I’ve taught creative writing, both poetry and fiction, off and on for so many years and learned so much from my students that it feels disingenuous to offer up insights as my own. The greatest satisfaction in teaching writing comes from collaboration: it’s a pleasure that arises unbidden out of immediate impressions projected on the constantly changing screen of experience.

One thing I think I know, though, and that others might find worthwhile, is an idea I stole from the great philosopher of the poetic image, Gaston Bachelard. In his book Earth and Reveries of Will, he writes:

“[A]ll images emerge somewhere on a continuum between [...] two poles. They exist dialectically, balancing the seductions of the external universe against the certitudes of the inner self. It would be fraudulent then not to acknowledge the double tendency in images to extroversion and to introversion, not to appreciate their ambivalence. Each image [...] must be understood in its full complexity. The loveliest images are often hotbeds of ambivalence.”

I’ve found this approach to the image, in poetry especially but in prose as well, to be useful in helping students break away from the notion that images are snapshots—that somehow accuracy, crispness of focus, are what they’re all about. (Before I discovered this particular book of Bachelard’s, I tried pointing out that the most effective photographs aren’t powerful because they’re “accurate” or “well focused,” but it’s tough to draw positive conclusions from a negative example.) Once a writer makes the shift from image-as-snapshot to image-as-hotbed-of-ambivalence, even the most common image exercise can produce breakthroughs.

Take, for example, the standard “observational poem” exercise. I used to put forward this instruction: “Write an observational poem whose
aim is to create a vivid picture for the reader. It may help to think of it as a painting or a sketch.” Of course, some writers would come back with snapshots: images devoted to accuracy and focus; only occasionally would someone come up with a painting or a sketch—images bent or coloured by emotion—and while I could draw attention to them, I often found it impossible to argue why they were better images.

The impact of Bachelard’s insight on my little exercise has been to break it into two parts: 1) “Write an observational poem whose aim is to create a vivid picture for the reader. Think of it as a well-composed, perfectly focused snapshot.” Accuracy-and-focus students love it because the instruction essentially eliminates ambivalence; the others tend to chafe at the restrictions. 2) After we’ve looked over the poems, I start introducing Bachelard’s ideas about extroversion and introversion (ambivalence), and I offer some examples. At the simple end of the scale, there’s Robert Frost: “The buzz-saw snarled and rattled.” We try on the weakening effect of changing “snarled” to something more accurate: “buzzed” or “popped,” for example. At the complex end of the scale, there’s Robert Bly: “The dark surrounds the frail wood houses that were so recently trees.” Turning this into a snapshot thoroughly denatures it.

Writers who understand the nature of true poetic images automatically, and often unconsciously, raise the bar for their work. Because “hotbed images” can’t be produced like prints at Wal-Mart, they teach patience—as your mother always said, it’s a virtue—and
usually lead the poem toward a richness the poet couldn’t consciously choose to create.

**City Limits**

**The Blue**

**Mortality**

**The Glare**

**Signals**

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**City Limits**

http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n01/articles/hutchison...
for Melody

You’re like wildwood at the edge of a city. And I’m the city: steam, sirens, a jumble of lit and unlit windows in the night.

You’re the land as it must have been and will be—before me, after me. It’s your natural openness I want to enfold me. But then you’d become city; or you’d hide away your wildness to save it.

So I stay within limits—city limits, heart limits. Although, under everything, I have felt unlimited earth. Unlimited you.

∞

Poem Index

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The Blue

In memory of Michael Nigg,
April 28, 1969 – September 8, 1995
The dream refused me his face. There was only Mike, turned away; damp tendrils of hair curled out from under the ribbed, rolled brim of a knit ski cap. He’s hiding the wound, I thought, and my heart shrank. Then Mike began to talk—to me, it seemed, though gazing off at a distant, sunstruck stand of aspen that blazed against a ragged wall of pines. His voice flowed like sweet smoke, or amber Irish whiskey; or better: a brook littered with colors torn out of autumn. The syllables swept by on the surface of his voice—so many, so swift, I couldn’t catch their meanings . . . yet struggled not to interrupt, not to ask or plead—as though distress would be exactly the wrong emotion. Then a wind gusted into the aspen grove, turned its yellows to a blizzard of sparks. When the first breath of it touched us, Mike fell silent. Then he stood. I felt the dream letting go, and called, “Don’t!” Mike flung out his arms, shouted an answer . . . and each word shimmered like a hammered bell. (Too soon the dream would take back all but their resonance.) The wind surged. Then Mike leaned into it, slipped away like a wavering flame. And all at once I noticed the sky: its sheer, light-scoured immensity; the lavish tenderness of its blue.
Mortality

Hard to imagine yourself
in the ground ... a shabby mess
of broken spindles, the loom
that cranked out the cloth of you
smashed, scattered—and somewhere
the ego sputtering its rage.

You can hear it now—railing
like a mill-town dowager
piqued, let’s say, by the country’s
fraying moral fiber. Her spotted fist
gavels the tea-table, making
the bone teacups clatter.

“Oh! The very idea!”

∞

Poem Index

The Glare

This slug on the path is both slick and slow-witted. They usually stick to the granite coolnesses in the rock garden, but this fellow’s managed to wander into the sun’s killing glare. Maybe the morning’s overcast made him think dusk, and venture out. Anyhow, now he races—there is no other way to say it—“sluggishly” toward the lilac-shadowed grass. Not blindly, though. As we bend down to study him, the creature curls upward, waving his antennas like little drunken fists. Then he goes back to hauling an invisible heaviness across the warm flagstone. It must be that his mortality weighs as much as ours, and therefore we’re drawn to his ache, his speechless effort ... watching him arch and stretch like the tongue in a dying man’s mouth....

∞
Signals

At the end of our last visit, I waved as the car slowed away from the curb,

and Dad waved back—straightened in his wheelchair where he’d parked it at the living room’s picture window,

and raised both arms and moved them like a signalman wielding invisible flags on a ship's sinking deck. With a shock

I saw that he was waving to a vanishing image of himself, signaling in distress,

at sea in a mirror made of lost time.
References


About the Author


He has taught elementary through high school age children for Poets in the Schools programs in Colorado and Oregon, graduate level students at the University of Denver’s University College, and adult learners online. A member of The Academy of American Poets and The Colorado Authors’ League, Joe lives with his wife Melody in the mountains southwest of Denver and makes his living as a writer. Visit his web site at http://www.jhwriter.com or drop in on his blog at http://jhwriter.blogspot.com.

About the Artist

**Andrew Young** is a senior geography teacher at Georges P. Vanier Secondary School in Courtenay, B.C. and the B.C./Yukon territory representative on the Canadian Council for Geographic Education national executive. His first award for photography was for pictures of sunrises at Big Bend National Park in Texas; in 1978 when he was not
quite ten and also not quite awake (his dad dragged him out of bed far
too early in the morning). Since that time he has melded his passion
for geography with his enthusiasm for photography. The frequent
ribbing that he and his other family members gave to his father for
looking for that perfect moment to photograph on vacation, while they
waited in the car for what seemed to be hours on end, taught him to
slow down and look for a while. “There’s beauty in every moment and
in every place; seeing beyond the façade of the obvious and delving
into the world that surrounds you offers rewards to those who are
patient. I find that photography helps me to look at the world in a very
different manner, one that demands that I pay attention to every
nuance of the environment around me and I wouldn’t have it any other
way”.