

## From Susan Wooldridge's poemcrazy (excerpts from chapters 3 and 4)

I have a strong gathering instinct. I collect boxes, hats, rusty flattened bottlecaps for collages and creek-worn sticks to color with my hoard of Berol prismacolor pencils. When I was a kid I'd lie in bed imagining I was a squirrel who lived in a hollow tree, foraging for acorns, twigs and whatever it takes to make squirrel furniture.

Most of us have collections. I ask people all the time in workshops, Do you collect anything? Stamps? Shells? '57 Chevys? Raccoons? Money? Leopards? Meteorites? Wisecracks? What a coincidence, I collect them too. *Hats, coins, cougars, old Studebakers.* That is, I collect the **words**. Pith helmet, fragment, Frigidaire, Quarrel, love seat, lily. I gather them into my journal.

The great thing about collecting words is they're free; you can borrow them, trade them in, or toss them out. I'm trading in (and literally composting) some of my other collections—driftwood, acorns and bits of colored Easter egg shell—for words. Words are lightweight, unbreakable, portable, and they're everywhere. You can even make them up. *Frebrent, bezoncular, zuber.* Someone made up the word *padiddle*.

A word can trigger or inspire a poem; and words in a stack or thin list can make up poems. Because I always carry my journal with me, I'm likely to jot down words on trains, in the car, at boring meetings (where I appear to be taking notes), on hikes and in bed.

I take words from everywhere. I might steal *steel*, spelled both ways. *Unscrupulous.* I'll toss in *iron, metal* and *magnolias*. Whatever flies into my mind. *Haystack, surge, sidewinder.* A sound, *splash.* A color, *magenta.* Here's a chair. *Velvet. Plush.*

Dylan Thomas loved the words he heard and saw around him in Wales. "When I experience anything," he once said, "I experience it as a thing and a word at the same time, both equally amazing." Writing one ballad, he said, was like carrying around an armload of words to a table upstairs and wondering if he'd get there in time.

Words stand for feelings, ideas, mountains, bees. Listen to the sound of words. I line up words I like to hear, *Nasturtiums buzz blue grass catnip catalpa catalog.*

I borrow words from poems, books and conversations. Politely. Take *polite.* If I'm in a classroom, I just start chalking them onto the board. I don't worry about spelling or meaning. *Curdle. Cantankerous. Linoleum. Limousine.* Listen. *Malevolent. Sukulilli,* the Maidu Indian word for silly.

*Magnet cat oven taste tilt titter.* I call gathering words this way creating a wordpool. This process helps free us to follow the words and write poems. In Paradise, California, my students and I looked up insects in a field guide with names like *firebrat, jumping bristletail* and *slantfaced grasshopper.* Then, moving around the room, I asked each person for one word, any word

Everyone started tossing out words. *Tabulate. Magnify. Silence.* We could see the weight and value of each one. Someone said the word *no.* We put *yes* up there to balance it. Scott said *hate* and then *demolish.* We added *love* and *create* after talking about the importance of opposites. Then we looked for the opposite of *brick, idea, jealousy, tumbleweed* and *cloud.* We piled dozens of words on the board,

*toe joust marvel  
apparatus dome click  
tubed tailstripes  
flabbergast horse thought  
cumulus cumulo nimbus  
nom de plume zodiac zirconium flicker  
slip spin serendipity  
obsession pyromaniac two-tailed thrips  
adobe hypothermia  
frost dragon confetti tapioca  
observe slither slink snuggle snooze*

The rhythm, the music in the words, the circle of voices around the room, the associations, the well of minds casting out words like water in a fountain, words next to words in new ways and the look of them spreading across and down the page takes us to the state of mind poems come from I encourage people to toss foreign words into the wordpool. Just the sound can move us into another world very swiftly, like *avra,* breeze in Greek, or *petra,* rock. Add *petrified* and the Maidu word for water that sounds like a spring murmuring, *momoli.* Include place names like the ones I collected in Wales, *Abergavenny, Linthill* and *Skrinklehaven.*

Listed and tossed out this way, words begin to fall into poems by themselves. We put them together in unexpected ways, like *zodiac flicker, tree thought, tumbleweed sadness, magenta jealousy, cloud brick, summer ice, tapioca slithers.*

When I'm playing with words, I don't worry about sounding dumb or crazy. And I don't worry about whether or not I'm writing "a poem" *word pool. world pool, wild pool, whipoorwill, swing.* Words taken out of the laborious

structures (like this sentence) where we normally place them take on a spinning life of their own.

