

# There and Back Again

*A trip to Delaware, to the Noyes  
Museum, to My Own Poetry, and Back  
to My Classroom, via a Ti and the Poet  
Peter Murphy*

**by Svea Barrett**

# Monday—Day One--Illness

- Three AM and the stomach virus my entire family already had has caught me...I understand when kids can't do anything when sick.
- I sleep all day and then Peter Murphy, my dedicated teacher, brings me the day's prompts, which I am finally somewhat able to try by dinner time. Here they are:

## Prompt #1:

Write several small poems that use imagery from the natural world (or not) to reveal something about the inner world. You might focus on a mood, conflict or recent problem. Begin with a few lines of pure description.

Tell a secret, tell a lie, and never tell anyone which is which. Surprise yourself.

This one has to be adjusted somewhat, but thanks to Peter's open (but not) prompts, it can be, and not in a complicated way. I start describing things from my dorm/sick room. I write a poem about the fire alarm box, the rainstorm, the clothes hanging in my sickroom closet.

***I realize that this prompt will be great for my students, and that I should give sick and absent students suggestions for adjustments to my writing assignments that make it easier to do them from a sick bed.***

**Day One Continued...Small poems written after reading several Peter collected and which I will use with my classes:** “The Red Wheelbarrow,” by W. Carlos Williams, “Dust of Snow” by Robert Frost, “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Friend” by marge Piercy, “Bitter Pill” by Kay Ryan, “Resume” by Dorothy Parker, and “Happiness” by Stephen Dunn.

**Here are some of my small sickbed poems. They are terrible but I am proud that I did them:**

The lights here  
are flat portholes  
in the ceiling,  
but they only  
look up into  
blurred white  
and a few  
dead flies.

She opened the window  
To the thunderstorm.  
We couldn't hear it  
So it wasn't real.  
We were taller than the maple  
Right outside so we saw it bend  
Like it should break.  
It was a casement window  
So it opened in, V'd towards us  
Out Of the wind. Scooped  
Some rain. The sound still  
Brushed too softly for a  
Storm. We wanted crashes.,  
Drama. Something to, as my  
mother used to say, to really  
Cry about.

I only have four hangers so the  
Shirts and skirts have to share.  
Deep pink linen hangs alone. She rates.  
Cotton stretch button tees  
Hang there by threes, Indigo,  
Then Paler Sky and finally,  
Not-So-White-Anymore.  
Candy apple red gauze  
Semi sheer made modest  
By a solid juniper green  
Blouse with mandarin collar.  
Hot pink linen's sleeve caresses  
Mr. juniper, unbeknownst to  
Candy apple gauze.  
Two skirts cling  
At the far end of the bar.  
Separate, they hang  
And look away.

Something's wrong with a dorm without kids.  
Echoes are dull with middle age. Nothing  
Bounces or breaks on the grey clouded  
concrete floors. Everyone is so polite  
About what we share. It's Much too bare.  
The jewel of my room? The strobe alarm,  
a small red box, silver facets shining slices  
of window towards the corner of my eye.  
It waits to flash the residents of any age  
with tragic ,artificial sun.

## Day One (still sick) Continued...

- **Prompt #2—Interview Strategy:**
- **Interview a classmate. Ask them to tell you a story about something that happened to them about work. Make sure they tell you Who, What, When and Where, and include color, sound, smell etc.**
- *Here I had to invent an interview—and to recreate what I thought the person would say. This is something to tell my students—especially with creative writing, what matters is they try to do the assignment—being adaptable to unforeseen circumstances is a trait I want to encourage in my students—it's a life skill!*
- Here is the poem's first draft I wrote, about a weird relationship—the friends of your friends. How do you treat them? Who are they to you, really? This would make for a great discussion before doing this assignment in class with kids—could help them think of things to write about themselves.

### Barrens--d1

The Barrens are family friends of our family friends.  
The oldest girl once took off her bra at a barbecue,  
But she kept her shirt. The Barren boys are not.  
They work at small desks in the city but come home  
To Curly haired daughters and freckled sons. I doubt  
They've been to the piney place their name reminds me of.  
They're all from Maine or Vermont, or,  
never from NJ anymore. I never remember any of their  
names. What do you call such friends of friends  
whose breezy little sports cars block your best friends'  
and who want you to kiss them like cousins?

