

from His eyes; realized they were mine as I bowed my head and a crystal tear fell to the cold marble floor below.

The blood of Christ. Amen.

Church—gothic, beautiful, sad. Stain-glass windows depicting the Stations of the Cross, while the cool sea breeze gently blows through the crack. St. Camillus, Rockaway. Dark, wood, very hard benches but somehow not so cold. People wear their bathing suits, shorts, and flip-flops to mass, only lasts a half hour. Can't wait to get out and go to the beach. I think Father Burke has the same idea. Funny old man, tells jokes, loves the Mets, sometimes wears a baseball cap. Hard to believe he screamed at my mother during confession when she was twelve, probably drunk, I've seen him at Hickey's.

Peace be with you. And also with you.

A religion based on one man's life, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Light of the World, Our Savior. So much pain, so much sorrow, so much suffering. All for us, all for heaven. We follow Him, we love Him, we are told He loves us. We must follow Him, be His servants. We shall be rewarded in Heaven. The Kingdom of God is ours. Why then so much pain, so much sorrow, so much suffering to those who follow?

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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4

Thirteen Ways of Looking at an Egg An Assignment in Generation and Revision

Alys Culhane

I am gathering up my supplies and preparing to teach English 203, "Introduction to Creative Writing," when my office-mate Donna walks into the room. Before me on my desk are pens, overhead transparencies, assignment sheets, freewrites, my journal—and two cartons of eggs.

Noticing the eggs, Donna asks, "Alys, what are you doing with those eggs? Are you going to have an egg toss?"

"No, my students and I are going to write about them."

A look of consternation crosses Donna's smooth forehead. "Why?" she asks.

"It's an experiment, an exercise in observation. I'm thinking that it is when writers abandon their set ideas about form that they come up with some of their best writing," I reply.

Carefully putting the eggs in my backpack, I explain that I'd gotten the idea for the assignment from Robert Persig, the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. He finds that asking writers to write about small objects such as bricks, quarters, and the backs of their thumbs forces them to come up with something original to say, since they have nothing to imitate.

Donna looks dubious as I head out the door, and this worries me even more. Although I sound confident, I am apprehensive about this assignment.

My fears are related to the fact that I'm not sure what, if anything, my students and I will learn about writing. To reassure myself, I take deep breaths and remind myself that the best writing comes about when writers take risks—and that, for sure, is what we are going to be doing this particular semester.

Take This Fish and Look at It

Most of the day's class is conventional. We spend the majority of our time freewriting and discussing Samuel Scudder's "Take This Fish and Look at It." In "Take This Fish," Scudder gives an account of his experiences as a student observer. He goes to study with Louis Agassiz, a well known and respected professor of natural history. Scudder hopes that Agassiz will teach him more about entomology. However, after Agassiz asks Scudder a few questions, he gives him a fish, a haemulon, and tells him to observe it. As Scudder learns in this three-day exercise, "seeing" involves "looking."

In our discussion of the Scudder essay, many valid points are made. Some feel that Agassiz is asking for trouble by having an entomology student observe a fish. Others think that Scudder is equally insane for going along with Agassiz's plan.

"What would you do if you found yourself in Agassiz's class and were asked to observe a fish?" I ask.

"I'm a business major. I'd drop the course," says Ken.

"What if it was, like this course, a general education requirement?" Michael asks.

"I guess I'd have to learn to like fish," says Ken.

Others saw the merit of Agassiz's observation exercise.

Roger says that the story showed the importance of detail. And Amy, making the connections between observation and art, suggests that "many artists have probably been asked by their teachers to do exercises that at first they did not understand."

Barb had a take that makes for a good segue into the egg exercise. She notes that in a previous creative writing class, she and her classmates were asked to observe pine cones for two weeks, and to enter their observations into their journals. Making a comparison to Scudder's situation, she reads a portion of her freewrite out loud:

I could identify with Scudder's reluctance to perform the task and or at least his lack of understanding in the beginning. But like me, not only did he discover and learn more about the fish (pine cone), but he also learned more about himself. He discovered how writing motivates and enhances the discovery process and is actually a powerful way of thinking. The professor substantiates that when he says that "a pencil is one of the best of eyes . . ." I discovered observing the pine cone that the more I discovered the more I wanted to discover. It became exciting and challenging to learn more than I had previously known.

