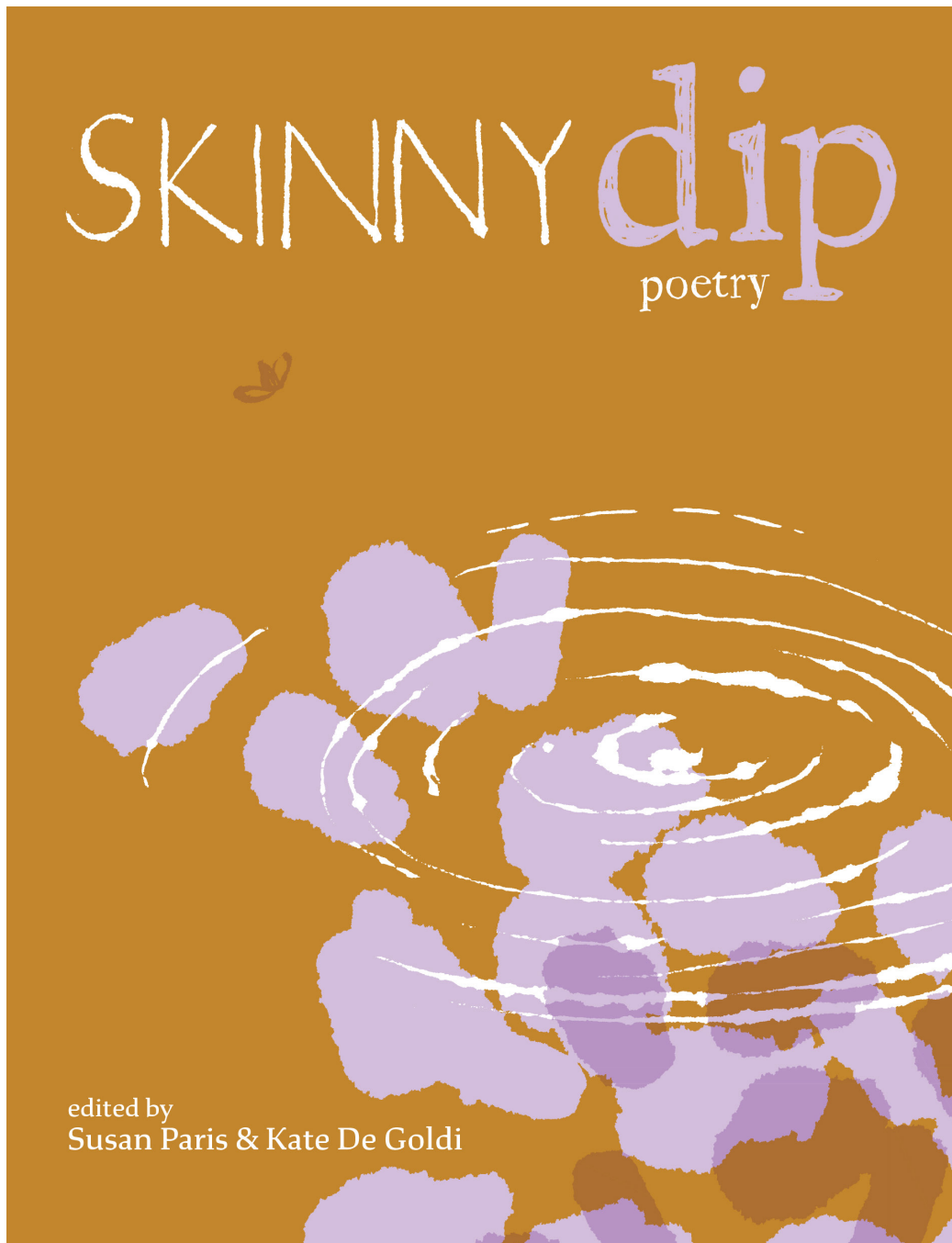




## *Skinny Dip: Poetry* Teacher Notes



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# Skinny Dip Teacher Notes

## *Skinny Dip: Poetry*

Edited by Susan Paris & Kate De Goldi

### *Why poetry in the classroom?*

Poems are little grenades. They compress and intensify, offering new perceptions, new modes of expression. They make plain that literature is a consequence of paying close attention to the world. Poems offer students and teachers a holiday from the demands of narrative. They have brevity, which makes them *achievable* in a classroom – both to read and discuss and to write – but are still dense with lessons in the language arts: the power of sound and rhythm, the role of voice and tone, the adventure of vocabulary; the ways figurative devices heighten expression.

