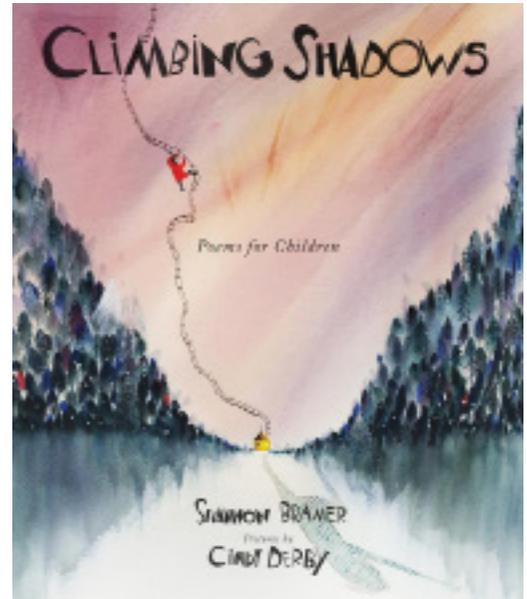


A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO CLIMBING SHADOWS: POEMS FOR CHILDREN

Written by Shannon Bramer and illustrated by Cindy Derby

This guide was created to help teachers and students of all ages engage with the poems in *Climbing Shadows* by sharing a little bit about the stories behind the poems and by providing some insight into my personal writing process. I've grouped poems together for purposes of discussion and have also included some writing prompts and suggestions for how students might use these poems as springboards for their own writing. I have been bringing poetry into classrooms as a visiting poet since 2002; many of the ideas in this guide come from my experience in classrooms where I worked with teachers who shared my enthusiasm for poetry. Those teachers wrote alongside their students, collaborated with me, helped me when an idea I had fell flat. They welcomed me. They are my heroes and I dedicate this guide to them.



There is a glossary of poetic terms at the end of this guide. These terms are bolded when referred to in the exercises.

PART ONE

Sometimes people ask me...

WHY DO YOU WRITE POEMS AND WHEN DID YOU START WRITING THEM?

I write poems because I love words as much as I love silence. I write poems because the effort to create them is so satisfying. I write poems because it is hard work and so much fun at the same time; because writing helps me think and figure things out, about myself, about the world. I started writing poems when I was a child; when I was in middle school I discovered the work of Canadian poets Irving Layton, Gwendolyn MacEwen and Leonard Cohen and fell in love with what poems looked like on the page, how they sounded, how they made me feel. When I got older I started reading Ana Akmatova, Langston Hughes and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and my love for the lyric poem and my passion for language grew and grew. I continued to write my own poems alongside all the work I loved to read.

WHAT IS A POET?

A poet sees a poem in the shadows on a city sidewalk, in the face of an old woman, in the waist of a wasp and the yellow eyes of a cat. A poet hears poetry: in the first words and sentences of her children, in the stories of her grandparents, in the cadences of everyday speech. In wild, loud music blasting out of fast cars and the wonderful, clicking *pocketa pocketa pocketa* of the storybook *Train to Timbuctoo* (Margaret Wise Brown, 1951). A poet sees, listens, feels, thinks and writes poems.



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PART ONE

WHAT IF I DON'T KNOW HOW TO WRITE POETRY?

If you know how to pretend to be a superhero or a seagull or a witch—if you can build with LEGO blocks or string together a necklace of sparkling beads or drive a toy car around the house and imagine you are in another world—then you can write poetry. You know how to play. You know how to make choices. A poet is a person that loves to play (and make choices!). And what they most love to play with are words and language. Dimension and texture in a poem come from the choice of words, based on the feelings and images they evoke; the choice of words in a poem, alongside the decision to leave certain words out. The order of the words matters. The space between words and the length of the lines matter. Sound matters. Silence matters. I love making poems because I love trying to figure out how to make all the words fit together the way I want them to. I like making a poem and then pulling it all apart and making a new one. I love it when broken pieces of old poems find their way into new ones. Sometimes I can write three poems in one day. Once, it took me a year to finish writing a single poem. Writing a poem can sometimes feel very easy, like the words just flow out of you onto the page and land there perfectly. Other times writing a poem can feel hard. It can feel like the music in your head doesn't match with what you are hearing in the world, or like you have all the pieces of a puzzle except for one or two. Sometimes a poem is started and never finished. That's also what makes it poetry.



