Hello National Poetry Competitors from the staff of the Poetry School!

Our friends at the Poetry Society have asked us to gather together some writing prompts to inspire your prize-winning entries for the NPC, pictured left. All these prompts come from the various courses and activities we offer via CAMPUS, our online social network. An Open Workshop is a free activity that any CAMPUS member can join – named courses are examples of our fee-paying classes which offer lots of individual feedback.

CAMPUS membership is free and easy – pay us a visit at www.campus.poetryschool.com and start joining in the conversation.

Meanwhile, we hope this following list of ideas sets your poetry brains ticking ...

1. Introducing an Unfamiliar Point of View from Claire Trévien’s Going Home, Not Going Home course

Claire writes....

‘If you are a writer, you’re a tourist anyway: a permanent outsider who will dissect the behaviour of your own family as if they were from Mars. It’s a perfectly valid method of working to continually forget what you know and see the world afresh. Forget your own language, your upbringing, your preferences, and give yourself over to the terrifying blank page as if you had never been inside your own culture to begin with. Forget the traditions, the toes you might be stepping on, the weight of expectation and write about damn daffodils if you want to.’

In other words, this approach entails making your familiar surroundings feel new and fresh: you can give your local pub a distinctly lunar flavour, contribute a tourist’s guide to your supermarket’s customs, try to decipher the patterns of behaviour in your café ... You can also speak from the point of view of a stone, a pigeon, a battered bunch of geraniums perhaps ...

Continues over
2. Urban Architecture
from John McCullough’s Sound of the City course

John says….
'I want you to play around with time and adopt a different compositional approach. I’d like you to pick an urban architectural feature you know well, preferably one you are able to visit. It could be a railway bridge, a statue, a clock tower or it might be a disused hospital or block of flats. I’d then like you to conduct some research on your chosen feature through a local library, museum and/or the internet (you might like to start out researching a few and see which has the most interesting back story). In what age and spirit was it created? Who were the first people whose lives were shaped by it? Make notes on the period, and especially on the language of that period and any photographs of the feature you can find.

When you’ve done this, I’d like you to visit the feature in the present day and make notes on how it fits into the cityscape around it now. What psychological effects do you feel when you first see it in the distance and when you’re up close to it? What kinds of people walk past it today, and how do they differ from those who walked past it when it was first created? What background noises, smells and details are there which weren’t present in the past? I’d like you to write a poem which in some way draws on both the feature’s historical past and how it affects the lives of urban dwellers today.'

3. Hackwriting
from Alex MacDonald’s Open Workshop

- Pick a news story or article from your favourite website, magazine or newspaper
- Take a clause at random from the first paragraph, paste it in to a Word document then another one at random.
- Keep this going until you have exhausted the editorial copy, so if the story is only eight paragraphs long, you have eight lines of text.
- Pick several lines of verse/text you haven’t published.
- Edit the poem together (as above).
4. Assumed Voices
from Miriam Gable’s section of our Five Easy Pieces course

‘I’d like you to write a poem in an assumed voice, either human or non-human. Some things to keep in mind:

• **Language**: This is meant to sound like someone or something talking, to a greater degree than might usually be the case with poems. It needs to be convincing as speech – and the speech of this particular person or thing – but not to be cluttered up with too much mundane phraseology; it still has to be linguistically interesting as a poem. Look at how Duffy manages this balancing act in ‘Mrs Midas’, and how Les Murray conceives of the animal voice in ‘The Cows on Killing Day’.

• **Speaker**: You need a characterful person or thing at an interesting juncture (with non-human personae, that juncture is often an implicit and present tense encounter with a human). Poems in persona are forays into psychologically arresting territory, so the speaker as well as the precipitating event needs to be worth hearing about / from! Don’t be tempted to lean on an event at the expense of exploring character.

• **Angle**: The best poems in persona tend to come from people or things we don’t normally hear from, or to reveal sides of people or things that aren’t normally shown (see ‘My Last Duchess’, where an urbane man basically confesses to having committed murder, though he doesn’t confess in such a way that he could actually be pinned down and brought to book for it). If you choose a human persona, don’t just think about what they’re ‘telling’, think about why. That’s for you to know and the reader to guess or dwell upon, though: don’t have the speaker give that information up!

• **Length**: I’d like you to confine yourselves to 25 lines or less. Some of the poems I’ve mentioned above are, of course, longer than this, but keeping to a set length will help you determine what really needs to go into the poem (in terms, for example, of contextualising back story), and what can be left out. We don’t need to know everything, and less is often more.

• **Is anything too far-fetched?** No! Edwin Morgan has a poem in the voice of a space module; Plath has one in the voices of mushrooms; Morgan even has one in the voice of the Loch Ness Monster. Be as inventive as you like in terms of what or who you choose to give voice to, don’t feel you have to play it safe. Most poems in persona do reverberate with the poet’s wider concerns, but that connection doesn’t tend to be manifested by, say, a choice of speaker who is superficially similar to you as a person.’

5. Secrets & Sounds
from Paula Bohince’s Representations of Childhood course

‘Write a poem that takes as its subject a secret held between you and either a sibling or friend. Think carefully, as an added challenge, about the sounds of the poem and how they might reflect the relationship or secret: the hard sounds of a K, the murmuring of an M, and so on.’

Continues over
6. Dream Poems
from Tom Chivers' Open Workshop

'Write a short (max 40 lines) ‘dream-poem’. The subject matter is up to you, but the poem should deploy techniques to create an unreal atmosphere, with some surprises along the way.

• Think about the tension between expression and concealment, between sense and nonsense.
• What role does narrative have in the dream? Is there a well-defined ‘dream landscape’? How is that narrative or landscape disturbed?
• Think about physical sensations (light, touch, sound, etc.) and how they might be made unusual or startling.
• What happens in the poem? Remember: in dreams you can get away with things that are impossible or implausible in waking life.
• Is there a recognisable speaker/dreamer? Think carefully about how you use pronouns (I/we/she etc.) to indicate agency. Consider how the dream might enable you to play with the confessional voice. To speak truly by speaking strangely.
• How can you evoke that strangeness not only through the imagery of the poem, but by its very fabric? Disrupt the syntax of the poem; use the sonic effects of language; experiment with shifts in voice or style. Be bold!'

7. Question of Faith
from Kathryn Simmonds' The Problem of God course

'I'd like your poem to pose a question. How you choose to do this is up to you: it could be an insistent poem which uses anaphora to state and restate a question, or you could use a circular form to create an echo. Your poem could merely suggest a question … the question could be there in the white space, (do think about form and white space, the white space is everything we don’t know, it’s the silence).

Will the question be repeated in a different form? Will the question be asked directly or embedded in the poem? Is the question rhetorical, or are you addressing someone? Perhaps you are asking God a question … what is it? The one important aspect to this exercise is that the poem will only get written if you are intensely interested in the question. And the question does not have to be one of doubt (though of course this exercise lends itself to the grey areas). Your question may have nothing to do with doubt, it could be an affirmation – I think of the spiritual ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ Which is a way of imagining the scene at Calvary, the passion unfolds and the question arises what was it like?’

Good Luck with your National Poetry Competition Entries!

• The National Poetry Competition is the Poetry Society's competition for previously unpublished poems. It has a first prize of £5,000 and the closing date is 31 October 2014. Enter here www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc
• For more inspiring poetry prompts, browse The Poetry School’s courses at www.poetryschool.com or visit CAMPUS at www.campus.poetryschool.com