### *Why Skinny Dip?*

*Skinny Dip* brings together new work from some of our best contemporary poets, written especially for readers from intermediate through to high school. The collection showcases a wide variety of poetic forms. Familiar ones like free verse, haiku, acrostic, and found poems, but dazzling, tricky forms too: pantoum, rondel, cinquain, sestina, and more! At the back of the book you'll find informative and entertaining notes on these forms.

### *Using Skinny Dip*

The following three lessons have been developed around the two English curriculum strands: students *make* meaning (listening, reading, viewing) and *create* meaning (speaking, writing, presenting). We offer a guide for the close reading and discussion of five poems along with suggestions for writing and follow-up activities. Think of these lessons as models or templates from which you might devise classroom work across the entire range of *Skinny Dip's* contents.

## A Prose Poem

**Begin with a mountain**

by **Nina Mingya Powles**

### *Thinking and discussing*

1. Before reading the poem, look at the title. The poet has used hanzi (a Chinese character). Can you guess what the pictograph represents? (A mountain, shown by three peaks.)
2. Read the poem. Write down what you notice about it? What features stand out? Do you have questions about the poem? Are there unfamiliar words?
3. Listen as the poem is read aloud. Write down anything new you notice (sonic effects, rhythm, etc.).
4. What do you think the poem is about? How would you describe the poem's overall mood?
5. Nina has used the structure of a pepeha. What are the customary parts of a pepeha for Māori? How has Nina adapted or extended her pepeha? ('Where are you really from?', anecdotes, thoughts, acknowledging the first people – as in pepeha for Pākeha and tauīwi)
6. Find the placenames throughout the poem (Tararua, Kinabalu, Waikanae, London). Locate them on a map. Why do you think the poet mentions all these places? What languages are represented in the poem?
7. What do you think the final four lines mean?
8. Can you find a definition of a prose poem? (A prose poem has one foot in poetry and one in prose; it usually dispenses with the line breaks associated with poetry but can use the range of other poetic effects.) Compare 'Begin with a mountain' to another prose poem in the book, 'I'm sorry for the bad handwriting the bus is bumpy' by Rata Gordon. What do the two poems have in common? How are they different?
9. Which elements in each poem seem like prose? Identify the poetic devices in both poems.

## Begin with a mountain

### Writing and presenting

1. A pepeha tells people ‘who you are’. Using Nina’s poem as a model, try writing your own pepeha prose poem.
  - a. Work out the the fundamental parts of your pepeha (for Māori: maunga, awa, waka, hapū, family name, tipuna, etc; for Pākeha & tauīwi you could use a slightly different form, eg: ‘*Ko XX te maunga e rū nei taku ngākau/XX is the mountain that speaks to my heart*). How much do you already know? Perhaps you’ll need to interview your family to find out more. Are there stories about grandparents or earlier ancestors that are significant? You might want your poem to build on and extend the basic pepeha as Nina’s does.
  - b. In her biographical note (page 110) Nina says, ‘To me, my family tree looks more like a river that flows into several oceans.’ What image might you use to describe your family tree? A web? A ladder? A maze? A blank page?
  - c. Note down all the ways Nina Powles *shows* where she comes from (significant maunga, awa, waka; physical description of her home city; food; ethnicities and languages; tales of ancestors; personal reflections). Think about what details from your past and present you could use in your poem.
  - d. Following Nina Powles’s example, write your own headings to structure your poem.
  - e. Write the first draft of your poem, using the notes you’ve made. Remember, one foot in prose and one foot in poetry. What prose elements will you use? Which poetic devices?
  - f. Read your draft. Is it telling you anything new? Do you want to explore that? Can you edit, tighten, or elaborate your poem to make it stronger? Is their stronger vocabulary you can use? Are their redundant words? Try a second draft. Expect to try a third!
  - g. Don’t forget a title.
  - h. Form small groups and share your poems. Or plan a class reading of pepeha poems. Or have a new pepeha poem shared with the class at the beginning of each day.

## **Begin with a mountain**

### *Follow Up*

#### Poem-in-a-zine

Nina combines writing and artwork in her zine making. You could turn your pepeha prose poem into a zine. Find zine-making instructions online (a good place to start:

[www.readbrihtly.com/how-to-make-zine](http://www.readbrihtly.com/how-to-make-zine)) for help to design and illustrate your own zine.