PART TWO

Thinking about Puddles and Metaphors

“Darkness Looks Like My Mom” and “afterschool” are both poems that use **imagery**, symbolism and **metaphor** to evoke feeling and create narrative. In “Darkness Looks Like My Mom” the speaker in the poem is a worried child whose mother is on her way out for the evening. The child is kissed goodnight and then consoled by the mother who reminds the child that the night and darkness are not scary for her; she reminds the child “how much she loves rain and puddles, the deep dark puddles you jump in when you dream.” Once she leaves she becomes one with the night and moonlit darkness. Her dress is black; the puddles she loves are as deep and dark as dreams. There are keys in the poem because they are the keys to home; the child knows his mother will return. The child is missing his mother the moment she leaves but is also comforted by the idea of darkness and mystery as it relates to the mother. The cat speaks the child’s deepest feelings—it is “the cat that hates to see her go.” The mother will go out into the puddle of night; the child will fall asleep and enter the puddle of deep, dark dreams.



One of the saddest poems in the book is a tiny poem that also has a puddle in it. It is also a poem that celebrates the deep, important connection between a parent and child. “afterschool” is a poem about a hard day at school and the desire to disappear. In this poem the child is too sad to jump or play in a puddle. The puddle is not a source of mystery or joy. Instead the child wants to be a puddle. This is what metaphor does. It helps us see (and feel!) things vividly and freshly by transforming them. The child needs the father to feel what he is feeling so he finds a metaphor to express himself with perfect clarity. He finds a wonderful, perfect word to hold what he feels: puddle.

PART TWO

DISCUSSION, QUESTIONS, IDEAS

- How does the word *puddle* make you feel? Is it a fun word to say? What do you think of when you hear the word *puddle*?
- Compare and contrast: read the poem “Muddy Puddle” by Dennis Lee and discuss how that poem uses the word *puddle*. Notice how “Muddy Puddle” uses a lot of repetition and rhyme. Doesn't it make you feel like you are *in* a puddle that you *want* to be in?!
- Which words do you associate with sadness? Which words do you associate with joy? Do you have words that might make you feel both things at once?
- Which image stands out most to you in “Darkness Looks Like My Mom”? If you took the images out of this poem what would happen to it?
- Write one poem that uses puddle to express joy and another poem that uses puddle in a different way.
- In “Darkness Looks Likes My Mom” the mother is wearing a black dress and she's travelling in the evening to go somewhere without her child. Write a daytime version of this poem. Where is she going when the sun is in the sky instead of the moon? Is she still wearing a black dress? Why or why not? Remember, you can't get this answer wrong: It's up to you!
- Write a poem about someone going somewhere without you. Write a poem about going somewhere together. Who are you going with? Where are you going?

PART THREE

Odes, Occasions, Octopuses

Climbing Shadows contains many love poems and odes, which are sometimes the same thing! An ode is a lyric poem devoted to the praise of a person, animal or thing. “Three Hearts and No Bones at All” is an ode to the wonder, mystery and beauty of octopuses, and was inspired by a student I met who loved octopuses (like me!) and by a story my daughter told me about an internet hoax involving a photoshopped image of an octopus up in a tree. The image went viral and had many people believing that octopuses were on their way to becoming creatures of the land as well as the ocean. I have long been enchanted with octopuses, and at that time I happened to be reading many books about them, alongside some wonderful folklore. When I wrote the poem I decided to use all of what I had been reading to create a universe that was grounded in truth but with an octopus that had dreamed itself into a tree. Please note that the word tentacle appears nowhere in the poem because that is the number one myth about octopuses, that they have tentacles—which they most certainly do not. Octopuses have arms. Squid have tentacles!

“I Love to Draw” is also an ode. It’s a poem I wrote after listening to a child talk to me about drawing while he was drawing, and I noticed he rarely took his pencil up off the paper, and I loved how he spoke in the same stream-of-conscious way in which he was drawing. When I asked him what kind of poem he wanted for Valentine’s Day, he requested a poem about drawing, and I already had it in my back pocket. The poem is written with **enjambment** and run-on fragments to reflect his tumbling waterfall of thoughts.

