Picture this
Images as inspiration for poetry
By John Glenday

Using art as an inspiration
Using images – prints, portraits, photographs, even objects – can be a wonderfully effective source of inspiration for writing poems, but it can sometimes seem like a fall-back response, rather than a fresh new idea. This resource contains new ways to approach using art as a stimulus. There are short exercises designed to inspire young writers and tips to help you adapt them to your needs.

The first two exercises use an illustration from a Japanese word book which provides an unusual inspiration for writing from a visual stimulus. The latter two use the more common starting point of postcards or portraits, but provide some ways to scaffold an investigation of the image.

The Japanese word book
These exercises use a page from an old Japanese illustrated word book (reprinted on page 5, and at bit.ly/WordsPics) which details English words with pictures to accompany them. The seemingly random selection of images is quirky and intriguing. Because the relationship between the different pictures is meaningless, it allows your pupils to use their imagination to create a link.

You can use this in any way you like, but here are two suggestions. These can either be stand-alone activities, or can form a useful warm-up to get your class thinking imaginatively.

Once your students have become familiar with the images from the word book, there is a second page of images (bit.ly/WordsPics2), although it has some trickier words which may need some explanation.

The ‘I am’ exercise
Each student chooses five images from anywhere on the page and writes a ‘self-portrait’ describing themselves through these images.

Each line should begin with the words “I’ll tell you who I am...”, or a variation on this. The example below uses ‘goat’, ‘box’ and ‘bath’ from the word book.
I'll tell you who I am
I'm always acting the goat, according to my Dad.
I'll tell you who I am:
A box filled with chocolate and laughter and secrets.
I'll tell you who I am:
I'm trouble, is who I am, I'm always in hot water.

The board game exercise
This is a more demanding exercise, but because it reduces choice it allows for imaginative responses which can produce fascinating work.

Ask the children to write a poem which begins at any square on one side of the ‘board’ and ends at another square on the opposite side. For example it could begin at ‘fishing’ and end at ‘chestnut’, or begin at ‘shoes’ and finish at ‘bath’. They can take any route they like, and move in any direction they like, but must include every image in between.

Encourage them to interpret the images as loosely and imaginatively as they can. For example ‘parrot’ could simply mention repeating, or copying; ‘bear’ could be unbearable; and the ‘commandant’ could be anyone in authority: a parent, teacher, or a bossy sibling. There are lots of animals here, so it’s a good idea to turn them into something else if it starts to get too zoo-like.

Stars
shiver in the darkness,
hungry for light.
They circle the moon,
like moths, their song
perfect and white
as snow, never quite falling.

Here’s an example, going from ‘star’ to ‘wolf’ to ‘ring’ to ‘cricket’ to ‘song’ to ‘snow day’. I cheat a little and interpret wolf as being hungry like a wolf, and turn crickets into moths. Explain that your students can do the same if they get stuck.

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Once your students have warmed up their imaginations with these exercises, you can use similar ideas to write about almost any topic. You can provide images related to your chosen topic as a starting point or, better still, ask your class in groups to brainstorm words associated with your chosen topic and find associated pictures.

Students can then lay the images out in a grid and create individual or group poems moving from one image to the next, as with the board game exercise.
Postcards and portraits

I often use postcards – the ‘art’ cards sold in galleries and exhibitions work well, or see below about other places to find good images. I tend to choose portraits rather than landscapes, to give that combination of people and context. The two exercises below explore using portraits and landscapes respectively.

Whichever images you’re using, spread them out on a table and ask the children to quickly choose one – not to think about it too long, but to go for an image that catches their attention. Make sure they don’t show the image to anyone else, or discuss it, because this gets in the way of writing about it in an interesting and fresh way.

The two exercises below can lead your students from this initial observation to creating their own poems.

The Detective
This exercise uses portrait images to create characters. Ask the class to choose a portrait postcard/photograph and then examine the image as if they were a detective searching for clues.

• How is the portrait’s subject dressed?
• Are they rich or poor?
• What are they doing?
• What’s just happened?
• What small details are lurking around the edges of the image?
• What do these suggest?

Make sure your class avoid the temptation to focus entirely on the central character or characters in the image. Make sure they look to the edges and the background as well to uncover little hints as to what this character might be like: their desires and aspirations; their successes and failures; their pasts and futures.

After some thought, tell the class to decide on exactly what sort of person this person is and why they are there. Now they must write a short poem describing the portrait. They can either describe the person, or choose to be the person telling their story.

Poet’s tip
It’s useful for students to decide on a title before they start writing. This can either be the title of the portrait, or something from the background, or a detail of the portrait. Having a title in advance can help focus the attention and give the finished poem more coherence.
The Window
This exercise is handy if the image focuses on or includes a location or landscape.

Imagine the picture you are looking at is the view through a window. Ask yourself these questions:
• Where are you?
• When (what era) is it?
• What can you see in the picture?
• What might also be there that is invisible or just out of the picture?

Ask your pupils to examine the picture carefully: what is obvious as the ‘centre of attention’ and what is less obvious? Are there any little details in the picture that are intriguing, or seem important? What do they suggest?

Write a poem about a view through a window or door using elements from the postcard/picture and your own imagination.

Development idea
These short exercises can be an ideal starting point to investigate a setting or character, either historical or fictional. You can either find images of that person or place, or brainstorm associated ideas, objects and thoughts.

Each student must then choose an image and investigate it using the exercises above and informed by their knowledge of the character or setting. For example, you could launch an investigation of Macbeth’s dagger, or of Oliver Twist’s London. These can be explored as part of your study of those texts.

Where to find images
In addition to postcards from art galleries, there are lots of images that are available online. The knack is knowing where to find them. The sites below can be helpful in finding pictures that work with the exercises above.

- The website for French/American photographer Vivian Maier, has some wonderful examples: vivianmaier.com
- The British Library’s Flickr stream has many intriguing images flickr.com/britishlibrary
- The Wellcome Collection’s Instagram feed has a selection of the weird and wonderful instagram.com/wellcomecollection

N.B. You can never be 100% sure what these image feeds will throw up, so make sure you access them yourself to save or print off a selection of appropriate images, rather than directing students to them.

About the author
John Glenday was born in Broughty Ferry, near Dundee. His first collection, The Apple Ghost (Peterloo Poets, 1989) won a Scottish Arts Council Book Award and his second, Undark (Peterloo Poets, 1995), was a Poetry Book Society recommendation. Grain (Picador, 2009) was a Poetry Book Society recommendation and shortlisted for both the Griffin International Poetry Prize and the Ted Hughes Award. His most recent collection, The Golden Mean (Picador, 2015), won the 2015 Roehampton Poetry Prize.
Fashionable melange of English words, woodcut print on hōsho paper, 1887, by Tsunajima Kamekichi. bit.ly/WordsPics