

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 7–12

Taking Time to Go Nowhere through Poetry



THE STILL LIFE TRADITION

In traditional Western painting, the dictionary tells us that the term “still life” includes all kinds of man-made or natural objects, such as cut flowers, fruit, vegetables, fish, game, pottery, and so on. None of these things move. The still life genre can be a celebration of material pleasures, or a warning of the ephemerality of these pleasures and the brevity of human life.

CONTEMPORARY STILL LIFE

In his video series *Still Life*, Taiwanese artist Wu Chi-Tsung echoes traditional still life flower paintings from both Asian and European traditions—a genre he feels is forever in the past.

Silent, but only seemingly static, his works require us to slow down in order to experience their unhurried pace and infrequent movements. This is in opposition to both the traditional, immobile still life paintings of the past and to the hurried, sometimes harried pace of what we more frequently watch or expect from our digital screens and accelerated world.

READ: STILLNESS IN POETRY

Novelist and essayist Pico Iyer explores in his book, *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere*, the unexpected pleasures of “sitting still as a way of falling in love with the world and everything in it.” Let’s accept his invitation to “go nowhere”; to observe, perhaps sketch, and then write.

Read the following poem “Falling: The Code” written in 1986 by poet Li-Young Lee. In the poem, Lee captures a moment of vivid observation amidst stillness as he speculates about the sound and slow action of apples falling from a tree.

1.
Through the night
the apples
outside my window
one by one let go
their branches and
drop to the lawn.
I can’t see, but hear
the stem-snap, the plummet
through leaves, then
the final thump against the ground.

Sometimes two
at once, or one
right after another.
During long moments of silence
I wait
and wonder about the bruised bodies,
the terror of diving through air, and
think I’ll go tomorrow
to find the newly fallen, but they
all look alike lying there
dewsoaked, disappearing before me.

2.
I lie beneath my window listening
to the sound of apples dropping in

the yard, a syncopated code I long to know,
which continues even as I sleep, and dream
I know

the meaning of what I hear, each dull
thud of unseen apple-

body, the earth
falling to earth

once and forever, over
and over.

ACTIVITY

Find a place in which you can be still and observe and listen. Perhaps sketch or make notes during this time. Later, write a poem based on your solitary experience of quiet space and slow time.