## Day One (sick day) Continued and Completed.

- After discussion the next day with our class, at least three parts were changed, as follows in Draft 2:

### **Barrens--d2**

The Barrens are family friends of our neighbors.  
The oldest girl once took off her bra at a barbecue.  
The Barren boys work at small desks in the city;  
come home after curly haired daughters and sons  
have fallen asleep. I doubt they've been to the  
piney place their name reminds me of. They're all  
from Maine or Vermont; never from NJ anymore.  
I never remember any of their names.  
What do you call such friends of friends,  
whose breezy little sports cars block our driveway,  
and who want you to kiss them like cousins?

*It's still not done. I would show these revisions to my students, to encourage their own.*



**Day Two—This Place is Gorgeous  
(When You're Healthy)!**

*This is Lake Fred—just a few steps from my dorm and quite an inspiration.*

*Walking outside always wakes up my imagination and gives me ideas.*

**Day Two Prompt:** *Write a long poem about loss that tries to reason 2 or 3 different ideas.*

*Mention a scientific principal, a current event, and something from pop culture (plus the usual secret, lie and surprise).*

FIRST WE READ two really long and seemingly rambling poems by Richard Jackson, and talked about how they did focus by continually returning to a unifying idea. Then some shorter oddly rambling-ish poems by Dean Young. My students may have a hard time staying with the Jackson poems—except for the advanced group—but they may have fun with the Young poems.

Here's mine—it's in progress—needs a lot of cutting and shaping:

**Snow Plow Turnaround**

The signs are frequent in upstate NY. I was never sure if the sign was ordering the snowplow to "Turn around!" or if a turnaround was a new noun. Not too much in the way of punctuation on signs. In Vermont my favorite sign was "Frost Heaves," which sent me into paroxysms of laughter. I suppose it's meant as a temporary version of "Bump," not related to the more artificial "Speed Hump," which carries its own more obvious humor. No one else thinks "Frost Heaves" is funny. And no one thought it was funny that a hotel down the shore was called The Tuckaho Inn, either. If they don't see humor you can't force it. A woman in my writing class says you can't force kids to change certain things either. Like the way they say "based off" now instead of "based on," even though that makes absolutely no sense. She says, this lovely woman, that it's just language lost or changed, and no use fighting it. I still fight it. Three other English teachers in my school, fight this particular one constantly, with cartoons we created of lamps and expensive vases sitting ON a base, which holds them up, and what happens when they fall off. sometimes a student remembers and changes, sometimes the concept is lost. My friend says it's a lost cause to argue with certain people on Facebook that George Zimmerman was an insane asshole and that no one has a right to kill a kid because he, George, decided to carry a gun against neighborhood watch rules and get out of the car against police advice to follow said kid until the kid turned around to fight him.

## My Long, Rough Draft of a Poem from Day 2, Continued...

My nephew manages to turn that conversation into “all you liberals want to take our guns” even when I say it’s the law. Something is lost when the law says you don’t have to even try to avoid confrontation to justify shooting in self defense. But now you are asking yourself, how does this relate to snow plows or heaving frost or humor, or bumps in the road, artificial or otherwise?

There is certainly nothing funny about the icy kind of loss Trayvon Martin’s family is dealing with. My ex-husband used to get angry with the word “lost” about a family member, in our case a child. It makes it seem like he’s still around somewhere, he’d say, like we just can’t find him. I have to admit he has a point there.

I find that people have a hard time when you just point blank say “my son died.” though I care less and less about how other people handle my loss, unless it’s because they’ve just had their own death-loss and can’t talk about it yet, or at all. It’s probably time to turn this conversation around right now, come to think of it, if I care that it might be making some of you uncomfortable, and I can’t decide if I do or not. and speaking of uncomfortable, and humor or perhaps uncomfortable humor, my roommate showed me a picture tonight of her Lion head rabbit trying to hump their three legged cat. Sad? Maybe. Funny?

For sure, she thought so and it's her cat and rabbit, so why not laugh?

