

## I Want to Play

by Phyllis Cole-Dai

I work hard. Sometimes too hard. I even work hard at play. Perhaps you suffer the same affliction. Call it “passion” or “devotion” or “loving what you do,” but it is possible to have too much of a good thing.

Recently I gave myself a leisurely gift—a series of online poetry-writing classes with Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. This might sound to you like just more work in disguise, but trust me, every minute has been pure pleasure. Not one page of assigned homework between sessions. I just have to show up on Zoom and soak it in.

Rosemerry is one of the finest poets and kindest people I know. Ruby Wilson and I featured several of her poems in *Poetry of Presence*, our popular anthology. As a teacher, Rosemerry coaches you up without intimidating you. Whether you’re a beginning poet or an old hand, she creates a safe space for you to practice—classroom, sanctuary and playground, all rolled into one.

In our latest gathering Rosemerry discussed several poems with the class, including “I Want to Speak with the Blood that Lies Down,” an ecstatic poem by the late Jim Tipton. Here’s just a taste of it:

... I want to speak with the  
thirsty rain, the lonely garbage, the tire that remembers  
when it was a tree in Brazil; I want to speak with  
the fragrance of sage that rises up, late into the night,  
after a soft rain; I want to speak with cinnamon  
and chocolate, and with windows that do not open,  
and with the bag of hair in the shop of the old barber....

Do you hear how Jim drives his poem forward by constantly repeating “I want to speak with...”? The poem uses those exact words almost 20 times.

Rosemerry invited us to come up with a similar phrase: “I want to sit with,” or “I want to go to,” or “I want to dream of,” and so on. The words that rose up in my mind and demanded to be used were “I want to play like....” (Big surprise, eh?)

We had twenty minutes to write a poem that repeated and completed our chosen phrase

with images. As always, before we started to compose, Rosemerry urged us to lower our expectations and just have fun. This is the poem that tumbled out of me, tweaked a bit the next day:

## I Want to Play

I want to play like the bird

that plunges from sky into lake

and surfaces with beak dripping

with fish. I want to play

like ebony and ivory beneath the knobby

fingers of an old pianist,

home at last after a life in exile.

I want to play like my toddler son

once did, making friends of monsters,

tunnels of doors, secret rooms

of walls. I want to play

like the bumblebee bouncing

over my tingling skin

without ever stinging.

I want to play like Brandi Chastain

ripping off her jersey on the soccer field,

baring skin without shame

for joy. I want to play

like eyes that study the chessboard

with such care and skill

and still make the wrong move,

and laugh out loud. I want to play

like the leaves that turn their silver bellies

up to the wind, inviting rain. I want to play

like the magician whose sleight of hand  
is so practiced, nobody wants to learn  
how it's done. I want to play like words  
cascading down the page  
in search of a soft place to land,  
freefall of pleasure.  
I want to play as if hard work never taught me  
to forget how.

I've shared this poem with you not because it's a masterful piece of poetry (it isn't), but because I enjoyed writing it—and mostly because my son Nathan loved hearing it and thought you might, too.

Now I want to invite you to join me on the playground of poetry. Choose your own repeated phrase, then write a poem of your own. Follow Rosemerry's advice: Lower your expectations, and just have fun. If you'd like, send me what you come up with. I'd love to read what you write.