

Creative Writing Exercises Based on the Poetry of

CARMEN TAFOLLA

Poet Laureate of San Antonio, Texas

Author of the poetry collections

Curandera

Sonnets to Human Beings

Sonnets and Salsa

Rebozos

and other works of fiction and nonfiction
for children and young adults

Incorporating creative writing exercises created

by Julia Alvarez (poet, bestselling novelist)

JoAnn Balingit (Poet Laureate of Delaware)

Naomi Shihab Nye (poet, bestselling novelist, anthologist)

Dave Oliphant (publisher, poet and translator)

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Sofia Starnes (Poet Laureate of Virginia)

Edited by Bryce Milligan

Exercises are numbered to correspond with the curriculum guide provided on this website.

Note: Some exercises are addressed to teachers, some directly to students.

Free for use by teachers using Carmen Tafolla's books.

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Poem I:
This River Here

Ex. I.1:

Consider these things as you read “This River Here:”

- What physical element does the poet use to connect the events of the poem?
- How does the contrast between “right here” and “a little farther down” affect what the poem wishes to say? What is the poet trying to express?
- In several places the poet uses subtle alliterations—or just sounds echoing each other—to draw our attention to a moment. Does this echo the sound of a river? Does it echo the rhythm of life?
- The poet uses literary exaggeration, or hyperbole, to create emphasis (the grandpa “scrubbing” souls, sweat and tears that mix with river water, fear that “drips”).

Think of a physical element—water, fire, sand, rock... something along those lines—and use it to connect several moments in a person’s life—yours or an imaginary one, if you prefer. You might recreate scenes, where the element appears, as the poet has done in this poem. Or you might do something different. Experiment with using hyperbole to emphasize an idea or image. At the end, do you think you have a poem? What makes it a poem?

—Exercise provided by Sofia Starnes, Poet Laureate of Virginia.
Author of *Fully Into Ashes*.

Ex. I.2:

A simple but powerful exercise is simply to find a place you really love, as Carmen sings of this river that means so much to her. “This river here,” she says more than once, and “Right here” begins most of the stanzas. The reader feels like he or she is standing beside the poet, being shown something very special. Think of a phrase you like that refers to that place, or invokes it. Repeat and chant your phrase throughout the poem as a thread; include history or personal memory, or imagined memory, or descriptive elements of the place, and see what happens! As you write the poem, listen to see how the repeated phrase comes alive and takes on different meanings.

— Exercise provided by Naomi Shihab Nye, poet, novelist, anthologist

Ex. I.3:

“This river here” has many universal elements because, for most people who live close to the land, rivers are important sources and markers. Yet this poem is also about a very specific place, significant to the life of the poet and to her family.

Choose a natural setting where you have felt comfortable in the past, or a place you imagine that you would find peaceful—a park, your backyard, even an image only seen in a photo-

graph. If you can only get to this place in your head, try to find an appropriate place to write that will be consistent with the place-based poem you will be writing. The poem does not have to describe the setting, but the feeling you get from that setting. Let your senses drift, and let the setting influence the flow of the writing process.

—Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*

Ex. I.4:

There is an implied metaphor throughout this poem—that time is a river. Tafolla never says this, but the historical moments that she describes all seem to “flow” with the river itself. Identify the various types of history involved in the poem, “This River Here.” Personal history and public history, ethnic, cultural and religious history, linguistic history, are some examples. Notice that there are different levels of diction that help to differentiate these. These are historical “lenses” through which the poet examines a single place. How and why they are important parts of the poem? Think about your own life and write a poem that describes an event using different historical lenses.

— Exercise provided by Dave Oliphant, publisher of Prickly Pear Press, poet and translator, historian of jazz

Poem II:

Right in One Language

Exercise II.1:

“Right in one language” contains an implicit question: “How do you choose the language in which you write a line of poetry?” This poem expresses the poet’s perspective on language, contrasting it to “agents” and “critics” and those who want her to “Think Shaker room” when she writes a “garden growing wild.”

Tafolla also engages here in the code-switching—using English and Spanish, as well as regional TexMex-Spanglish—a technique which throughout Chicana/o literature transforms the our everyday vernacular speech into an effective literary language. Tafolla even code-switches ideas and cultural backgrounds when she calls Chaucer (another code-switching poet) an “old Pachuco playing his TexMex onto the page...”

This poem is aesthetically complex and intellectually exciting; but it also has a message to convey. Map the geography of this poem that takes us through several pages from “glares hairy brows over foreign words” to the “two tongues inside this kiss.” Find yourself in this geography and write a poem from that perspective.