I'm not sure that would qualify as a speed hump like the signs you see on the roads, which as I've said do make me laugh, but somehow there's no sign to warn you that a deer is about to ram the side of your car, especially in winter. And those mega plows DPW's use in upstate NY where I grew up don't kill deer, they're so friggin loud the deer hear them coming a mile away, but every year people are lost to these plows or smaller ones. That is, people die.

The most recent one I know is a family near my parents who live so far back in they have their own pretty heavy duty plow and the banks along their drive go as high as a telephone pole and the man killed his grandchild who was playing in the snow banks and probably thought the plow would see her or never thought about it at all, the arcing snow may have been a beautiful white rainbow before she was lost, and her granddad lost his mind after that and they sold the farm to live in town where someone else could drive the plow, someone like my cousin Jamie, who doesn't read and never wanted to go to college and whose marriage is a big hot mess but his father, my uncle Jess, was an angry abusive racist sheriff who kept German shepherds and trained them to attack and who didn't think much of anything was funny except the look on people's faces when he sicced his dogs on them, so when his son, my cousin Jaime, got a job working for the town driving one of those big mother fucking SRV's (that's snow removal vehicle to you, more than just a plow, it has multi moveable blades and a blower on a dump truck chassis) anyway when he bragged about his snowplow job we were glad. Everyone was proud. All the moms said he really turned himself around.

\*\*\*\*\*





### **Day 3—Field Trip! Cape May Ferry**

**We had 2 prompts on the boat ( as follows) and were encouraged to write, but I couldn't. Instead I took lots of observational notes and pictures, like this one.**

## Boat Notes, and First Prompt

First we read some wonderful poems by Kathy Graber—with a great sense of place, and two of which were addressed to America. My students will love these.

“America” and “America (Peaches)”  
Also— “Self-Portrait with No Internal Navigation”

---

### OBSERVATIONS ON THE BOAT:

- \* “I like peaches so much more than America.”
  - \* Light houses. Laughing gulls not laughing.
  - \* A diagram of the ship’s three decks.
  - \* White piled stone piers—people fishing.
  - \* “I just saw a shark! The water reflecting off him. Just under the water. Next to the boat.”
  - \* “I heard last week about dolphins beaching themselves on the shore. And here’s the worst part—sharks were attacking them. They were suffering.”
- 

**PROMPT :** Write a poem about desire using sight, sounds, smells, touch and taste from the journey to Delaware. Secret, lie and surprise.

My poem—about the third draft. I cut off a lot from the end.

The title comes from the gulls. The quotes are in italics—some overheard on the trip.

### Not Laughing

One man says he saw a shark,  
*the light reflecting off it, just  
under water, beautiful. Another  
says did you hear about all  
the dolphins ending up on  
the beach at the Jersey Shore?*  
*It’s even sadder: Sharks  
attacked them. They’re suffering.*  
I turn my head so no one sees  
the ridiculous tears. This  
is what makes me cry?  
Is it because if I knew all the  
constant small sufferings elsewhere,  
at my son’s high school, for example,  
I couldn’t stay normal?  
I’d go into the cafeteria  
and pour boiling oil on the boys  
calling my son any painful names.  
Instead I cry now, over a dolphin story,  
on The Cape May Ferry, watching  
two serious laughing gulls not laughing,  
while back home my sons play football,  
drink too much with their friends,  
sweat it out in their landscaping jobs  
the next morning. My middle one  
came home from college this spring,  
a fraternity crest on his sweatshirt.  
*I thought it would be better if I  
didn’t tell you until after the hazing,* he said.

## Day 3, Second Prompt, Etc.

**PROMPT 2 FOR THE BOAT**—(Except I combined it with the later one about works of art—the picture here is from the Noyes Museum exhibit, and it is called “Deer Woman.” Disturbing in many ways, and really cool.)

