

An exercise from *The Practice of Poetry*, Robin Behn and Chase Twitchell, eds.
followed by the poem I created using it, "Ten Thousand Cicadas Can't Be Wrong"

TWENTY LITTLE POETRY PROJECTS

by
Jim Simmerman

1. Begin the poem with a metaphor.
2. Say something specific but utterly preposterous.
3. Use at least one image for each of the five senses, either in succession or scattered randomly throughout the poem.
4. Use one example of synesthesia (mixing the senses).
5. Use the proper name of a person and the proper name a place.
6. Contradict something you said earlier in the poem.
7. Change direction or digress from the last thing you said.
8. Use a word (slang?) you've never seen in a poem.
9. Use an example of false cause-effect logic.
10. Use a piece of "talk" you've actually heard (preferably in dialect and/or which you don't understand).
11. Create a metaphor using the following construction: "The (adjective) (concrete noun) of (abstract noun) . . ."
12. Use an image in such a way as to reverse its usual associative qualities.
13. Make the persona or character in the poem do something he/she could not do in "real life."
14. Refer to yourself by nickname and in the third person.
15. Write in the future tense, such that part of the poem seems to be a prediction.
16. Modify a noun with an unlikely adjective.
17. Make a declarative assertion that sounds convincing but that finally makes no sense.
18. Use a phrase from a language other than English.
19. Make a nonhuman object say or do something human (personification).
20. Close the poem with a vivid image that makes no statement, but that "echoes" an image from earlier in the poem.

Open the poem with the first project and close it with the last. Otherwise use the projects in whatever order you like, giving each project at least one line. Try to use all twenty projects. Feel free to repeat those you like. Fool around. Enjoy.

Initially, I created this exercise for my beginning poetry writing, students who—as best I now recall—seemed to me to be overly concerned, with transparently logical structures, themes, and modes of development at the expense of free-for-all wackiness, inventive play, and the sheer oddities of language itself.

I created the exercise in about a half hour, simply listing, in no particular order, a lot of little sillinesses I had seen and liked, or had not seen but thought I would have liked, in poems here and there. Inasmuch as I created the exercise during a semester in which I had decided to do, with my students, all poetry assignments, and inasmuch as I thought a model might be helpful—if only as an example of my own willingness to be ridiculous—I then did the assignment myself, again taking only about a half hour. Subsequently, incidentally, my poem from it, "Moon Go Away, I Don't Love You No More," was published by *Poetry*. (The students like that story.)

Ten Thousand Cicadas Can't Be Wrong

Summer sings sweet songs for her supper, (1)
but her golden slippers aren't for sale (2) – not unless
you happen upon some celestial bargain basement
of goodly delights. There, nearly hidden under
last year's turquoise silk sky (3a), raspberries ripen, rampant,
as the mourning dove's plump notes whirr (3b), winged,
into basil-drenched (3c) dreams. All this,
and watermelon (3d), too, and fireflies, and the daylilies
from your mother's last garden, double-headed. Just don't forget
there are chiggers, and mosquitoes, of course, and that heat (3e)
everyone speaks of, muggy, tasting of
mildewed shower shoes (4), sounding for all the world like
kudzu unfurling (4) in Jackson, Mississippi, where Janis Joplin (5)
might have sung supper songs of her own. I don't know.
I've never been there. I do know *freedom's* not
just another word for nothing left to lose, and that you'll never
find that bargain basement, no matter how long you look. (6) Listen,
ten thousand cicadas can't be wrong. (7)
Anybody knows larvae never lie, not as long as
persimmons pucker and peaches procrastinate. (9)
Lollygag (8) if you must, whenever
the tomatoes lean, but remember
that the persnickety bookie of guilt and doubt (11)
is keeping score. You can't hide but you can
run (12). You can steal the chiggers right out from under
the blackberries (13). You can rob from the raspberries
in bruised homage (16) to the *summer afternoon* –
the two most beautiful words in the English language,
according to Henry James, whose afternoons
are elsewhere now. *Tu connais* (18) Uncle Death?
No worries (10). Aunt Morning (14) will waltz (19) willfully
wanton beyond noon, yea, and onward, well past dusk, (15) (17)
in Sister Summer's silver slippers, the ones
deep in her closet that she seldom thinks to wear. (20)

~ Maureen Ryan Griffin

(See below for an unmarked copy.)

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but her golden slippers aren't for sale—not unless
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of goodly delights. There, nearly hidden under
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find that bargain basement, no matter how long you look.
Listen, ten thousand cicadas can't be wrong.
Anybody knows larvae never lie, not as long as
persimmons pucker and peaches procrastinate.
Lollygag in your hammock if you must, whenever
the tomatoes lean, but remember
that the persnickety bookie of guilt and doubt
is keeping score. You can't hide but you can
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