Giving Voice: Workshop for Teaching Poetry

I. Pedagogy:
Billy Collins’ “Introduction to Poetry”

a. A poem can fall anywhere on the continuum of a plot arc.
   i. Kooser’s “Applesauce”

b. Have students read lots of (good) poems and read lots of good poems to them!
c. Donald Justice: You should be able to film a poem.

II. What’s Being Communicated?
(Miller Williams: A poem starts as the poet’s and ends as the reader’s.”)

a. Howard Nemerov’s “The Common Wisdom”

III. “Should My Poem Rhyme?”

a. Patterns of Poetry by Miller Williams (textbook of forms)
   i. Sestina
   ii. Sonnet
   iii. Villanelle

IV. Writing about Feelings and Emotions

a. Warning: Avoiding sentimentality and over generalization
   i. Edgar Guest’s poem “Mother” - [What not to do!]
   ii. Jane Kenyon’s “In The Nursing Home”
   iii. Miller Williams’ “Poem for Emily”

V. Teaching Students Word Choice and Effects

a. Exercise: Choosing the best word
   i. Lorine Niedecker’s “Popcorn-Can Cover”
   ii. Robert Francis’ “Sheep”

VI. Metaphors and Similes (Making Comparisons)

a. Metaphors are stronger than similes
   i. Kooser’s “Student”
   ii. “Death in the Family”

b. Simile examples
   i. Robert Bly’s translation
   ii. “The Illiterate” William Meredith

VII. Writing with Details (Have teachers use this for their writing assignment: picture details)

a. Kooser’s “Tattoo”
b. Kooser’s “Old Cemetery”

*Writing With Details exercise: “Mourning Picture” Edwin Romanzo Elmer

*Adrienne Rich poem
Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with a rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

--Billy Collins
Applesauce

I like how the starry blue lid
of that sauce pan lifted and puffed,
then settled back on a thin
hotpad of steam, and the way
Her kitchen filled with the warm,
wet breath of apples, as if all
the apples were talking at once,
as if they’d come cold and sour
from chores in the orchard,
and were trying to shoulder in,
close to the fire. She was too busy
to put in her two cents’ worth
talking to apples. Squeezing
her dentures with wrinkly lips,
she had to jingle and stack
the bright brass coins of the lids
and thoughtfully count out
the red rubber rings, then hold
each jar, to see if it was clean,
to a window that looked out
through her backyard into Iowa.
And with every third or fourth jar
she wipped steam from her glasses,
using the hem of her apron,
printed with tiny red sailboats
that dipped along with leaf-green
banners snapping, under puffs
of pale applesauce clouds
scented with cinnamon and cloves,
the only boats under sail
for at least two hundred miles.

--Ted Kooser

The Common Wisdom

Their marriage is a good one. In our eyes
What makes a marriage good? Well, that the tether
Fray but not break, and that they stay together.
One should be watching while the other dies.

--Howard Nemerov
WRITING ABOUT FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS:

Mother

Never a sigh for the cares that she bore for me
Never a thought of the joys that flew by;
Her one regret that she couldn't do more for me,
Thoughtless and selfish, her Master was I.

Oh, the long nights that she came at my call to me!
Oh, the soft touch of her hands on my brow!
Oh, the long years that she gave up her all to me!
Oh, how I yearn for her gentleness now!

Slave to her baby! Yes, that was the way of her,
Counting her greatest of services small;
Words cannot tell what this old heart would say of her,
Mother -- the sweetest and fairest of all.

--Edgar Guest

In the Nursing Home

She is like a horse grazing
a hill pasture that someone makes
smaller by coming every night
to pull the fences in and in.

She has stopped running wide loops,
stopped even the tight circles.
She drops her head to feed; grass
is dust, and the creekbed’s dry.

Master, come with your light
halter. Come and bring her in.

A Poem for Emily

Small fact and fingers and farthest one from me,
a hand’s width and two generations away,
in this still present I am fifty-three.
You are not yet a full day.

When I am sixty-three, when you are ten,
and you are neither closer nor as far,
your arms will fill with what you know by then,
the arithmetic and love we do and are.

When I by blood and luck am eighty-six
and you are someplace else and thirty-three
believing in sex and God and politics
with children who look not at all like me,
sometime I know you will have read them this
so they will know I love them and say so
and love their mother. Child, whatever is
is always or never was. Long ago

a day I watched awhile beside your bed,
I wrote this down, a thing that might be kept
awhile, to tell you what I would have said
when you were who knows what and I was dead
which is I stood and loved you while you slept.

--Miller Williams
TEACHING STUDENTS WORD CHOICE AND EFFECT:

**Popcorn Can Cover**

Popcorn-can cover  
screwed to the wall  
over a hole  
so the cold  
can’t ________ in  

--Lorine Niedecker

**Sheep**

From where I stand the sheep stand still  
As stones against the stony hill.  

The stones are gray  
And so are they.  