\*\*\*\*

***Write a poem addressed to America (or a different country, or a state or a city) in which you try to explain something which is not exactly clear to you. Mention a type of fuel and two or three name brands. Tell a secret, etc.***

\*\*\*\*

***Mini-field trips could happen easily at my school—there is always great art on display in our library gallery. And I like the idea of having them gather observations first to later include. They could do it during lunch, on the bus, at home the night before, or on a short walk around the school grounds.***



# Day 3 Boat Prompt #2—My Poem

*This was perhaps my favorite poem of the week that I wrote. It's important to note that it happened after a boat trip, many observations, several great poem models, and a museum trip. Also, I mixed prompts. I need to remember to allow my students these same freedoms.*

## **To You, US America**

Because the museum is in the middle of the Pine Barrens.  
Because the most beautiful thing there is the window framing the lily pond lake in the pines. Because there was a sculpture called “Chicken Man” which was a chicken with thick human legs and a penis, and “Deer Woman” which was a deer head with breasts, but with antlers. Because there was a sculpture called hornets that was hornets and one called “Baby Elephant Swimming” and it was. Because this sculpture I’m standing in front of now looks like a map of you made of latex gloves that hang like condoms, and I was actually disappointed when I walked up close to find it wasn't made of condoms. Because my sweet late mother-in-law picked up Popsicle sticks, made pencil cases out of yogurt cups with old yarn because reduce, reuse, recycle. Because she'd have laughed I think, but appreciated a map of you made of used condoms, though I doubt she'd have touched them herself. Because it's beautiful

and weird like you and what if it was condoms and beautiful even close up, use the ugly, make it new. Because at the school in NY city all the kids wore hoodies, colors glowing over Facebook, softening the ugliness of posted comments below. Because you're the terrified people who wanted to cut down all the trees on the island after the hurricane because they might fall on your house, and the guy on my street who built his deck around the double birch in his backyard, *leaves in the barbecue?* he says, *fuck yeah, whatever.* Because *leave my god damn guns alone let me shop where I want but wait, are you ok? Does your car need a jump, a tow? Here, I brought you dinner.* Because you're the 24 hour CVS when my baby son had a fever--103 at 3 AM, and the little old lady who saw my pajamas and children's Advil and let me cut in line, but you're also the poor people who shop at Wal-Mart, ignoring the poor people who work at Wal-Mart. Because Hurricane Sandy. 9-11. Tornado Alley. Trayvon Martin. Because the Debt ceiling. Taxes. Because fresh peaches. Because your fresh sweet corn in a basket on a table beside the road in upstate NY, next to a box with cash sitting next to a handwritten sign : *Please Pay What You Can. Thanks.*

---Svea Barrett

# Day #4—When Poems Evolve and It's OK

- *We started the day by reading two more wonderful Kathleen Graber poems, “The Off Season,” and “The Magic Kingdom.” This poet really knows how to use surprise!*
- *I am so going to use her with my classes—never have before—love discovering new model poems for my students!*
- *When I wrote this poem about the rustic cabin my grandfather built and what happened when he died and my sister wanted to buy it, it evolved into a personal essay about what parents aging and dying does to a family. Would I be OK with my kids writing an essay instead of a poem? If so, why not?*

## **PROMPT:**

**Write a poem set in a place you know well, about a personal conflict.**

**Refer to a foreign film, a food you dislike, and an item of clothing.**

**Tell a secret, tell a lie, and never tell anyone which is which.**

**Surprise yourself.**

# My Personal Essay that Started as a Poem:

## Black River

There was a fight when he died and my sister bought the camp. Grandpa's camp, it was, like it was Grandma's house, and there was a fight when she died and they sold that too, about how much and who'd get everything, such as it was, triple mirrored dresser, cabin boy's sea chest. Anyway now he'd died and my sister and her husband wanted to buy the camp. Aunt Charlene's (mom's baby sister) objection was that it should still belong to everyone, though it never had, Grandma and Grandma just let everyone go there whenever they wanted.

Next Charlene said sell it and split the money. My mom (middle sister) got mad then, why not keep it in the family, you all can still come whenever you want, and so on. As Charlene didn't have the money and older half-sister Joan lived up in Vermont and it wasn't her dad anyway, my sister bought it and split the money three ways, and her husband Steve built the porch grandpa never finished and screened it in, keeping the same heavy loud screen door to screech rusty slam every time, like the old days, often on someone's small fingers. Inside it's still almost the same, at least the last time I went, we can't get up there much anymore, boys in college, or playing football or working summer jobs at the shore. Same fieldstone fireplace, plain two by four frame and plywood never sheet rocked or insulated, why bother? It was only used in summer. No one could drive in after it snowed.