## Free Verse & A Dialogue Poem

### Street Fighter

by Amber Esau

#### *Thinking and discussing*

1. Before reading the poem, look at the title. How many ways can you read 'street fighter'? (Most significantly, Street Fighter is an arcade fighting game.)
2. Read the poem. Note down the things that interest you or that you particularly enjoy. Are there words or lines you don't understand? What questions do you have about the poem?
3. Listen as the poem is read aloud. Note anything new that you hear.
4. Whose point of view is the poem from? (first person plural: *but we/and we/and our*)
5. What do you think the poem is about? (The pleasure of being with your friends after school; group identity.) What happens during the walk home? What's the overall mood of the poem?
6. What features of the poem heighten the subject? (The group moves fast; the sense of headlong pace and rhythm achieved by the short lines and stanzas; the repetition; the contractions; the mix of swift actions and quick interior observations; the particular verbs: *rushing; hop, skip, jump, honking, driving*; the scrunched words: *'they go downdownleft'*.)
7. What do you learn about the kids in this poem, including their life outside school, their families, their suburb?
8. The poem is a rich mix of figurative devices (similes, personification, alliteration) and informal language (colloquialisms, dialect). Identify examples of each.
9. The poem foregrounds kids together, as one, on the street. But who is referenced at the beginning and end of the poem? (Mum, representing all mums.) What do you think the poet intended with that?

## Street Fighter

### *Writing and presenting*

‘Street Fighter’ is written in free verse. Read the description of free verse on page 101. Note that while it ‘has no rules’ (as to structure), it does use ‘all the usual features of poetry.’ ‘Street Fighter’ revels in a good few poetic features, but the poem sprawls across five pages in ragged columns, like a group of kids making their way home from school. It’s full of sudden moves and shouts and the noise of the suburb. Amber Esau exploits free verse’s lack of formal rules to give the full sensory blast of a walk home. But, cleverly, she gives herself an internal structure to keep the poem shapely and tight: it begins as the kids burst out the school gate and ends once they reach home.

1. Write a free verse in which you travel from one place to another (walk, run, bike, scooter, skateboard). Use Amber Esau’s poem as a prompt.
  - a. Work out where you’ll start and end. It could be a short journey or a meandering one. Show the setting of your poem. (Suburb? Urban area? Rural? In a park?)
  - b. What’s the pace? Speedy? Dawdling? Purposeful but moderate pace? Think about the ways this can be shown in your poem: line lengths, choice of verbs, the way things and people pass by or are noticed, etc.
  - c. Are you alone or in a group? Which point of view will you use?
  - d. What sensory effects or observations can you work into the poem? What can be seen, heard, tasted, touched, smelled?
  - e. Are there incidents or people along the way?
  - f. Is there conversation? What are the participants thinking? Are they listening to music as they go (can you borrow lyrics to use effectively)?
  - g. Read through your first draft. Does anything surprise you? Which parts do you particularly like? Can you trim or expand for better effect? Try a second draft. And a third ...
  
2. ‘Street Fighter’ is fun to read aloud. Try performing it as a group, with 3–5 readers, like a chorus with soloists. Go through the poem first and work out who will read which parts and which parts might be read in unison. Think about what interesting rhythmic and musical effects you can achieve in the way you use the different voices available. Are there any sound effects you might add?



**Sole to Sole**  
by Victor Rodger

*Thinking and discussing*

1. Ensure everyone understands what 'sole' means ('bro' or 'mate' in Samoan).  
What might the title mean?
2. Read the poem through. Note what you particularly like or any questions.
3. Listen as the poem is read aloud. Do you have further observations?
4. How many speakers are there in this dialogue poem? (three). How has the poet shown this visually? Who else has a brief walk-on part in the poem?
5. How would you describe the mood of this poem? Which aspects of the poem create that mood?
6. What happens in this poem? What would you say the poem is 'about'? (Two kids scheming and scabbing for some food, goofing off as they go. Two kids enjoying the creativity and 'music' of talk.)
7. The energy and drive, the rhythm and music of dialogue is at the heart of this poem. How does Victor Roger create those rhythms, that music? (Varying line lengths, emphases, repetitions, use of vernacular, dialogue sonics  
(*Fahhhh/Pffffft/Ooooooh/Ssssssst.*)
8. How does Victor make the poem comical? (The snap of the dialogue, the kids' ragging each other, mimicry, fake pathos, the exaggerated similes, the first speaker's success in wrangling a chip and his mock praise of the afakasi kid.)
9. Compare 'Street Fighter' and 'Sole to Sole'. What do they have in common?  
What are their differences? Which would you choose to perform?