Visually, this poem is “all over the page”—fitting with the topic; however, the lines have a visual rhythm, leaping across the page at intervals like tongues of wildfire creeping out, horizontally across dry grassland. How does the spacing on the page reflect the meaning of the words?

This poem takes a stand on an issue of importance to the poet. What issues are important to you? Choose an issue that is important to you, and phrase it as a question to yourself. Write

a poem that answers that question in more than one way. If you know more than one language, experiment by using both. Experiment with creating or enhancing meaning by the appearance of the lines on the page.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*

Exercise II.2:

Background: What it means to be bilingüe/bilingual is a recurring theme in all genres of Chicano/a literature. Living “across borders” and in-between languages is a way of life for all immigrants and their descendants, a condition their present families know—and their ancestors knew—intimately. Bilingualism is the way of life for increasing numbers of Americans. The trauma of losing or retiring one’s mother tongue is an American story, and a global story. The empowerment of saving and deploying one’s native language is also part of that story. Tafolla’s poem, “Right in One Language,” grapples with that story and its implications.

Language is a person’s cultural keystone. Language choice implicates the speaker politically, socially, economically, emotionally, artistically—in almost every aspect of living. Power struggles surround language choice at the street-level, and also in the realm of the imagination. This poem asks, How does it feel to have to choose when, where and with whom to speak one’s language(s)? How must it feel to be forced to favor a second language over your preferred or mother tongue?

Writing that alternates between different languages called “code switching,” a term that became more well known with the rise of Chicano/a Literature in the 1960s and 1970s. While “Right in One Language” takes a challenging stance on the bilingualism debate, its overall tone is playful, beginning with the title. Though the poet disagrees with the “gringos” who insist her words should “Match-Match,” she flaunts her “Mix-Mix” without bitterness. She gleefully evokes a father of the English canon, Geoffrey Chaucer, in defense of her polyglot poem. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are written in middle English liberally larded with French, a style that Tafolla subtly suggests Chaucer’s readers were quite used to. This literary allusion to Chaucer helps make her point that to be bilingual is not a problem. To make use of all vocabularies that make up our “hybrid wealth” is not only fun but natural—is, in fact, sensible. The poem (and the reader) can take it. The poem and the reader know that “There is room/here/for two/tongues/inside this/ kiss.”

Discussion Questions and Exercises:

1. A language warm-up suggested by Ben Johnson, a blogger at Edutopia: Engage students in the ancient wisdom of metaphors and sayings, that is, *dichos*.

“To get students thinking and using the Spanish language, I print a dicho (saying) such as, “En boca cerrada no entra mosca!” (in a closed mouth, flies don’t enter) on the board and asked them to decipher the Spanish and then the true meaning. Once we get beyond the literal interpretations, then students can derive approximate meanings. Some dichos just stumped them: “En casa del herrero, cuchillo de palo” (in the house of

the blacksmith, a wooden knife). The key is not to give the students the answers. Students begin to see the deeper messages in the dichos and are able to transfer that skill to see deeper messages in Spanish humor and literature.

(Adapted from *Edutopia*, Ben Johnson's Blog, post on "Teacher Leadership and teaching abstract thinking." January 13, 2012)

2. Tafolla's "Right in One Language" is meant to be performed as well as read from the page. Have students listen to or watch the poet recite the poem, without handing out copies yet. After the performance, ask the class to respond to these questions:

- What do the "agents" and "the Man" want the poet to do to her poem? Who are the agent and the Man?
- How many languages do you hear in the poem?
- Ask any Spanish speaker to repeat a phrase/line she liked. Ask any English speaker to repeat a phrase/line she liked. Ask why they liked that particular line of the poem.
- Read the "Leave it to Beaver" stanza again—Stanza three. Ask the class, What is "Leave it to Beaver"? What is that 1960s TV family doing in this poem?
- Ask the class, without yet showing them a text of the poem, what they think this poem looks like on the page. (form/ free verse/ line)

3. Pass out copies of the poem: have the class read stanza 7, the Chaucer stanza. Talk about the suggestions the poet makes about her choices re language and Chaucer's use of languages. Perhaps bring a sample from *The Canterbury Tales* for the class to read and look at.

4. Write some Spanish lines and "Mix-Mix" lines from the poem on the board. Ask students to offer sample approximate meanings, in the spirit that Ben Johnson describes. The goal is to get students to think abstractly and figuratively.