Camps, we call them in Lewis County, "God's Country" my grandpa said--cottage and even cabin are too grand. This one was fancy for its electric lights and stove, but had no TV. Grandma's aprons still hang on nails in the hall-like kitchen no one can walk through if someone's washing up or opening the tiny old stove. They have chickadees on them, those birds are everywhere, clothes-pinned on curtain rods, thumbtacked into pine board walls. She called the dirt road leading in her Chickadee Lane. There was no bath or shower--just a toilet I don't want to think might have flushed downriver from where we swam. A pump for this and the two sinks that made a stunning loud grinding sound when water, brown, not black, that we could not drink until it was boiled, splashed out of the faucets.

We washed in the river, and swam all day. Dangerous current. I'm sure now mom was always terrified we would drown. A game--swim against the current and stay still. Remember to swim diagonal to get anywhere, and with the current was too fast but so fun. Rocks like little islands, the size of couch pillows or overstuffed armchairs or ottomans. Some of them secret, submerged, we'd fight to find them first so we could walk on water. My sister was so small, we splashed her, we helped her out to the rock islands and left her stranded there until our parents heard and made us bring her back, we'd race up the steep front embankment where sharp grass stabbed our waterlogged feet and dragonflies thickened the air, dotted the towels we slung on the clothesline between the pines, landed their iridescence on our hair. We fought about whose dragonfly was better, who got the bathroom first, who had to sleep in the stifling attic rooms where roofing nails like tiny fangs waited to bleed your head when you woke too fast from the mildewed mattresses on the floor. Those rooms had no doors. We fought over the last hotdog bun or pink popsicle. Which was better, ketchup or mustard, and who got to be Miss Scarlet in our usual game of Clue.

(continued on next slide)

# My Poem Turned Essay, Continued...

I hated her sometimes, hated being there with just family, then hated going home to a stuffy house with no river in the yard, TV a small consolation. I think now there should be a small metal box somewhere, like in the movie *Amelie*, that would hold things from our childhood, but what would we put in that box? And who? How could I now, as it all belongs to my sister and her kids, and I guess that bothers me, and it bothers me that it bothers me, and don't I suck, I never wanted the camp for my own, I didn't have the money, and we live in jersey, how would we use it? She's there. Death showed my mother's sisters for who they were-- Joan sad but silent, Charlene loud in demanding denial, blatantly wanting her share, my mother in the middle, in shock, the moderator, often losing her cool. When my mother goes, and my father, my sister will be there, I'm five hours away. Am I glad or sorry? I hate that she invited us to my niece Sage's graduation party picnic to be held there, though she knows we can't go. I would hate it if she didn't invite us too.

I see her kids still climbing into the flatbed canoe with its faded winter squash- colored lifejackets hanging loose on their sunburned necks. Her kids fighting over the best spot on the picnic bench at the kitchen table to grab the last brownie. Her kids fighting over the cramped summer house when she dies, who'll take the painted chickadee lane sign if no one wants the camp? Which sibling moderating, which drowning in the current when it's our parents failing, moving, selling, rolling downstream?

\*\*\*\*

*\*\*\*Peter talked to us about what makes a poem a poem and not an essay. This piece wanted to include a great deal of detail and to explain a little. That's prose. A poem shows primarily—image and sound and shape—and you make your own conclusions. Some mystery, in a poem, but not confusion.*

## Day 5—Two Prompts and the Poems That Inspired Them

### 1<sup>ST</sup> PROMPT

- ❑ Write a **protest poem** that subtly presents its case.
- ❑ Experiment with diction, sound or form.
- ❑ Begin a sentence with the word “BUT” about 2/3 of the way down the page and argue with yourself.
- ❑ Tell a secret, etc.

