

“In poetry, paying attention is the hardest thing,” the poet John Ashbery once said. In fact, he continued, “It’s the most difficult thing in the world. You have to *learn* to do it.” This assignment will flex your attentiveness muscles, and force you to draw upon resources of perception that you may be unused to exercising.

Begin by choosing a simple object—not a car or a living creature or anything representational like a painting, but rather something that you can hold in your hand and get to know with all your senses. Then write fifty descriptive sentences about it. The descriptions in each sentence should be limited to the object itself—if you describe how the object responds to your poking it or acting upon it in some other way, you’re cheating (example of cheating: “When I throw the rock at a window, it shatters”). Try instead to inhabit the object with all your senses. Scrutinize it. Smell it. Run your fingers along all its sides. Lick it, if it won’t make you sick. Your sentences should derive from your experience in perceiving the object with your fullest attention. Your descriptive sentences can include metaphors, of course, but make sure that they’re all sensory and accurate. You’ll be working hard by number 25. It may take you a couple of days to complete the assignment—and let it, because each fresh return to the object will open up new dimensions of perception. By 35, you’ll probably arrive at some transformative realizations.

By the time you get to 50, chances are that there will be the germ of a poem nestled within your sentences. Writing poetry is a process of discovery—even twofold discovery: one act of discovery occurs as you consider an object or idea closely and for an extended period, revealing more and more about its nature and complexities. The second occurs as you begin to understand more and more, through your own attentiveness, what drew you to the object or idea in the first place. Paying attention not only to the objects that speak to you but also to *why* they seem so crucial to your interest reveals the relationship that lies at the heart of poetry, and indeed at the heart of art—that is, the relationship between the dynamic, vibrant self and the dynamic, vibrant Other, whether that Other is another person or an object or an idea. Your fifty descriptive sentences say as much about you as they do about the object you’ve examined, and poetry lies in the patient and careful discovery of the ways in which the two entities—you and your object—interact with one another and change one another through the interaction.