A conversation about Barb's freewrite follows her reading. The writers are incredulous that Barb's former creative writing teacher had the nerve to ask her students to carry around and write about a pine cone. And they are surprised to see that she saw it as being a positive experience.

"Better you than me," says Sammy, shaking his head.

A lull in the conversation. I reach into my knapsack and pull out the eggs. Seeing the carton, the class collectively emits a loud groan.

"We aren't going to be writing about eggs, are we?" asks Sammy.

"I'd rather write about pine cones," says Ben.

Ignoring these and other remarks, I stride around the inside of the circle, and with great ceremony, have each writer choose an egg. Some deliberate, while others quickly make their choices. I then give a brief overview of the entire assignment, and a specific exercise for the next class.

"For the next six weeks we'll observe these eggs. And in the following six weeks we'll use your data in our revisions. So keep your egg with you at all times, and of course, bring it to class," I say.

I also caution writers that they were not intentionally to fold, spindle, or in any way mutilate their eggs. I add, "If your egg breaks, put its remains in an airtight container. Or get another egg. The most important thing is that you continue your observations."

"I can't carry this egg around with me all the time. I work in a factory," says Ken.

"Hire an egg sitter," suggests Michael.

"And write about it," I add.

"If I'm seen carrying this egg around, I'll be labeled the dorm idiot," wails Trish.

"They'll be envious once they learn that you are doing a class assignment," I reply.

The class ending, I explain that the assignment for the following Thursday is to come up with 50 direct observations about the egg. The students again look aghast.

"It's brown, round, and came from a chicken," says Sammy, tossing his egg up and down in his hand.

"Hey, yours looks just like mine," says Ken.

Looking at my own brown, round chicken egg, I don't see much more than Sammy or Ken do. Like them, I realize that I too am going to have to be pushing my powers of observation.

In- and Out-of-Class Exercises

For the next four sessions, we come to class with 50 observations or 200 total for each observer. And we began each meeting by telling one another three unusual things about our eggs. The only rule is, no one can repeat an already given observation. Predictably, the first few responses elicit the usual observa-

Intrigued by these and other findings, we ask one another questions and make like-observations. For example, we as a class collectively discover that some of us can fit our eggs into our mouths and some of us can not. And in an attempt to determine if eggs all spin at the same rate of speed, we have Kurt and Kyle (identical twins) get down on the floor, spin their eggs, then exchange them. (Through this controlled experiment, we determine that no two eggs spin at the same rate of speed.)

In addition to doing out-of-class observations, we complete numerous in-class egg exercises including looping, cubing, and clustering. Another exercise includes writing for twenty minutes about a "bad egg." We also describe our eggs to an alien, write lists of how we'll dispose of our eggs, and write radio advertisements in which we try to sell our eggs. After six weeks of observing eggs, those who still have intact eggs take them to the edge of the local woods and hit them with golf clubs.

Not only do we as writers generate a great deal of useful material, but the aforementioned assignments also bring about some very interesting digressions. And, believing that verbal narratives inspire good writing, I encourage talk. Some of the observations lead to discussions about what it's like to be different, the responsibilities of being a parent, the pros and cons of abortion, the ethics of recycling, and the necessity of violence. (This topic inspired by Amy, who wisely noted that most of the suggestions for getting rid of eggs are violent.) And the question, do chickens have teeth? starts what I eventually call our "collective oral history"—an ongoing discussion of our dental histories.

Richard Hugo's *Triggering Town*: From Generation to Revision

The first half of the six-week assignment being over, we each have approximately seventy-five pages of observations. Understandably, we are all nervous going into the second half of this assignment. It is one thing to generate ideas, but it is quite another to do something with them. How, we wonder, might we make the great leap from unfinished to finished work? Fortunately, I had chosen Richard Hugo's *Triggering Town* as a course text. At the beginning of the semester I'd reasoned that since Hugo's text had been beneficial in terms of my own understanding of revision, others would also find it useful. Also, I liked the way that Hugo used his writing to make his point—that writers' ideas often change as they compose their texts. My intuitive and somewhat arbitrary choice proves to be the right one. After we read the book, I begin the second six-week segment of this assignment by asking, what is Hugo saying about revision and how might it be applicable to us as writers?