And both are weatherworn and round,  
Leading the eye back to the ground.  

Two mingled flocks -  
The sheep, the rocks.  

And still no sheep stirs from its place  
Or lifts its ____________ face.  

--Robert Francis
METAPHORS AND SIMILES (MAKING COMPARISONS)

[Metaphors often stronger than similes]

Student

The green shell of this backpack makes him lean into wave after wave of responsibility, and he swings his stiff arms and cupped hands, paddling ahead. He has extended his neck to its full length, and his chin, hard as a beak, breaks the surf. He’s got his baseball cap on backwards as up he crawls, out of the froth of a hangover and onto the sand of the future, and lumbers, heavy with hope, into the library.

--Ted Kooser
Death In The Family

After years of working everyday
keeping things on the inside, the barn
has laid down in the pasture, her red boards
turned grey under a hairnet of cobwebs
unable to hold things together.
No one remembers when she first lifted
her tar-paper skirt, after laboring
so long under the sun, to birth the bitter weeds
that have galvanized around the water troughs,
the countless Holsteins kicking the ribs
of her stalls, or the paper wasps washing
their babies in the leaky nail holes
of the sun. What we do remember
is how she stood like a widow leaning
into winter with that far off look
past the hills and the cataract of ice
over the pond's eye, the horse harnesses
having rubbed her as smooth as the moon.
Similes....

[Selection from Robert Bly’s translation of a Tomas Transtromer’s poem]

The Couple

They turn the light off, and its white globe glows an instant and then dissolves, like a tablet in a glass of darkness.

[Versus if a metaphor had been used]

They turn the light off, and its white globe glows an instant and then dissolves, a tablet in a glass of darkness.

THE ILLITERATE

By William Meredith

Touching your goodness, I am like a man
Who turns a letter over in his hand
And you might think that this was because the hand
Was unfamiliar but, truth is, the man
Has never had a letter from anyone;
And now he is both afraid of what it means
And ashamed because he has no other means
To find out what it says than to ask someone.

His uncle could have left the farm to him,
Or his parents died before he sent them word,
Or the dark girl changed and want him for beloved.
Afraid and letter-pround, he keeps it with him.
What would you call his feeling for the words that keep him rich and orphaned and beloved?

1958
WRITING WITH DETAILS

Tattoo

What once was meant to be a statement—a dripping dagger held in the fist of a shuddering heart—is now just a bruise on a bony old shoulder, the spot where vanity once punched him hard and the ache lingered on. He looks like someone you had to reckon with, strong as a stallion, fast and ornery, but on this chilly morning, as he walks between the tables at a yard sale with the sleeves of his tight black T-shirt rolled up to show us who he was, he is only another old man, picking up broken tools and putting them back, his heart gone soft and blue with stories.

--Ted Kooser
[from Delights & Shadows, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, WA 2004]
Old Cemetery

Somebody has been here this morning
to cut the grass, coming and going unseen
but leaving tracks, probably driving a pickup
with a low mower trailer that bent down
the weeds in the lane from the highway,
somebody paid by the job, not paid enough,
and mean and peevish, too hurried
to pull the bindweed that weaves up
into the filigreed iron crosses
or to trim the tall red prairie grass
too close to the markers to mow
without risking the blade. Careless
and reckless, too leaving green paint
scraped from the deck of the mower
on the cracked concrete base of a marker.
The dead must have been overjoyed
to have their world back to themselves,
to hear the creak of trailer springs
under the weight of the cooling mower
and to hear the pickup trun over and over
and start at least, and drive away,
and then to hear the soft ticking of weeds
springing back, undeterred, in the lane
that leads nowhere the dead want to go.

--Ted Kooser
[from Delights & Shadows, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, WA 2004]
Mourning Picture

Edwin Romanzo Elmer

Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 in. (Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA.)
Mourning Picture

They have carried the mahogany chair and the cane rocker
out under the lilac bush,
and my father and mother darkly sit there, in black clothes.
Our clapboard house stands fast on its hill,
my doll lies in her wicker pram
gazing at western Massachusetts.
This was our world.
I could remake each shaft of grass
feeling its rasp on my fingers, draw out the map of every lilac leaf
or the net of vines on my father’s
grief-tranced hand.

Out of my head, half-bursting,
still filling, the dream condenses—
shadows, crystals, ceilings, meadows, globe of dew.
Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in the light
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned porch-pillars,
under high early-summer clouds,
I am Effie, visible and invisible,
remembering and remembered.

They will move from the house,
give the toys and pets away.
Mute and rigid with loss my mother
will ride the train to Baptist Corner,
the silk-spool will run bare.
I tell you, the thread that bound us lies
faint as a web in the dew.
Should I make you, world, again,
could I give back the leaf its skeleton, the air
its early-summer cloud, the house
its noonday presence, shadowless,
and leave this out? I am Effie, you were my dream.

—Adrienne Rich