TO A NEW ERA: TEACHING GUIDE

Joanna Fuhrman is willing to waive her fee for virtual visits for instructors teaching her book. To reach her, email jofuhrman@gmail.com

WRITING PROMPTS:

1) The Adjunct Commuter" poems (pg. 6 and pg. 61) were inspired by recurring dreams that Joanna Fuhrman had about riding on a bus. For this exercise, think about an image that appears often in your dreams. The assignment isn't to write about the dream, but instead to write about the recurring dream image in a new context so that the process of writing is similar to the process of dreaming. Before you start writing, pick three favorite poetry books or novels. Pick five concrete nouns and five verbs from each book. Use these words to write a poem where your dream image is placed in a new context.

2) There are two sestinas in the book: "Are We Having Fun Yet?" (pg. 8) and "Broken Singularity, Kali Tribe Sestina" (pg. 56). Look up what a sestina is here and here, and write your own. Vary your syntax and make sure you aren't end-stopping too many lines. In other words, don't end more than a few sentences at the end of a line.

3) "Song of Flatbush" (pg. 10) consists of one long sentence formatted in couplets. For this assignment, write your own one-sentence poem in couplets. You might want to use the word "yes" to start the poem, and the poem may be a response to a person (or an inner voice) who criticizes your lifestyle. Before you start, you might want to make a list of small things that make your life challenging and things that bring you joy.

4) Read "Why Can't Middle Age Be Like Childhood but with Sex, Liquor and Hipper Boots?" (pg. 11). Write your own poem that includes a list of what makes you happy.

5) The book contains two pantoums (pg. 14 and pg. 90). Read the description of the form and write your own pantoum. "Mauve Decade" was inspired by the film The Forbidden Room. You might want to write a pantoum inspired by a favorite film. If so, don't retell the story. Allow your imagination to play with the images in the film and create something new with them.

6) "To a Broken Window or a Future Self" (pg. 16): Write your own poem addressed to and/or describing a future version of yourself.

7) "Whiskers" (pg. 17) was inspired by an exercise by the poet Mahogany Browne, who was visiting a class Fuhrman was teaching for teenagers. Browne asked the students to write a list of images that appealed to the feeling of touch and then write a poem using one of these images. "Whiskers" was the poem Fuhrman started in response. For this prompt, try Browne's exercise. After making a list of tactile images, pick one for your poem to focus on.

8) "I've Got a Cell Phone in My Pocket Instead of a Heart" (pg. 19): This poem was written doing a psychogeography exercise by Rachel Zolf. Here is a simplified version: Walk for at least 30 minutes without focusing on where you are going. As you walk, take notes on what you notice (sights, smells, sounds), what you are thinking, and how you feel within your body. Turn your notes into a poem.

9) Fuhrman wrote "Love Poem in a Failed State" (pg. 24) after listening to different people read during a poetry marathon. As the poets were reading, Joanna Fuhrman wrote down her favorite words from their poems. She then put some of the words into a poem. For this assignment, go online and listen to different poets read for 45 minutes, writing down favorite words as you listen. Then write a poem using as many of these words as you can. Pennsound.com is a great place to go to listen to poetry.

10) "Abecedarian with Butchered Catalogue" (pg. 29): Write your own abecedarian, a poem where each line starts with the subsequent letter of the alphabet.

11) "Household Tips for A New Era" (pg. 39): Write your own poem of household tips.

12) "Justin Bieber Visits Anne Frank's House" (pg. 52): Write a poem using the headline from a newspaper as a title. Try to evoke the feeling you get from the headline without mentioning or alluding to the story.

13) "Ode to Unhappiness" (pg. 53): Write an ode (a poem of praise) to something most people would curse.

14) "Boredom" (pg. 59): Fuhrman started this poem by writing down four abstract nouns on index cards. Then she looked at four paintings and described them. The nouns and descriptions were scrambled and combined. For this exercise, try this procedure to start, and then see where the poem takes you.

15) "The Happiness Factory" (pg. 64) came out of a workshop on dream poetry. The idea was to write a poem where the speaker is doing an unusual job that might only take place in a dream. The class collectively generated a list of types of words to include in their poems: a food, an animal, a body part, a plant and a type of building. The students typed the words in the Zoom chat so they could exchange them. For this exercise, first collectively generate a list of words, and then write your own poem where the speaker is performing a job that doesn't exist in the real world. Try to use dream logic and imagery.

16) " Listen to the Rooster" (pg. 69) was inspired by Joanna Fuhrman imagining herself as an animal in a Chagall painting. Before you start writing your own poem, pick a painting; imagine yourself as a person, animal or object in the work; and answer these questions:

- What do you smell? What does the smell remind you of?
- What do you hear? What does the sound remind you of? If the sound were a color, what color would it be?
- What do you see around you? What is the smallest thing you see? What is the biggest?

- What just happened?
- What did you dream last night? (Again, don't answer as yourself, but as the person/animal/object in the picture.)
- What is beyond the picture's frame? What is there that we can't see?
- What will happen next?
- What does the weather taste like? (Write a sentence about it.)

After answering the questions, use your answers in a poem.

17) "Lavender" (pg. 72) was inspired by the poem "Loneliness" by Fanny Howe.

