

Ben Gunsberg

Write a Rhapsody

The term “rhapsody” is derived from the Greek *rhapsôidein*, which means “to stitch songs together.” The first rhapsodists (or “rhapsodes”) were professional performers who traveled from town to town in ancient Greece reciting epic poems, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The poet would improvise a poem by combining various elements of these and other famous epics, all while drawing on a vast repertoire of myths, jokes, and anecdotes to spice up the performance.

Your rhapsodies need not be epic in character or prepared for performance, but for the purposes of this exercise they should follow a few basic guidelines, which I’ve listed below.

1. Effusive and Enthusiastic Expression of Feeling: Rhapsodies often get carried away with their subject, meaning you can cut loose while composing, particularly during your first draft. This is an opportunity for you to indulge in hyperbole, leap ecstatically between ideas, and deploy repetition to accelerate the poem’s tempo.

2. Improvisatory Character: Rhapsodies tend to be free-flowing poems that eschew rhyme schemes and metrical formalities. Your poem should possess an air of spontaneity—a sense of improvisation. You might establish a pattern, but don’t be afraid to break it!

3. Travel or Movement: In ancient times, Greek rhapsodes traveled from town to town to earn a living. With this in mind, try to evoke a sense of movement in your poem. You might include numerous place names to suggest travel across real or imagined landscapes. A rhapsody for summer camp, for instance, might meander from beach to cabin to dining hall, allowing readers to feel the excitement and/or despair that arises when one is separated from friends and family for five weeks of the summer.

4. Contrasted Moods: Because rhapsodies often seem swept away by emotion, they can careen between positive and negative moods. In a rhapsody for summer camp, for example, the dining hall might contain both the wretched drone of horseflies (negative) and a clean wedge of watermelon (positive).

Rhapsodies run the risk of unraveling into a confused mass that roll hither and thither, so it helps to build the poem around concrete places, ideas, and events. You might think of a particular place you’ve lived or visited or a transitional event, such as the summer between high school and college. I’ve written about my childhood experiences moving around the Midwest in “Rhapsody for Children of the Midwest,” which can be found here:

<http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/rhapsody-for-children-of-the-midwest-by-ben-gunsberg/>. Other examples include “Rhapsody” by Angie Estes: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/rhapsody> and Frank O’Hara’s “Rhapsody”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171386>.