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Speaking of Valentine's Day—the poem “The Snow Is Melting” takes place on Valentine's Day. But it's not a poem about romantic love. It's a poem about the love inside a family and between two sisters, written from the point of view of a highly observant and empathetic middle child. In the poem the mother is pushing a stroller through “slush and broken ice.” There's “lots of cold water shining on the street.” They are travelling uphill together and it's not easy. The middlechild is thinking about the imminent party and the valentines she's got in her bag for everyone in her class, even the boy who called her “stupid.” It is in that tender moment that she remembers her sister. Her sister knows she is not stupid. She also knows she hasn't got “a mean bone” in her body. The love she feels for her sister compels her to want to save her a chocolate cupcake, to give her ALL the cinnamon hearts she can imagine.

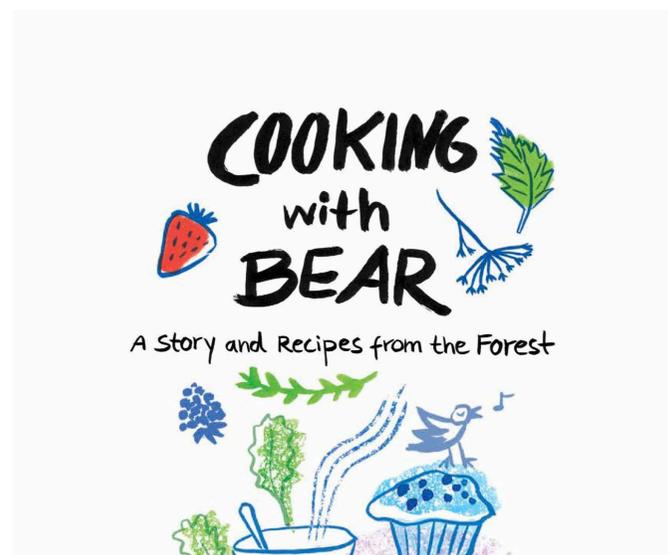


“Penelope's Birthday” is a poem I wrote after listening to many different kinds of kindergarten conversations about birthday parties. I wanted to write a poem from the point of view of a young person who is invited to a party and has a wonderful time experiencing all of it (the rusty truck full of balloons, the raspberry cake, the unexpected rain) but is also aware of the fact that the birthday party is special, and will only happen once. I think a little bit of danger and worry in a poem creates the tension and drama that both children and adults find both relatable and thrilling to read.

PART THREE

DISCUSSION, QUESTIONS, IDEAS

- Like many of the poems in *Climbing Shadows* both “I Love to Draw” and “The Snow Is Melting” are written from the point of view of the child, in the voice of a child. Can you look at the illustration and imagine another point of view to write from? Can you imagine yourself into the mind of the mother? Or write a poem about everything the baby might be seeing or feeling? You could also write a poem from the point of view of a person observing the scene. What stands out to you when you look at the illustration? What more do you see?
- Write a poem about something true or real (could be a person, place or thing) but then add a few made-up/imaginary details.
- Write an ode to something/someone special in your life. Write about something very tiny that you love. Write about something huge!
- Write a poem for a person you have not seen in a long time. To help you bring details/images in to your poem, consider their shoes. Imagine them in a sweater you want them to have or that you remember them wearing. Think about their hands, hair and face. Do you have a favorite memory connected to this person? Could that be included in the poem?
- Write a poem about a birthday party. It could be your own or someone else’s. You can even invent a person to write a poem about. In the poem everything can go right at the party or everything can go wrong. Or perhaps a little bit of both happens, as in “Penelope’s Birthday.”



PART FOUR

A Spider Way of Thinking: Form, Style, Play

Poems come in all shapes and sizes, and in *Climbing Shadows* you'll notice that some of my poems are long, with words spread all over the page—while others are very small and use only a handful of words (“Little Yellow House”). This is because the form of the poem and the style of the poem are often intimately connected to both the subject and images in the poem. For example, “a spider way of thinking” is a poem about a spider making a web on a ceiling, so when I wrote it I imagined the words spinning out onto the page in the same way the spider builds a web. I also used some interesting, long-legged words in the poem (fixtures, calligraphy, intricate) and saw the spider’s tiny shadow made by a “dusty crystal chandelier.”

“Dreaming Upside Down” is a poem about bats. There are lines of various lengths in this poem that evoke both the stillness and the flight of the bats. A single word on a line makes a reader slow and pause to feel the whole word. Also, if you look closely at the second half of the poem you will see where I shaped the poem to look like a bat’s extended wings!

