

AN EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

(FOR A GROUP)

Cleopatra Mathis

The teacher begins by reading a poem aloud.

1. Listen carefully to the poem as it is read aloud. It's best if the poem is unfamiliar.
2. Afterward, without looking at the poem, write down all the evocative words you remember, or any other words that the poem triggers.
3. Imagine a journey you might take in a real (concrete) landscape, one that is familiar to you. Use the words you have chosen to guide your way into a poem in which you take that journey, literally or figuratively. Let the borrowed language propose ways to break through your familiarity with the landscape, by suggesting details, a mood, the bare bones of a narrative, a kind of diction, or maybe even something as specific as the name of the place, or words spoken there.

The poem read aloud should in some way have to do with a journey. Two excellent poems are "A Blessing" by James Wright and "To Go to Lvov" by Adam Zagajewski. By adopting the

mood and tone the poem evokes through its particular language, you enter an emotional landscape which is crucial in the recovery of memory. That sensibility then determines the location of your poem. The poem might focus on one specific incident or aspect of the journey, it might follow the complete route, or it might end in a place that no longer exists. After you have the first draft of a poem, you might find it helpful to "copy" the poem you heard. Taking the poem line by line, you might model your own poem after the original by progressing similarly from subject to subject, observation, metaphor, tone, etc. This is particularly useful in the Zagajewski poem, which follows.

T*o do this exercise alone, outside of a class, read the Zagajewski poem once, and then put it away. Go on to step 2.*

To Go to Lvov

by Adam Zagajewski

To go to Lvov. Which station
for Lvov, if not in a dream, at dawn, when dew
gleams on a suitcase, when express
trains and bullet trains are being born. To leave
in haste for Lvov, night or day, in September
or in March. But only if Lvov exists,
if it is to be found within the frontiers and not just
in my new passport, if lances of trees
—of poplar and ash—still breathe aloud
like Indians, and if streams mumble
their dark Esperanto, and grass snakes like soft signs
in the Russian language disappear
into thickets. To pack and set off, to leave

without a trace, at noon, to vanish
 like fainting maidens. And burdocks, green
 armies of burdocks, and below, under the canvas
 of a Venetian café, the snails converse
 about eternity. But the cathedral rises,
 you remember, so straight, as straight
 as Sunday and white napkins and a bucket
 full of raspberries standing on the floor, and
 my desire which wasn't born yet,
 only gardens and weeds and the amber
 of Queen Anne cherries, and indecent Fredro.
 There was always too much of Lvov, no one could
 comprehend its boroughs, hear
 the murmur of each stone scorched
 by the sun, at night the Orthodox church's silence was
 unlike
 that of the cathedral, the Jesuits
 baptized plants, leaf by leaf, but they grew.
 Grew so mindlessly, and joy hovered
 everywhere, in hallways and in coffee mills
 revolving by themselves, in blue
 teapots, in starch, which was the first
 formalist, in drops of rain and in the thorns
 of roses. Frozen forsythia yellowed by the window.
 The bells peeled and the air vibrated, the cornets
 of nuns sailed like schooners near
 the theater, there was so much of the world that
 it had to do encores over and over,
 the audience was in a frenzy and didn't want
 to leave the house. My aunts couldn't have known
 yet that I'd resurrect them,
 and lived so trustfully, so singly;
 servants, clean and ironed, ran for

fresh cream, inside the houses
 a bit of anger and great expectation, Brzozowski
 came as a visiting lecturer, one of my
 uncles kept writing a poem entitled *Why*,
 dedicated to the Almighty, and there was too much
 of Lvov, it brimmed the container,
 it burst glasses, overflowed
 each pond, lake, smoked through every
 chimney, turned into fire, storm,
 laughed with lightning, grew meek,
 returned home, read the New Testament,
 slept on a sofa beside the Carpathian rug,
 there was too much of Lvov, and now
 there isn't any, it grew relentlessly
 and the scissors cut it, chilly gardeners
 as always in May, without mercy,
 without love, ah, wait till warm June
 comes with soft ferns, boundless
 fields of summer, i.e., the reality.
 But scissors cut it, along the line and through
 the fiber, tailors, gardeners, censors
 cut the body and the wreaths, pruning shears worked
 diligently, as in a child's cutout
 along the dotted line of a roe deer or a swan.
 Scissors, penknives, and razor blades scratched,
 cut, and shortened the voluptuous dresses
 of prelates, of squares and houses, and trees
 fell soundlessly, as in a jungle,
 and the cathedral trembled, people bade goodbye
 without handkerchiefs, no tears, such a dry
 mouth, I won't see you anymore, so much death
 awaits you, why must every city
 become Jerusalem and every man a Jew,

and now in a hurry just
 pack, always, each day,
 and go breathless, go to Lvov, after all
 it exists, quiet and pure as
 a peach. It is everywhere.

A JOURNEY TO NOWHERE

Susan Snively

Write a poem in which you undertake a journey to an unknown destination. The poem does not necessarily have to have a formal "plot," but does have to leave you, at the end of the journey, in a wholly unexpected place: either in the midst of a strange landscape (mental and/or physical) or in the throes of a threatening or exciting discovery (self, other, or both).

Begin the poem with a predicament: the speaker of the poem (the poet, her surrogate, a fictional narrator, or an actual person re-imagined) is lost, or hunting for something (someone), or is being propelled into a quest against her will, or is on a supposedly ordinary journey that turns weird.

Make the poem long enough (sixty-five or more lines) to make it hard for you to predict its outcome. It should be written in some kind of line that you follow more or less consistently throughout (this may be regular iambic pentameter, or something looser). Long verse-paragraphs suit this exercise, as do six-to-eight-line stanzas with informal rhyme schemes (abaccbca, abbcabc, etc.) or no "scheme" at all. Some regularity of form helps give the sense that the *poem* is taking the *poet* on the journey; it works against a too-rational and too-orderly plotting by setting up a crafty, quasi-deliberate momentum.