Sometimes I clip words, phrases and pictures from magazines to tape in my journal or arrange in collages. Once I clipped a rectangle of blue sky with a cloud trail and the words, *Do airplanes write your name in the sky?* For years I kept these clippings in a folder that came to mind as I drove home from my friend Jane's in Berkeley one fall, thinking about a seven-woman art show coming up.

I'd agreed to a project blending sculpture and writing. I planned to label objects and I wanted the words to look good...something made me think of tickets...I could tape cut-out, printed words on tickets. Perfect, I thought. A ticket lets you in somewhere. On one side of some tickets it even says, "Admit one." Like a poem, a ticket is small, often colorful and valuable, allowing entrance to a special place...I found a big blue roll of tickets...My two teenage kids helped me cut out words from a *New Yorker* story and tape them to tickets: *parachute, bamboo, black spaces*. The small, printed words gave the tickets a quiet, quirky authority, unlike words scribbled on cards. And stealing words from articles and poems felt like an adventure. We sat around the kitchen table excited about the words we clipped, including phrases like *searching hilarious, Lula let her cry, the first housekeeper* and *cold sheets*.

We went for nouns and verbs, *gathering daymoon, abandon, glow, jackhammer, extinguish, filter, China, contain, chamber*. Then the fun began, finding objects to label...we gathered an old globe, creek driftwood we'd colored with pencils, a pomegranate, a bristly magnolia seed pod, a scrub brush and a shoe among other things...I added photographs and collages.

We had a fine time labeling things. *Peach* went on the seed pod, *abandon boundary* on the globe, *sundial, north star, emperor, ruby* in the oak galls...*anger* for the stump of a burned-out green candle...*glow* for a white votive candle in a fragile dish. *Wolverine* was never placed.

Suddenly it seemed the objects could speak. They'd become poems themselves...one of our favorites was a squat, green squash with the label *answers* near its stem. The answer squash, we called it...a colored piece of wood labeled *anchovy* invited close scrutiny...a worn scrub brush was labeled *diamonds*.

Is this play, poetry, art or silliness? Who cares? My kids were excited and involved, pinning words everywhere...I gathered all the labeled things on a rickety, ancient card table and

hauled it to the gallery as my contribution to the show...There was *Don't let nobody speaking* for a ragged, canvas gym show. *Grazing* defined an almond. *Let me be spoke* for a hammer.

At the show's opening I pinned *Rustproof* to a stiff fellow and soon people began choosing word tickets as name tags...the room filled with people labeled *window, fortune, mingle, ghost of the sun, searching hilarious, and raccoon eyes*...I noticed the new names seemed to change people. A shy, silent fellow got *underwater voices* and began to babble. *Fortune* wore hers for weeks to bring her luck..."*Into the night, with dark serious eyes,*" I recorded in my journal, "*is whispering to mars.*" Later I learned *ultraviolet's* romance with *window* began that night. I've heard they're married now and have a baby.

Exercises:

- Toss words, say them, sing them, chant, notice and let yourself get excited about them
- Collect nouns and verbs especially. We want the heart and guts: *blood, sweat* and *tears*. We want the action: *lure, slink, release, trickle, churn*
- Label things strangely. Put *lightning* on a shoe, *trigger* on a stone. Label a car, *spoon*. This turns everything upside down and loosens us up.
- Pair verbs with nouns. You might wind up with a *tarantula spin* or *table exiting the long room*
- Collect words for things you love. Mix these with your verbs.
- Create a word ocean for your classroom
- Create your personal universe of language that includes at least one word that's an important abstraction, like *truth*.

See  
where  
words  
take  
you.