In the subsequent class discussions, the class correctly defines a "trigger" as an idea that is a catalyst for another idea. Furthermore, we note how in his work, Hugo uses the metaphors of place and memory to move from one idea to the next. We also talk at length about our own revising processes. I admit

tions: chicken eggs are brown, odorless, oval, flavorless, filled with yoke, and have hard shells. Mixed with these responses, however, are more unusual ones. One writer notes that the shell of her egg is thicker at one end than the other. Another tells us that her egg has craters at one end. And I mention that my egg is brown in some places and pinkish-grey in others.

In the subsequent classes, our responses become more detailed. Finding that we have to push ourselves to come up with (no pun) fresh ideas, we begin experimenting. Eggs are rolled, measured, weighed, spun, poked, and dropped onto soft surfaces. Some apply various substances, such as ink, bleach, magic marker, vinegar, Vaseline, and crayon to their eggs. And they subsequently attempt to remove these markings with various types of stain removers. (We learn that Pinesol removes crayon and pencil marks but does not remove indelible marker.) We also discover that:

- When water is poured on an egg, it runs off.
- It (the egg) falls on its side, if you try to balance it on its points.
- When you spin an egg and squint, it looks like a blurry mass, like the lava inside a lava-dome lamp.
- It fits in the top of a trumpet.
- Scotch tape is easy to remove if applied to the surface of an egg.

We also made some rather imaginative associations:

- The bumps feel like Braille markings for the blind.
- My egg smells like rubber.
- It has dimples like a golf ball.
- It might sound dumb, but my egg smells like Easter.
- When I put the egg in a bowl of hot water, bubbles form on the surface of the egg. The bubbles look like fish eyes.

Our findings are not limited to direct observations. We write puns and make comparisons, such as, my egg is like a _____ because _____.

Some of the more novel of these comparisons include:

- My egg is like a Republican because it is brain dead.
- My egg is like someone with a hot temper because it is hard-boiled.
- An egg is like a water balloon dipped in dilute cement.
- An egg is like a safe because it holds something inside until cracked.
- An egg is like a record because it is easily broken.

The observations also evoke memories:

- When I was a kid, I used to draw pictures of people and their heads would look similar to the shape of this egg. The top of the head was bigger than the bottom.
- When I look at this egg it makes me think of my 86-year-old grandmother. She will not make eggs without picking out the white membranes attached to the yoke.

cal, and is subject to multiple interpretations. Moreover, we are quick to point out to one another when our own work exhibits these characteristics.

The Final Products

As writers, we become more confident about generating our own ideas, and as revisers, we began taking more risks. Even though the assignment is difficult (and some think too lengthy), it enables us to produce some of our best work. This becomes evident when we flip through the pages of our completed class books. The representative samples that follow illustrate how we adhered to and, at the same time, pushed the boundaries of poetic convention.

The trigger for Matt Kasper's prose poem is hatred. In his original writing, he began by writing about how he hated eggs and went on to write about how he hated red lights.

The Power of the Lights

I see the red light. I feel the strength this red light has. My mind, my body, and my car are trained to be stopped by it. We are all trained. Red is anger. We see red. Red alarms us. We turn red. Blood is red. Red is fear. Put all that into a bright light. That is power—the light restrains me, it restrains everyone. The opposite “don't walk” sign is not even flashing. My stereo has been stolen yet my foot is tapping uncontrollably. I hate thieves. Right now, I hate everyone. I wish I were here only for an eternity. I could only be so lucky.

An anonymous tinted window pulls up next to me. I hate faceless people. The road funnels from two lanes into one. Pole position is what we both want. I will win!—“Don't walk” is flashing now. The red light holds me still. The downfall of the red and the rising of the green. The opposite light is red now. Mine is still red, but I can feel it get weaker. I can crawl forward just a bit. IT'S FINALLY GREEN! Green freedom, green power, Green Peace, Green Lantern, a Green Bay Packer victory. I love green. It slings me forward like a catapult. I win. A thousand white doves have been released and trumpets are playing. I see another red light but I ride this high right through its barriers. A red light now flashes in my rearview mirror.