—Exercise provided by JoAnn Balingit, Poet Laureate of Delaware.
Author of *Forage*

Poem III:

Marked

Exercise III.1:

Wonderful poems and prose poems can be written about what our parents, teachers, and other authority figures tell us not to do and to do. (Remember the famous line, "Do as I say, not as I do"?) "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid, is one of my favorite examples: it's one long paragraph of all the instructions a mother gives a girl in order to ensure that she will grow up decent and good. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés wrote her own takeoff, based on the Kincaid piece, "Muchacha," from the point of view of a Latina mother. Another favorite is the opening paragraph of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, *The Woman Warrior*: "You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born."

What we are told not to do or to say is often a closed door that writers must open in order to get past the censors that keep us from telling our stories.

“Marked,” by Carmen Tafolla is a poem in which the mother tells the daughter both what not to do and what to do. It accomplishes so much in its 22 short lines. I admire its wonderful economy. Note for instance, how it’s only via the “refrain” of *m’ija* (my daughter) that we know that it is a mother speaking. Her big picture advice (“Make your mark proud/ and open,/ brave...”) is grounded in specific details that bring it home (“like a piece of turquoise/ marked”). Through simple but vivid details the mother covers a lot of ground: outlining the diversity of ways in which the daughter can make her mark in the world: from writing (with ink) to fertility from growing berries or babies, to activism, spilling her blood when necessary.

By making her marks on paper, the poet-daughter has ensured that her mother’s voice will not be lost, erased. In other words, the mother’s advice has been followed.

Students can brainstorm, as a group or individually, on all the do’s and don’t’s they’ve been given. These prescriptions and proscriptions should be as detailed and specific as possible. Think of something your mother or father, your teachers, an older brother or sister or friend has told you not to do, or to do. Think of specific ways in which you might follow this advice, or not. Begin by writing down the advice itself in the voice of the person who gave it to you. See where it takes you, where you might end up.

Sharing this exercise aloud with a class can be hilarious!

— Exercise provided by Julia Alvarez, bestselling novelist, author of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

Exercise III.2:

On the surface, “Marked” asks us to pay attention to the tools with which we write, but the poet is also creating metaphors for different attitudes toward life. Does Tafolla’s characterization of those who write with pencils resonate for you? What images arise from the tools for writing names in the last stanza? A person who prefers the ability to erase their words could be tentative—or they could be a perfectionist. What do you think Tafolla means?

Is your writing utensil something you think about when you write? Do you consider where you write—the size and quality of the surface you write upon? Do you consider the environment in which you write? How does writing by hand differ from writing on a computer? Do these considerations matter differently for you in conjunction with certain kinds of writing? All these factors can contribute to the character of our poetry, and observing how they work for you will make you a more self-aware poet.

The idea of “making a mark” in life is played against the idea of being “marked” throughout the poem. A gang member might “tag” a building, marking territory. Tattoos can be seen as simultaneously making a mark and being marked. What other ideas play against each other in this poem?

Write a journal entry to express your responses to these questions and to this poem that draws our attention to what we write with. Consider what tools you use best to make your mark on life. Turn the journal entry into poetry.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*

Poem IV:
Voyage

Exercise IV.1:

Read “Voyage” aloud. Listen for the several repeating aspects of the poem. Think about the significance of the repeating line, in terms of the content and sense of the poem, and in the formal structure. Tafolla asserts that she is the “fourth ship.” She is using a metaphor to say that she is like a sailing ship in some way, but also that she is an unknown quantity, capable of new and unexpected actions.

Create a single-phrase metaphor for yourself. Carry it around in your mind for several days. Try repeating it in time with your walking. Keep notes of the phrases that come up naturally to go along with it. Gather the phrases that accumulate and write a poem that says who *you* really are.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*

Exercise IV.2:

“Voyage” has been around for over 30 years, and it is indeed a well-traveled poem, having been republished in nearly a dozen textbooks, and made into a popular poster. Originally included in Tafolla’s 1983 collection, *Curandera*, the poem created an enduring metaphor that mingles personal aspirations for a life of unencumbered creativity with a social critique of conformist lifestyles and incorporates an implied historical-political commentary on the Spanish invasion of the Americas. On the surface, “Voyage” is one of Tafolla’s simplest poems—a celebration of imagination and personal freedom; in reality, it is one of her more complex and powerful poems.

Examine the poem’s extended metaphor—the repeated assertion that the poet was the “fourth ship” trailing behind Columbus’s famous trio. Obviously she is on a different voyage—she is “lost at sea,” sailing without a map an imagined sea empowered by “moonbreezes.” She is vowed to her voyage, not to any particular discovery, and yet her voyage is all about discovery. The sea she sails is poetry itself, and each poem is a new discovery.

Note that this poem, which celebrates unbounded creativity and imagination, is written in a regular form: three five-line stanzas, each beginning with the same line, each ending with a variation of the same idea. Do you find the “form” of the poem restrictive? Why not?