“My Cars Never Sleep” is a poem with long lines because I imagined roads when I was writing that poem. The sentences in the poem run on and on together like the roads the child sees in his mind as he plays with his cars and speaks the story of their traveling.

“Skeleton Song” is structured using couplets and **off-rhyme** because I wanted a poem about dancing bones to fit or click together in a particular way—I wanted this poem to have a defined shape but also have a sense of movement and fluidity—just like its subject: the dancing human body.

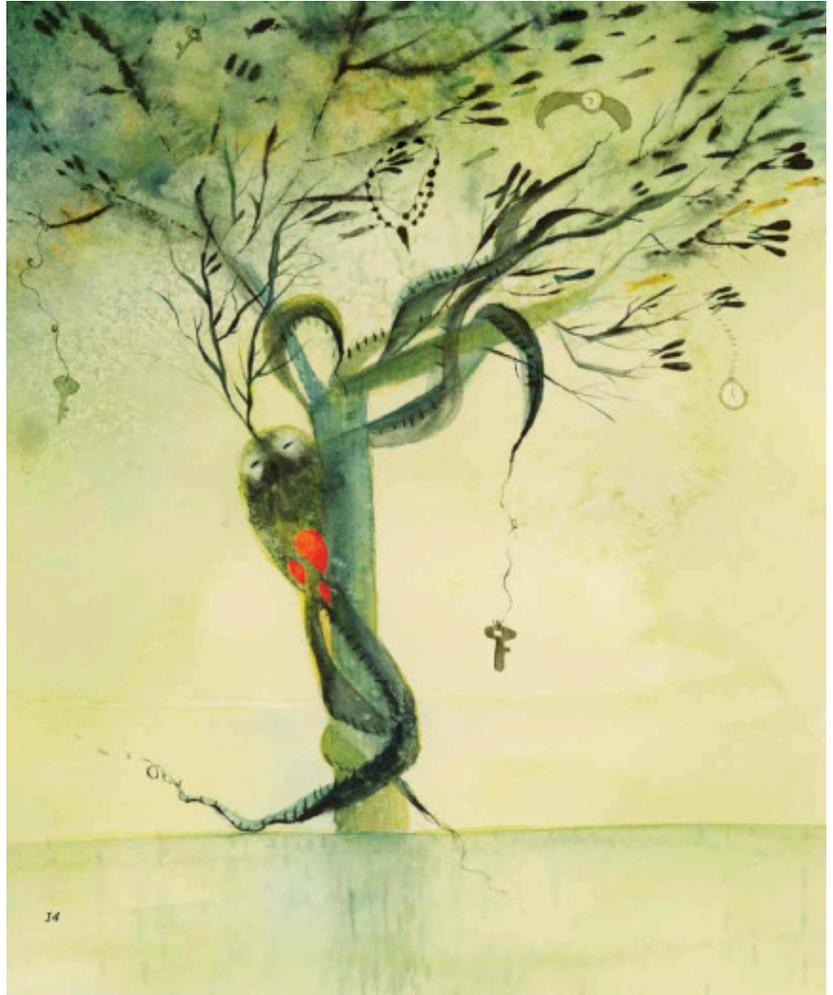
“polka-dot song” is an ode and one of the few rhyming poems in the book. That rhyme happened a little bit by accident and a little bit on purpose, after I got the following phrase stuck in my head: “polka-dot, polka-dot, you are not at all what I thought.” I wanted the poem to have a plinky (I just made that word up—poets are allowed to do that!) sound, like rain on a tin roof, and I wanted it to be musical, so I tried my best to create a rhyme that would be both pleasurable and a little bit unexpected, because this is how I feel about the beauty of polka-dots.

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“When She Grows Up” and “The Envelope” might both be considered “list poems,” which are quite fun to write because you can pack them full with dreams, ideas and lots of surprising **juxtapositions**. In “When She Grows Up” there are two cats, called Persephone and Lorca. There are also three bowls of cherries and four purple orchids in a window. This series of images paints a picture in the mind that is full of the color and surprise that makes you want to keep reading.

“The Envelope” contains a litany of descriptions about a mother and all the ways the child sees her. Juxtaposing images like “pearl” and “bear” make each image more vivid because the difference between them is so striking and immediate. Also: the two words sound wonderful (**assonance!**) beside each other. This poem will also help you understand what a **metaphor** is. My favorite one is “My mommy is an avalanche / a big heavy love.”



