

14.

My Teachers Told Me

What were you told about the writing of poetry, the rules you insist on breaking.

The Thing Is

My teacher told me never to use the word *thing*,
because thing doesn't mean anything
and never to say "I don't think,"
because clearly you are thinking.
The reason to go to school
is to learn the rules
but the thing is
to jump gloriously free
from everything.

Steffi Fletcher

ERASING STARS

A teacher of standing, a poet, tells her class, "*Never put stars in your poems...*" and some of the students write this down. And some stop writing after a year or two. And some get married or take jobs selling pharmaceuticals. And some think *Time is in short supply* and *ex cathedra* take up parent worship.

I know a Baltic poet who draws Egyptian star charts on cocktail napkins as he answers questions. I also know a poet in Tucson, an amateur ornithologist who believes that stars influence birds. "Of course," he says, "the carbon in our brains comes from stars."

Erase stars from a page. Nothing happens. The allotropic pulse of mathematics ticks anyway. But now try putting the stars back in. It can't be done. The failure has nothing to do with personal habits.

Stephen Kuusisto
Anthologized in *One Art: poems
about poetry*,
edited by Michael Wiegers

Love Poem

*...Do not write love poems;
avoid at first those forms*

that are too facile and commonplace: they are the most difficult...

R. M. Rilke
in *Letters to a Young Poet*

There are too many similes for bed—
Nothing at all like the things I've said
scribbling late this last hour;

not like the boats I've rigged, or rivers either,
designed for us to float. Metaphor
sinks what I meant to say.

And about what Rilke says, I know even
his angels won't save me now; heaven
is much too terrible to leave.

So all you get to know is that I'm trying,
my tongue *not* a stupid girl crying
down my throat, wet and speechless.

Erin Belieu
Anthologized in *One Art: poems
about poetry*,
edited by Michael Wiegers

One of my teachers who loved rules once said to me, "In a line of iambic pentameter, it is permissible to substitute a trochee or spondee or anapest or dactyl for an iamb, but only in the first or third foot, never in the second or fourth." Well, how can anybody write well with restrictions like that?

Ted Kooser
in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*

Ignore the Rules!

(after reading Kooser's Poetry Home Repair manual)

Think of those pinched people
shouting shoulds and should-nots
as minions of the enemy, the critics,
that patch-eyed pirate, stealer of souls.

Your poem has a green heart,
and is trying to become itself—
a fragrant, flowering thing, reaching out
for sunlight between slats of fencing.

Your poem wants to be organic, simple.
Bash that pirate with a fence slat
whenever he jeers that you're simplistic
and have a tin ear.

Every poem is a trip.
Don't buy its ticket up front.
Best not to know where it's going
'til you're halfway there.

The poem is a shape changer
who loves to try on costumes,
loses or tears up tickets,
creates and destroys whole worlds.

The poem might hide for a while.
You might count syllables,
you might count stresses,
you might just count your breaths.

Then peek-a-boo!
the poem whirls back in.
Don't ask it where it went
It will tell you only if it wants to.

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