

## Generating Poems from Epigraphs

I use two related prompts: 1) reading a lot and 2) keeping a notebook.

I read not only poetry, but other genres as well. Often a word or a phrase seems to jump off the page. So that I will remember it, I jot it in my notebook, put quotes around it, and cite the author and the book. This happened when I read Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*. I liked part of one of his sentences.

One day, shortly after watching my husband give a presentation, I scanned my notebook. My experience and the words from Cunningham came together and prompted a poem in which I used the phrase as an epigram (see my poem "Wife of Many Years" below).

Here are some phrases you might use as epigraphs in creating your own poem:

"Dogs are better than human beings because they know but do not tell." (Emily Dickinson)

"[I] don't think men will fly for a thousand years." (Wilbur Wright, 1901)

". . . where the spirit horses drink." (Robert Bly)

"And then she drank from the jaguar cup." (anonymous)

"[He] forgets that ants could eat him or that a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on his head." (Garcia Lorca)

"Grace has a grand laughter in it." (Marilynne Robinson)

"Liars prosper." (anonymous)

"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." (Sylvia Plath)

"Nothing would give up life: / Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath."  
(Theodore Roethke)

"Yes, in distant centuries man will be a Cyclops . . . a being with one eye only."  
(Dr. Thomas Hall Shastid)

"In the future all tomatoes will be square." (anonymous)

Wife of Many Years by Mary Bushman-Carlton

“She sees him, briefly, as a stranger might ...” (Michael Cunningham)

You didn't anticipate  
this occasion:

sitting in the audience,  
he, set apart as in a clearing;  
you, admiring his patient diagrams  
and quaint jokes;

you, wanting everyone there  
to understand who  
claims his rib.

You've stopped hurrying for a change, behold  
his pleasing architecture,  
hidden rooms you often squander,

see him through tourist eyes.

No, you see him  
in lambent afternoon light,

his outline colored in,  
the half glasses on his nose  
neutralized.

But why are you surprised?  
Didn't his first valentine  
tumbling from your crepe-papered box

make all the others seem small and dry  
as cornflakes?