PART FOUR

DISCUSSION, QUESTIONS, IDEAS

- How is a mother like an avalanche? An envelope? A bowl? Can you think of three metaphors for three people (or animals!?) in your life that you care for? You could write descriptions first and then try to create the metaphor. For example: My mother is a tall, strong woman. (description) My mother is an oak tree in September. (metaphor)
- Choose an animal or insect or inanimate object to write about and try to imagine the way it thinks. Here are some examples of titles to get you started:

a puppy way of thinking

a tree way of thinking

a beetle way of thinking

a rose way of thinking

a staircase way of thinking

- How does the poem want to move around on the page? Compare your staircase poem and your puppy poem. What happened when you tried to “staircase think” vs. when you tried to “puppy think”?
- Choose an image from “The Envelope” and make that a starting point for a new poem. You can make a list poem if you want, or try something different.
- Choose any poem from the book and use the words in that poem to make a poem of your own. See what happens when you are only allowed to use a restricted number of words rather than having all the words you know available to use!

PART FOUR

- The two cats in “When She Grows Up” are named after two special people. Lorca is named after the famous Spanish playwright and poet—Federico Garcia Lorca. Persephone is named after a fictional character from Greek mythology known as the Goddess of Spring. I used those names in the poem because I love the way they sound, but also because the story of those names lends a little secret clue to the personalities of the cats and the person who named them. Can you write your own poem about two creatures with different names? They can both be cats. They can be fish. They can even be people! Try to give them names that are unique and see what happens.
- Create a poem made up of a list of dreams or wishes. Include tiny wishes and/or hopes alongside more elaborate ones and see what happens. This can also be a lot of fun to do as a class collaboration, with every student writing down one wish and sharing it aloud. Then everyone can work together to edit and arrange the wishes, creating a complete classroom poem. For example:

I wish the roads were violet flowers
I wish we could have spaghetti for dinner
I wish I could swim through the sky like a pike fish with wings
I wish our washing machine wasn't broken and dying all the time
I wish I was made of a million windows

- A follow-up to the above would be to try and create poems about wishes that do not use the word “wish” anywhere in the poem.



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PART FIVE

Owl Secrets: Memories, Inspiration, Portraits

The poems in *Climbing Shadows* came from being around children and listening to them talk about all sorts of things. The children themselves—their voices, faces and conversations—inspired the poems in this book. The things the children told me or asked me to write about brought back memories of my own childhood thoughts, dreams, loves and fears. This is all the stuff of poetry.

“Owl Secrets” was written for a little girl who told me she loved owls and that she slept with her owl stuffie every night. When I wrote that poem I tried to imagine myself young again, in bed, holding a special toy and trying to fall asleep.

The title poem, “Climbing Shadows,” was written for a child who whispered to me about her love of kittens and how she wished she had one, because if she did it would live with her in her room and keep her company at night. I remember having the very same wish as a child, before we did get our first cat. I also remember watching shadows in my bedroom climb and fall and leap the way a small cat would—and I remember how it comforted me.

“I Don’t Need a Poem” is an example of a verbatim poem. A verbatim poem is one you write in the words you’ve heard someone speak. When you record what they’ve said on the page, you shape those words to reflect their pauses, their breath and hopefully the uniqueness of their voice. One of the children I helped at lunchtime was new to Canada, and when I asked her if I could write a poem for her, she quietly and eloquently spoke a poem back to me without even knowing she was doing it, without even knowing how beautiful her words—in new, hesitant English—sounded.

“Eleanor’s Poem” is one I wrote for a child who was wonderfully mischievous and extremely funny. I wanted her poem to evoke her personality. I knew that she would enjoy the idea of being similar to a poem, to poetry itself.

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“A Question for Choying” is a poem with an entirely different tone and personality because of the child who inspired it. Choying had a notebook that she was always carrying around with her. Because she was just at the beginning of learning how to write, her book was filled with wavy lines and circles and drawings of everything she wanted to say with words that were still elusive to her, those “snowy animals in the woods.”

Finally, “You Speak Violets” is a poem I wrote for a student who was non-verbal. This child was affectionate and communicative with his peers. His eyes were always alive with thoughts even if he could not speak them. I happened to be reading a very old and wonderful book called *Our Wild Flowers* (1839), written by Louisa Anne Twamley, which included color plates of her own illustrations, original poems and an entire chapter devoted to violets. The idea of flowers “speaking” to poets, to children, to the person who gets down on the ground to really delight in them, is not a new idea, but the coincidence of reading this book when writing my own poems about children caused me to see that non-verbal child in the context of silent flowers that speak through their being, their beauty, without words.