Note from JF: "I started the poem in a workshop in my apartment where we wrote the names of emotions on index cards and shuffled them, so everyone got an emotion written by someone else. We then used an assortment of random words found in poetry books and novels to write a poem that defined an emotion in a new way, the way Howe's poem does. I can't remember where the "random words" came from, but I may have asked the students to look in a stack of poetry books for nouns and verbs that all started with a certain letter or contained the same vowel sound."

For this exercise, gather ten nouns and ten verbs. If you want to try this exercise without a group, you can gather the nouns and verbs yourself, and then write six emotions on a piece of paper, numbering them 1 to 6. You then roll a die. The die will tell you which emotion you are writing your poem about. Start your poem by defining or telling us something about the emotion.

18) History Lesson (pg. 76): Write a poem that starts with a fake historical fact.

19) Fuhrman started "This Tyger Burns the Bones of William Blake" (pg. 77) by collecting questions from Clark Coolidge's book *88 Sonnets*. For this exercise, start by looking through poetry books for questions. Answer the questions without thinking, and then use your answers to start a poem.

20) "Kerosene" (pg. 78) is a word-for-word, line-by-line "rewrite" of Frank O'Hara's poem Naphtha. Write a poem that "rewrites" and "updates" a favorite older poem.

21) "Wrap it in a Beehive" (pg. 93): Write your own poem that rewrites and updates a fairy tale from the point of view of a minor character.

22) "The Adjunct Commuter: A Cento" (pg. 100). A cento is a poem collage using favorite lines from other poems. Try writing your own cento. Don't use more than one line per poem that you are taking lines from.

DISCUSSION OR CRITICAL WRITING QUESTIONS:

1) What would you say are the differences between the three sections of the collection? How do the section titles relate to the poems included in their respective sections? What do you think ties the poems in each section together?

2) In what way is Brooklyn a character in the book? How is the city characterized? What does it mean to the speakers in the collection?

3) Read "A Short Essay on Protest" (pg. 46). At the end of the poem, the speaker says, "I know nothing about successful protest." What leads the speaker to this conclusion? What causes her feelings of failure? Where else in the book do protest and activism appear as themes? What do you think makes someone a successful activist? What are the obstacles to activism that the characters in the book encounter?

4) Read "Ode to Unhappiness" (pg. 53). What do you think the difference is between "ordinary unhappiness" and a "future, weirder sadness?" Why do you think the speaker is praising ordinary unhappiness?

5) Where do you see gender roles being satirized in the collection? How do various poems play with and comment on gender expectations?

6) Most of these poems were written during the Trump era. Where do you see his shadow in this collection?

7) Watch some of the videos made of the poems on the collection. How do the videos change your experience of reading the poems?

- Household Tips for a New Era: https://vimeo.com/310960385
- Search Engine Overlord: https://vimeo.com/312271491
- Are We Having Fun Yet?: https://vimeo.com/322484678
- The B Train: https://vimeo.com/340221882
- Boredom: https://vimeo.com/321115001
- I Have a Secret Crush on Everyone in the World: https://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-156/i-have-secret-crush-everyone-world
- Benediction for a New Year: https://vimeo.com/308597144
- Breaker: https://vimeo.com/309019969
- Self Portrait as Missing B Movie: https://vimeo.com/308233927

POETIC STATEMENT: "AND/AND" POETICS

My work employs a pluralistic approach to language; I want my poems to incorporate techniques from a wide range of traditions and include various approaches to how language works. I particularly respond to and want to write poems that have moments of opaqueness when language is enacting or creating direct experience, but also moments when language is used as a means of transparent communication or narrative. I am interested in poems that include both moments of what the Russian futurist poet Vladimir Khlebnikov called "zaum" (instances when the sound of poetry takes precedence over the denotative meaning, where, as he writes, "a word is a sound doll and the dictionary a collection of toys") and moments when the language has the familiarity and transparency of speech. I want wordplay and sound play to exist side by side with discursive rhetoric, narrative and conversational speech. In this way I attempt to allow language to enact all of its possibilities. I am interested in pushing against the boundaries of what is considered "sentimental" in order to reclaim emotion as the center of experimental poetry. Emotion is, of course, embodied in the formal properties of poetry, but I do not think this negates the non-formal ways that language can convey emotion and meaning.

I want my poems to be experiences that reflect the complexity of both the inner and outer world: an expanse a reader enters and is perhaps startled by. I work to achieve this through shifts in perspective and diction and by using a variety of imagery so that the naturalistic and fantastical are juxtaposed.

My method of composition sometimes involves writing constraints, responses to other poems and collage, but I use these techniques as starting points to create a feeling of expansiveness and surprise for myself as a writer rather than as ends in themselves. My approach to language is related to my deep interest in surrealism. Approaching language in various ways can help create the jolt of surprise that the surrealists viewed as the purpose of poetry. It also can help create a feeling of "openness" in a poem. I am interested in metaphors not as a means of description, but as a way to create something new. This is why my metaphors are often extended to the point where the vehicle and tenor might not be even tangentially related. I am drawn to extreme, even absurd specificity.

Wit is also central to my project. It is important to me that humor is present to counterbalance and question the role of the orphic mode, to open up the lyric. Humor can be a

way of waking the reader up and putting personal sadness in perspective. Most of all, I want the reader to feel that there is room for them to bring their own impressions into the space created by the poem. I want even the smallest lyrics to evoke the complexity and expansiveness of the world.