

# WEST SUSSEX WRITERS: WRITING POETRY

John McCullough



# What is Poetry?

- Rhythm
- Compression
- Imagery
- Plays On Sound

# Why?

- ❑ These create emotional intensity.
- ❑ They rely on instinctive responses, not logic.
- ❑ Prose was invented to explain.
- ❑ Like song, poetry was invented to stir feeling.



you fit into me  
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook  
an open eye



Margaret Atwood

- ▣ Atwood creates intensity via stripped down language.
- ▣ Poem focuses on one image – at first romantic, then slightly disturbing but about clothing.
- ▣ Last 2 lines stress sexual violence/ vulnerability.
- ▣ The images reinforce each other, pull together.
- ▣ Rhythm is created through repetition of a/an.
- ▣ Contrasting sounds evoke what's being described: the sharp 'k' of 'hook' versus the softness of 'eye'.



# the mississippi river empties into the gulf

and the gulf enters the sea and so forth,  
none of them emptying anything,  
all of them carrying yesterday  
forever on their white tipped backs,  
all of them dragging forward tomorrow.  
it is the great circulation  
of the earth's body, like the blood  
of the gods, this river in which the past  
is always flowing. every water  
is the same water coming round.  
everyday someone is standing on the edge  
of this river, staring into time,  
whispering mistakenly:  
only here. only now.



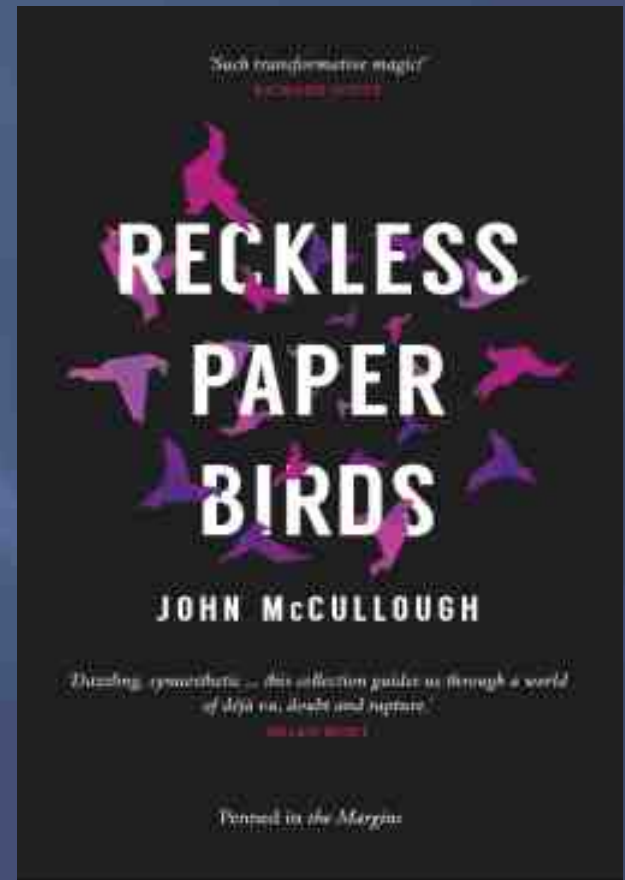
Lucille Clifton



- ❑ Clifton's form is fluid: sentences flow over line breaks.
- ❑ The title flows into the first line.
- ❑ Lack of capitals makes words more equal.
- ❑ 'White-tipped backs' evokes both waves but also history coming from pens of white writers.
- ❑ Mississippi's economy was built on slavery.
- ❑ Again, the images reinforce each other, creating focus and intensity. The metaphors don't compete.

# Reckless Paper Birds

- ▣ This collection of poems of mine focuses on vulnerability.
- ▣ It won the 2020 Hawthornden prize for literature and was shortlisted for the Costa.
- ▣ I had to explore emotions in ways that would grab a reader who doesn't know me.
- ▣ Freewriting helped me to create vivid, unusual images plus energetic phrases.





# What is Freewriting?

- ▣ Write/type faster than normal.
- ▣ Access the creativity of your unconscious.
- ▣ Generate phrases/images not a finished piece.
- ▣ Set topic.
- ▣ Use before you begin or to help fix problems.



## Stationery

September is going all out to ease us in.

The clouded sky is a whiteboard for helpful diagrams,  
the first cool air as welcome as your hand inside my jeans.

Autumn zips round with its orange highlighter  
and you provide nifty shocks and marshmallows,  
leaving pornographic Post-its that ask me to rendezvous,

please, for hot chocolate. I am the type of man  
who likes unnecessary displays of manners,  
who appreciates thank you cards, warning signs,

a forest of regretful notices for building works.  
I admire rows of ginkgos that lose all their foliage  
in one drop to form a Yellow Brick Road.

I am a desperate Lion today, stalking Scarecrow.  
I chew biro, glimpse at my watch too often. I was so afraid  
of being late to see you, once, I turned up six days early.

Love is horrific like that. First it's a rabbit, then a duck,  
then it's a ravenous, one-eyed sock puppet;  
but the rest is yoghurt adverts. And you fasten my thoughts

with the most beautiful paperclips, even the filthy ones,  
like the time I saw a grove of ripening chilli plants  
become a rainbow of penis trees. *Do you wish to continue,*

says the voice of a self-service checkout. Yes, yes I do.  
Between the shops, the sea snuggles under its blue leaves.  
The clock tower waits patiently for Christmas,

a familiar figure below it wagging his arms  
to lure me over. Succeeding. Your skilful face punches  
a giant hole in the day and I jump through it.

