move through each in turn as you describe the tension(s). In doing this, you may use different examples to capture the situation exactly as it is with direct real observations or evoke it through what it's like, using your chosen metaphors and analogies. Or you might mix the two – as works best for the scenario you've chosen and the type of poem that you want to create.

[A very basic starting structure for this might be something like:

When Tim and I fell out
it was like watching...
the sound of...
the taste of ... in my mouth,
feeling....] *more actual poem examples at the end of this exercise

Once you've crafted your first draft, you might want to look back over it and consider places where you can add (or remove) pauses or line breaks to heighten the tension. This might be increasing the pace with long lines and enjambments encouraging the reader on to the next line. Or using more punctuation and line breaks to encourage the reader to pause, read slower or have to wait for what happens next...

If you're wanting your poem to be one for performance. Then also think about how you might use your voice, gestures, movement, longer pauses or even possibly audience interaction to increase the sense of tension.

If you're using rhyme – whether at line ends or elsewhere – can you use this create a pattern or expectation of rhyme that reinforces a sense of tension? Consider if controlled use of repetition or repetition with an accumulation of small changes might also help to build up tension.

* Some example poems

Of fences

'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood'
Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

'Our wills and fates do so contrary run'
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Yes, two hands on the steering wheel
allow for manual precision,
or so the guides inform us.

Two sides allow a balanced debate,
or a complicated story.

Two attempts, a hope
of passing our failures.
Two failures, another proof
of past wrongs.

Two possibilities allow a choice, of dilemma.
In two minds allows that we are indeed human.

Two kidneys – a spare for selfless donation,
or half the work filtering mundane exchanges.

Two bulldozers won't mend fences.
Bulldog boundaries are not for sitting on.

Two hands cupped,
an arc for drinking;

Two animals, arked,
did not allow for
the Woolly Mammoth,
Dodo, Steller's Sea Cow,
Falkland Islands Wolf,
Caribbean Monk Seal...

Two elements,
say hydrogen and oxygen,
might allow
a molecular reaction.
Sometimes,
that makes water,

this vessel overflowing, maybe.

In two minds allows that we are human in deed.
Two hands joined, a more-than-flesh linking.

Two things which life does not allow:
words that can be throated back,
and bullets which re-enter a gun.

When Malala Yousafzai stepped
from the metal shell-shock

of her school bus, she raised
her book in both hands,
then softly spoke louder.

Sarah James
From plenty-fish (Nine Arches Press, 2015).

The Colours of Insomnia:

light-cracked red of faulty eyelids,
broken white of eyes pricked by glass,
shadow blue of veined skin sails,
grass-green greener still the other side
of stalled yawning's jumping-sheep fence,
yolk yellow of raw egg bursting to drip,
drip pukish pink of the mind turned upside-
down and inside-out,
black black of the lack of black whole,
which haunts in colour my inability to sleep.

Sarah James
Published in Under the Radar issue 10 (Nov 2012) and nous magazine (May 2013).

Also:

'Lament of the Night Cough' by Hilary Hares on *Magma*:
<https://magmapoetry.com/archive/magma-68/poems/lament-of-the-night-cough/>

Poetry on Tension Exercise 2

“If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,”

From ‘If We Must Die’ by Claude McKay (1889-1948, key figure in the Harlem Renaissance)
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44694/if-we-must-die>

“I fear the books will not survive the acid rain.
I fear the ruler and the blackboard and the cane.”

from Selected Poems by Ciaran Carson (1948), published by Wake Forest University Press. Copyright © 2001 by Ciaran Carson. Reprinted on <https://m.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/fear> with permission by Wake Forest University Press.

“...Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question...”

from ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ by T. S. Eliot
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>

“America why are your libraries full of tears?
America when will you send your eggs to India?”

From ‘America’ by Allen Ginsberg (1956) from *Collected Poems, 1947-1980*. Copyright © 1984 by Allen Ginsberg. Used on <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49305/america-56d22b41f119f> with the permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

“...I want to make love but my hair
smells of war and running and running.”

from ‘War Poem’ extract by Warsan Shire for *The Pity*
<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/project/the-poetry-of-conflict>

“I spent my childhood days trying too hard
to stitch trying too hard into my DNA”

from ‘Trying Too Hard’ by Charley Barnes in *A Z-Hearted Guide to Heartache* (V. Press, 2018)
<http://vpresspoetry.blogspot.com/2019/02/the-v-press-valentines-selection-box.html>

“...My toes twitched when I saw so few brown faces
but really when one eats racism every time one goes out one’s door
the appeal of talking about it is minuscule...”

from ‘Into the Racism Workshop’ by Chrystos from *Fugitive Colors*. Copyright © 1995 by Chrystos.
Reprinted on <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/146923/into-the-racism-workshop> by
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“I am the history of rape
I am the history of the rejection of who I am
I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of myself “

From ‘Poem about My Rights’ by June Jordan, from *Directed By Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*
(Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005). Copyright © 2005 by The June M. Jordan Literary
Trust. Used on <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48762/poem-about-my-rights>
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“The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill”

from ‘Caged Bird’ by Maya Angelou from *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou.
Used on <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird> by permission of Random House,
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Which of these quotes particularly resonates with you and why? Can you use it as
inspiration or the starting point for your own poem about conflict or tension?

You might choose to use a quote as a way in to exploring the same situation you used for
exercise 1. Or it might inspire you in an entirely different way, maybe even leading to a
poem of peace, love or resolution in contrast to the conflict and tension. It’s entirely up
to you... (But please remember copyright and proper attribution if you include any parts
of the quoted extracts within your actual poem.)

Poetry on Tension Exercise 3

I'm a keen photographer as well as a writer; I like both to combine photos and words together but also use the camera lens as a poetry focussing tool. I want to invite you to use your mobile phone camera to take a picture that features two extremes, two contrasts or a striking juxtaposition. This might be light and shadow, curves and straight lines, starkly contrasting colours, something solid and something flowing, something clear and something blurred or another contrast that catches your eye.

Once you've taken your picture, consider how you might 'translate' this into a poem. This could be a long or short poem – if you already feel inspired to write, follow where the words and inspiration take you.

If you'd like more structure, think about the possibilities of turning this into a haiku or haiku-influenced poem.

The haiku is a Japanese form that's often simplified in English to a poem with three lines of 5 syllables, 7 syllables and then 5 syllables again. But as Japanese is a very different language to English this exact syllable count isn't actually imperative. The core essence of a haiku is often considered something like: 3 lines, of a very compressed/spare style, direct observation of two juxtaposed images or ideas, an epiphany flowing from this juxtaposition and including an element of nature.

In this exercise then, the two contrasts or extremes might have a cutting word/turning point on which the 'epiphany' hangs in the second line, with the two contrasts either being given the same or an unequal weight on either side of this.

Alternatively, the first line might be used for one contrast/extreme, and the second line for the second contrast/extreme. The conclusion or epiphany flowing from these is then either the third line or the end of the second line and the third line – depending on whether you wish to give the two contrasts/extremes an identical weight (number of syllables) or allow a heavier weight to the second contrast/extreme by giving it the whole of the usually longer second line of the poem.

(I run an online journal *LitWorld2* combining other people's short poems with my photographs for use in the journal and sharing on social media. If anyone finds this exercise fruitful and wants to send me their poem, or their poem and their photo, for use on LitWorld2, you can find the journal here: http://www.sarah-james.co.uk/?page_id=9835 and the submission guidelines here: http://www.sarah-james.co.uk/?page_id=9967.)