Memories of his grandmother's cooking trigger Roger Schimberg's prose-poem.

Patiently Waiting

It takes her forever to walk to the coop. I tell her to hurry. She walks slowly, one foot then another. The chickens are hungry and so am I.

“They're cluckin' away grandma.”

“So are you,” she tells me.

Her way of taking everything in as she walks frustrates me.

I'm in my youth. I walk fast.

“What are you looking at, grandma?”

that I am an overly compulsive reviser and will routinely do twenty or thirty drafts of an essay. By way of example, I pass around the ten drafts of my bad egg prose-poem. “I'm trying to be less critical of my work, and to revise less,” I say. My confession opens the door to further conversation since a few class members say that they have never been encouraged to revise extensively and, further, are reluctant to do so. As Jill admits, “I'd rather write a paper the night before and get a C than possibly revise it and get the same grade. Because if I revise it and get a C, that would be proof that I'm not all that good a writer.” Acknowledging Jill's comment, I add that in general, revision is risky because much of the time, writers don't know what they are going to end up with.

Using Hugo's text as a “trigger” to talk about revision also enables me to put what we will do for the next six weeks into context. On Tuesdays we refer to course readings in an attempt to define the characteristics of poetry, prose poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. And on Thursdays, we workshop. I stress that in their revisions writers needn't stick to the topic of the egg, but use the egg, as Hugo did, as a trigger, to generate other ideas. I also carefully explain that, in part, our job as workshopers/audience members is to help one another make these metaphorical and associative leaps. This input, I say, will make it easier for us to produce approximately twenty pages of finished writing (in any genre) by the semester's end and we'll select our best work for inclusion in a class book.

During the next six weeks, we assist one another in finding our writing triggers. We read one another's journal entries, conference, and note down what interests us as readers. One class exercise involves putting a list of “triggers” and “topics” on the board:

Trigger	Topics
poaching	illegal hunting
dropping	dropping out of school
fear of heights	airplanes
bad eggs	stink bombs in the dorms
Uncle Ted	grade school enemies
raw eggs	Rambo, macho guys
fits in a shotglass	Drunks, underage drinking

During the second half of the semester there are no complaints about not having anything to write about, nor are there any problems with determining what genre a given work might fit into. In fact, because there are no limitations put on length, form, or genre the majority of us feel freer to experiment.

In part, I attribute our high degree of revisionary flexibility to the fact that our definitional discussions complement what takes place in the workshop sessions. Our reading-related conversations focus as much on the commonalities inherent to these genres as they do on the differences—we agree, good poetry, fiction, and nonfiction contain description, detail, voice, is metaphorical-

She tells me that she is looking at life. I don't understand.

What is there to look at? What hasn't she seen before?

"Let's go grandma, how many eggs for French toast, how many for an omelet? That sounds even better."

She has always walked through life patient, looking. Those old shoes, worn through the heels from years of work on the farm.

They'll step a few more months, then no more walks to the coop.

"Come on grandma, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm just looking at life."

Now I understand.

When my egg broke in my carton, I began writing about the mess in the carton—the end result, this prose poem:

The Dumpster Diver

Shaking an egg carton, the old man begins dancing. His sunglasses balanced on the edge of his nose, he stretches his arms outward, and wiggles his fingers. The cat, balancing on the dumpster ledge, flicks her tail and dives into a cardboard box. He knows that to grow, to become strong and healthy, you need equal parts sunlight and water. But how do you collect sunlight if you don't have a spoon? As the God Lord has told him, "you dance until the sun goes down." He knows this as he knows that the wind will whistle at the women who ignore his curious glances.

And, although she plays with the form of this poem, and experiments with line breaks and stanzas, Barb Hyder's group members liked this, the original draft of her concrete poem:

13 Ways of Looking at an Egg

albino rock
 beneath a chicken
 armor for an infant fowl
 with my hashbrowns, toast, and coffee
 cradled in an apron fresh from the hen house
 teenage pockets like squirrel cheeks at homecoming
 a forgotten Christmas wreath the birds call home
 a vessel carrying Mork to Mindy from Ork
 brightly colored in a basket at Easter
 delicate and fragile as crystal
 cracking under pressure
 a brain on drugs
 in a dozen.

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Elements of Alternate Style

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