**Before doing this prompt we read a long poem that was all questions by W.S. Merwin called “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Field.”**

**My students would LOVE this—and I think specifically asking them to do a question/protest poem would be great!**

\*\*\*\*

***FOR MY OWN POEM** I decided to do the questions and a personal kind of protest—knowing my own passionate political views I avoided that—could be a rant fit only for Face Book. I really enjoyed this one and read it at the last day’s presentation, along with “TO You, US America.” “Deal Breakers,” to the right here, is in a second or third draft.*

#### Deal Breakers

Do you frequently arrive late? Do you care? Does he?  
Who pays the second or third time?  
Who suggests the first bill split?  
When do you tell him you have children--three?  
Does he want children of his own? Why not?  
Are you uncomfortable with your body?  
Do you dress or undress in front of him?  
If so, how old are you? Do you tell him?  
Do you tell how much you weigh?  
Would it be a deal breaker if he asked you?  
Is it always naked? Partially clothed?  
In the dark? Lights on? Shades drawn?  
With the door locked? With no one in the house?  
What if you have to go to the bathroom  
in the middle of things, do you hold it?  
If you can’t and then when you come back  
he’s done, is that a deal breaker? Do you fake it?  
What if you fart? Do you acknowledge?  
If he does, is that a deal breaker?  
Does it matter if the dogs are watching?  
If they jump up on the bed? If you start  
laughing and it’s over? If neither of you care?  
Are you weird if you prefer dogs  
to people? Do you want to be weird?  
Do you want to want to be weird, or  
not to want to? Why or why not?

--Svea Barrett



## Day 5, Second Prompt and My Very Rough Draft

This prompt was meant to be done after seeing the exhibit at the Noyes Museum, but as I used that in my Talking to America poem, I used our trip to the Stockton Art Faculty Exhibit on campus as subject matter.

### **PROMPT:**

**Write a poem responding to a piece of art that surprises or disappoints you.**

**Begin your poem with a subordinating conjunction.**

**Mention a wine, a kind of tree, and a retail store you like.**

**Secret, lie, surprise, etc.**

*I don't like this one at all. It needs a lot more work—maybe it will even be discarded, but I tried! I think it's important to talk to kids about my own weak poems and why I think they are weak—and why this is important to know!*

### **Faculty Art show**

Pita squares and hummus.  
Bruschetta on mini French breads.  
Lemon squares. The wine was upstairs.  
With the plaster sculptures of disembodied women-- torsos, perky breasts, hairless vaginas. No heads or feet except for the life-sized one face down, as though she'd just been pushed or thrown, red light beneath, hair strewn on the ground. Some of the torsos were bent over. They had vaginas too. It was the focus. The plaster woman on the ground did too.

Yes, downstairs, brownies at the snack table.  
Iced tea and water next to prints of cats.  
Torsos upstairs with the wine-- ID required.  
I watched an older couple. Waited for the awkward silence, head turn, pointing to a friend across the room. But they stopped. Stood. Looked. Looked some more. They said nothing to each other.  
*Beat.*

Moved on to the found wood furniture sculpture and YA book illustrations, enlarged. Ate a brownie. The husband ate a lemon square. The wife drained her glass of wine.

## Last Two Days—Revision, Etc.

Peter Murphy's Words of Wisdom  
(to be used with students during the  
revision process):

- ❑ Poetry is like rock candy. The string is the weird variables of the prompts to include. The subconscious is the crystals. Together they make the rock candy poetry that would never work without both!
- ❑ Sometimes showing a fresh draft to just one person is a good way to introduce it to the world—the new poem—the “shitty” first draft—is like a newborn. IT needs to grow up and be trained.
- ❑ If you think you are blocked, lower your expectations. Or try asking, what am I afraid of? Then, what am I afraid to write about? Write that and destroy it. Then you may be ready to write.
- ❑ Poetry is about the great abstractions of the world—love, loss, hate, death, etc. Metaphor uses a physical thing to convey the abstract. You can't explain an abstraction with an abstraction, so don't do it in your poetry!

## Handouts and Materials I will Use with Students:

- ❖ **Writers on Revision—quotes from famous writers on writing.**
- ❖ **Writers on Poetry—same as above.**
- ❖ **The Johari Window Diagram—about self knowledge.**
- ❖ **Wisdom from Keats and Coleridge.**
- ❖ **Murphy's Style Sheet for Revising Poetry.**

## It had to End! ):

\*\*\*\*

I haven't been so inspired to write and bring assignments back to my writing students in a very long time.

Thank you Peter Murphy, ATI and the generous administrators who provided this scholarship opportunity—many students will benefit for years!

(photo: "chicken man" from the Noyes Museum exhibit)