# Stationery

- ▣ Short, indented stanzas create visual excitement and movement.
- ▣ Unusual images create manic energy of *both* being in love and experiencing anxiety.
- ▣ Repeated stationery images create cohesion.
- ▣ Details that slowed things down e.g. surplus adjectives = taken out.
- ▣ Expected words were replaced and verbs upgraded to dramatic ones.
- ▣ The last line's 'step' became 'jump'.



- ▣ I drew primarily on phrasing from a freewrite.
- ▣ I added both observations of street life in Brighton and surreal images I'd had knocking around in my notebook for a while.
- ▣ When a poem doesn't work, I often extract promising phrases and images and keep them in my notebook to see if they might work elsewhere.



# Tips from Natalie Goldberg

- *Keep your hand moving.* Don't pause to reread.
- *Don't cross out.* That is editing as you write.
- *Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar.*
- *Lose control.* Go wild. Don't think or get logical.
- *Go for the jugular.* Burn through to first thoughts.



# Writing Exercise Time

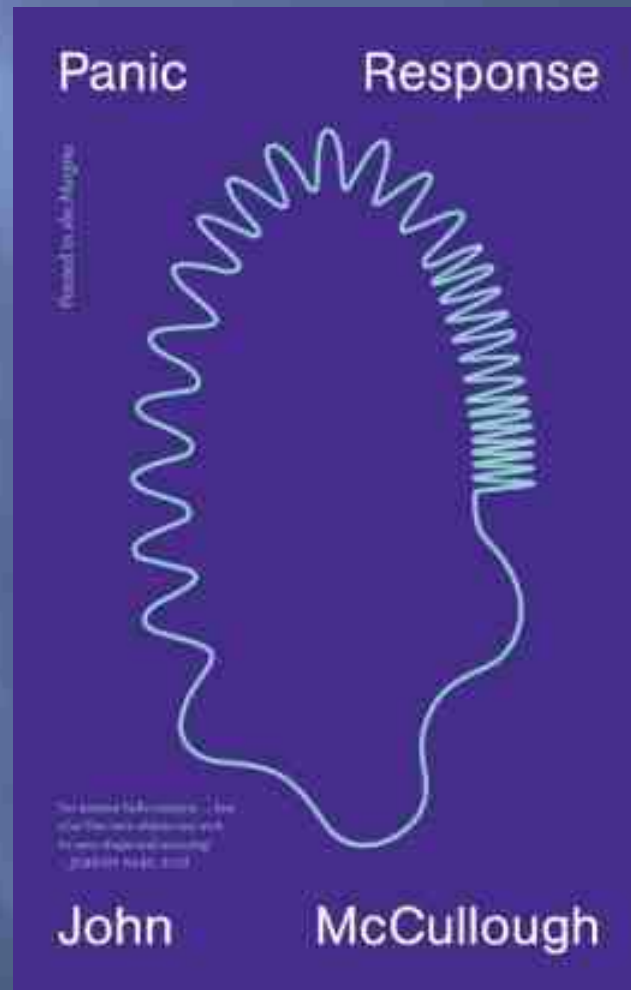


- ▣ Choose a colour that inspires strong feelings.
- ▣ It will be your set topic.
- ▣ Freewrite on memories, impressions & sensory detail.
- ▣ Remember you're generating phrases & images not a finished piece.

- ▣ Re-read your freewrite, underlining the phrases or images with the most energy.
- ▣ Use a few to form the seed of a short poem.
- ▣ Would any make a good beginning/end?
- ▣ Linked phrases/images create structure.



# My Latest Collection





# Quantum

*i.m. Avril Brown, 1951-2002*

Now and then, the past flutters  
out of a cupboard. I cradle a yellowed  
newspaper cutting—Mrs Brown,  
my chemistry teacher, found dead.  
~~Her husband stabbed her fifty times  
with a screwdriver. He barely spoke  
a civil word to her, said the prosecutor,  
once he lost his job after a stroke  
while she became Head of Department.~~

This needs correcting. Avril was a lilac  
potassium flame. She talked to phosphorus,  
encouraged it to turn hexagonal.  
Her clan: gauze, tongs, crucible.  
She never gave up on experiments,  
including the boy who kept smashing  
conical flasks, whose thermometers  
rolled off desks to their doom.  
*Oh, for goodness' sake. Here: try again.*

In the picture that comes when I hear  
her name, she is tilting, arms spread,  
as she tears round the lab, aping  
an excited electron—how it radiates  
vigour, shapes light. You cannot kill  
an electron. It has no substructure.  
Avril, in this image, is both particle  
and wave, past and future, her grin wide  
as she accelerates, decade after decade.

# Electric Blue

The radiance is visiting again,  
a bloom of shimmering plankton at low tide  
that lifts the brutal shore to space.

Conditions must be perfect for their blue glow,  
the darkness total. They must be far from home,  
completely lost, exiled by currents

then panicked by the foamy smack  
of breakers. This is no bounty for them. It's horror,  
this brilliance that quivers, arcs.

Picture it now so you'll remember the scene  
one lonely midnight when your heart assaults  
your ribs: the galactic light of tiny selves

that never wanted anything like this  
but, together, finished up terrified, magnificent,  
brightly living the only way they know.

# Read, Read, Read

- ▣ Learn the effects of different approaches to the line, stanza, image and phrase.
- ▣ Seek out regularly work by writers who are unfamiliar to you.
- ▣ Each summer I locate work by 15-20 poets I've never taught on before (usually 5 poems each).
- ▣ Typing up their poems makes me pay close attention to the impact of particular technical and structural features.

# Freewrite On An Element

## 4 ELEMENTS

FIRE



EARTH



AIR



WATER