Note how the metaphor works. She is not simply “like” this imaged fourth ship. She says that she *was* that fourth ship. As with all true metaphors, this is an impossible statement that must involve the reader’s imagination in order for it to be understood. The poet doubles the power, so to speak, by using a “reverse personification”—not giving a voice to an inanimate object, but by becoming that object.

What are you committed to? Create a metaphor that stands for something to which you are truly committed. Whatever it is that you choose to compare yourself to, make a list of things associated with it. Repeat the metaphor, expand it by using the details from your list. Mean what you write.

— Exercise provided by Bryce Milligan, publisher of Wings Press;
author of *Lost and Certain of It*

Poem V:
The Magic

Exercise V.1:

“The Magic” responds to a photograph with a poem that uses a formal structure. Identify the formal aspects of the poem and think about how they work in conjunction with the content. Identify how Tafolla has modified the traditional structure to make it her own. (Tafolla calls this poem an “almost sonnet.”) How does the fact that Tafolla dedicates the poem to the child in a photo resonate with the formal structure of the poem? How is a photograph like death (referred to in the last line)?

Does it matter that you cannot see the particular photograph that Tafolla refers to? Does it matter that she does not give us a source we can track down? Do you think the photograph is imagined or real?

Do you respond differently to various forms of poetry? What do “rules” do for a poem? You can make up the rules that govern a poem. They can be simple or complex. They can specify things like alliteration or rhyme, the number of lines in a stanza, how many syllables are in a line, etc. Try making up your own rules for a poem so that other readers will recognize that it has rules?

Poems inspired by other works of art are called ekphrastic. Write an ekphrastic poem in response to a photograph, a painting or drawing, a musical piece, a dance performance; choose a form—or create your own form—that will help your poem to correspond (in your judgement) to the origin of your inspiration.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*

Poem VI:
Mujeres del Rebozo Rojo

Exercise VI.1:

“Mujeres del Rebozo Rojo” could be described as an infinite exclamation, a sunrise anthropomorphized, a brilliant visual image with resonating audible alliteration, rhyme and rhythm—or, it could be a very specific cultural statement about a group of women who wear a particular color of shawl. How would *you* describe this poem? Does it speak more clearly to women than men? Does it matter if the reader is a bilingual person? Would an artist appreciate this poem better or more fully than a non-artist?

Freewrite a response for ten to fifteen minutes, but focus on one physical thing—an article of clothing, a walking stick, a tool, anything that you associate closely with a particular person. Then, look over what you have written, and analyze the feelings and observations the poem aroused. Choose one aspect of what you have produced and craft your own poem.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*

Exercise VI.2:

“Mujeres del Rebozo Rojo” begins by asking the question “Who are we?” The same question is asked again in the beginning of the second stanza. At the end of the poem, the same words are reversed to make a statement about “who we really are.” Poets often use this kind of word play to end a poem because it “feels” final in some way. Can you think of another poem that works this way?

Write a poem that asks a specific question, and then answers it, using similar language in both the question and the final answer.

— Exercise provided by Bryce Milligan, publisher of Wings Press;
author of *Lost and Certain of It*

Poem VII:

La Malinche

Exercise VII.1:

Carmen Tafolla’s poems refer to historical characters in ways not always found in our history books. In “La Malinche” we see how one can interpret certain actions and motivations in different ways so that one person’s hero can be another person’s traitor. We meet a young Indian girl whom some see as a traitor to her people and others see as the mother of a new race; we meet an Emperor whom some see as a doomed and tragic hero and others see as vain, bloodthirsty and foolish. We meet an invading soldier whom some see as a bringer of civilization and others see as vain, bloodthirsty and greedy. Choose one of these persons and imagine meeting him/her today. Then write a dialog you might have with that person. Choose some other controversial historical figure and do the same thing.

— Exercise provided by Margaret Randall, human rights activist
and author

Exercise VII.2:

Like “Voyage,” Carmen Tafolla’s “La Malinche” rewrites a familiar story from Spain’s *encuentro* with the Americas from a perspective that is often unheard. Arguably, the most prominent woman of that *encuentro* narrates “La Malinche.” How is this narrator’s identity important to building the poem? What names do others give her? How have the meanings of these names changed since the poem was written (in the late 1970s)? What names does she give herself? Overall, how do languages (at least three) and naming figure in this poem?

Write a poem that sees history (long ago, not-so-long ago, yesterday) from the margins, from a perspective not likely to be found in a history book or newspaper. Find and use words from languages that represent those perspectives.

— Exercise provided by Kamala Platt, author of *On the Line*