PART FIVE

DISCUSSION, QUESTIONS, IDEAS

- Write your own portrait poem. Use the name of a person in your poem and repeat their name as many times as you like. Limit this writing exercise to five minutes and then write another poem using another name. A teacher may even have a hat full of names to draw from. Notice how a name like *Frank* (hard *k* at the end—rhymes with *crank*, *sank*, *bank*, *tank*) will work differently than a name like *Willow* (such a soft sounding name—rhymes with *pillow*, evokes weeping willow trees) or *Maitri* or *Clyde*. The name, with its unique aural and visual qualities and its varied connotations and associations, will impact both the subconscious and conscious choices the students will make when deciding which words to use in their poem. Once the students write a few poems using the name(s) of their choice, they might all write one using the same name, so that they can see how differently each person's poem turns out .
- Write a poem about a favorite toy. Can you connect the toy with a memory?
- “A Question for Choying” is a poem that begins with a question. Think of a question and write the answer to your question in the poem. Start with a playful question like: What is my cat thinking about when she looks out the window? And then try a question that might need a more complex answer, like: Why does the moon make me feel sad? Why is my bicycle blue? A teacher could brainstorm a handful of questions with the class before reading “A Question for Choying” and then follow up with this exercise.
- Read one of my favourite poems, “How Do I Love Thee?” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and create your own version of this poem for a family member or friend.

PART SIX

Shannon's Glossary of Poetic Terms (just a few favorites...there are so many more!)

JUXTAPOSITION

The act or an instance of placing two or more things side by side, often to compare or contrast or to create an interesting effect. "The Envelope" is a poem that uses a lot of juxtaposition.

ENJAMBMENT

The running over of a sentence from one verse or line into another so that closely related words fall in different lines, often without punctuation. "I Love to Draw" is an example of a poem with a structure created using enjambment.

OFF-RHYME

Sometimes called slanted rhyme, a poem with off-rhyme is created by using words with similar but not identical sounds. In "Skeleton Song" the words "face" and "dance" have a similar sound but don't rhyme the way "dot" and "pot" do in "polka-dot song."

PERSONIFICATION

Representation of a thing or abstraction as a person (or attributing human qualities to something inhuman—an idea, a feeling, a thing). In "Little Yellow House" a poem is personified. Darkness is personified in "Darkness Looks Like My Mom." The sun in "Penelope's Birthday" "hides in the clouds/ too shy to come to the party" and this is another example of personification.

PART SIX

IMAGERY

Elements of a poem that invoke any of the five senses to create mental pictures. The use of using vivid, specific words to represent ideas, objects or actions. An image in a poem helps you see it in your mind. Compare the following: I see a bird in a tree; I see a cardinal in the snowy cedar. The second statement is more evocative because we see the red of the cardinal, and we see the cedar—the clumps of dark green laden with snow and the flash of red that is the cardinal, bouncing on the branch.

METAPHOR

Metaphors help us create the images (or pictures) inside poems. While similes (using “like” or “as”) create evocative comparisons, effective metaphors create fusion: two discrete images come together to create a new (or more vivid) picture or image—one that is fresh, unexpected. Here’s an example from a tiny poem I’m trying to write that isn’t finished yet.

New Baby

*your sleeping face: moon
stone in the dark*

“The Envelope” is a poem made up of a list of metaphors for mother. “A Question for Choying,” “Owl Secrets” and “afterschool” all contain at least one metaphor.

DICTION

The choice and use of words and phrases in speech or writing. In poetry every word you choose is important because it affects how all the other words around it work. In “a spider way of thinking” and “Dreaming Upside Down,” my use of diction was informed by the subject of the poems: spiders and bats.

PART SIX

ASSONANCE*

The repetition of similar vowel sounds near enough to each other to create a pleasing resonance or echo in a poem or other piece of writing.

CONSONANCE*

The repetition or recurrence of similar sounds made by consonant letters in close proximity in a poem or other piece of writing.

ALLITERATION*

The occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words. This sound may come from a repeated vowel or consonant letter if it is at the beginning of adjacent words.

*“Polka-dot song” uses assonance, consonance and alliteration. Can you find other poems in the book where the repetition of sounds occurs?