*Writing and presenting*

'Sole to Sole' is a dialogue poem (a subset of free verse). Like Amber Esau, Victor Rodger uses the form's freedoms to full effect: the poem roams over several pages like a casual conversation between mates; it's spiked with dialogue's 'special' effects (emphases, silences, sounds of awe and exasperation, repetition, colourful expressions). Victor's poem feels like an episode in a larger narrative, or a scene in a play, but it's structured like a story with a beginning, middle, and end: the main players want something badly (food), there's an

## Sole to Sole

obstacle (not enough money), they find a solution (scab off another kid). The poem's speakers are also vivid characters – their personalities are conveyed almost entirely by what they say and how they say it.

1. Write your own dialogue poem using 'Sole to Sole' as a guide. You can invent or use something from your own experience – but remember, 'real life' needs work ('the sandpaper of art'!) to be transformed into a persuasive poem.
  - a. How many people will be in this conversation? (More than three is a lot to control.) Where are they?
  - b. What's the main topic of conversation? Is there something the talkers want to achieve? Or are they discussing something that's happened (an incident, a person's actions)? Is one of them telling a story and the others interrupting along the way?
  - c. What's the overall mood or tone you want to convey? Comedy? Reflection? Fury? Sulking?
  - d. Where/how will the dialogue end? It's often useful to work this out before you begin writing.
  - e. How will you lay out your poem to make clear which character is speaking?
  - f. What poetic dialogue effects can you use to show your characters' personalities and the poem's general mood?
  - g. Think hard about your title. How much will it tell the reader/listener?
  
2. Write a dialogue poem as a group.
  - a. Decide how many voices you need. One of the voices could be a chorus.
  - b. Discuss the incident or elements of the poem and work out your structure.
  - c. Work up your first draft by going back and forth between yourselves, each writing your own parts in response to the others. This provides your base material. Discuss how this first draft can become an effective dialogue poem. What poetic features might you use? Think about your line breaks. How will the poem look on the page? Are there any sound effects you might add (whistling, clapping, hand slapping, whooping, etc.)? What is redundant in the first draft? Are there parts that need clarifying or expanding?

## Sole to Sole

- d. Work on as many drafts as you need but try to keep your ultimate poem to five pages.
3. ‘Sole to Sole’ is also a terrific performance piece. You’ll need three expressive readers and some practice to work up a good pace and comic vibe.
4. Perform your own poems. Lend your voices to each others’ work. Think about how you can heighten the poem’s features with your use of voices or extra sound effects.

## Follow Up

### A new poetic form!

- Read the notes on poetic form in *Skinny Dip* (page 99) to get an idea of what kinds of rules some forms use.
- Now invent your own poetic form.
  - a. What’s it called?
  - b. What are its rules? (How many lines? How many stanzas? Any rhyming scheme? Any repetitions? Particular subject matter? (Odes are usually in praise of something or someone, a eulogy generally praises someone who has died, haiku are often about the natural world or everyday occurrences.)
  - c. Now write a poem using your invented form. When you’ve done several drafts, make notes about the form: How difficult is it? (Too difficult – or just challenging enough?) Which rules do you think are particularly effective? Do you want to change anything before you launch this new form on the world?
  - d. Make copies of your poem for your classmates and read the poem aloud to them (world premiere!) Challenge them to work out what the rules of your new form are?

## A Rondel & A Villanelle

### History Lesson

by Bill Manhire

#### *Thinking and discussing*

1. What might you expect from a poem with this title?
2. Read the poem. Is it what you expected? (History lessons traditionally deal in ‘facts’, such as places, dates, events, people, etc., and this poem has few specifics. It’s saying something quite different about history and how we might make sense – or not – of it.) Note down what you respond to and any questions you may have.
3. What do you think Bill is saying with this poem? (That it’s difficult to be black and white about historical events and people because people interpret history in different ways.)
4. How does he convey this idea?
  - He uses provisional statements: *a good or bad thing happened here. There are probably bones beneath the ground. We should spread the word around.*
  - He personifies the past and suggests it’s a little impotent: it often can’t tell us anything definitive: *The past can only stand and stare.*
  - He suggests that humans too are a little at a loss: *We stand on the top and gaze around.*
  - He implies that we often don’t learn from the past. We repeat mistakes: *year after year after year after year, and the bones are starting to make a mound.*
  - We don’t pay attention: *but no one seems to care.* Or we forget: *the view is part of our atmosphere.*
5. Read the notes on rondels (page 99). Listen to the poem read aloud.
6. What features of the rondel accentuate the poem’s subject?
  - Bill uses the repetition required (*A good or bad thing happened here*) to emphasise the idea at the heart of the poem: we read history through personal lenses so it’s difficult to reach agreement on what happened and why.
  - The rhyme requirement also gives a particular lilt to the poem, an almost carefree verve, underscoring the poem’s suggestion that our relationship with history is sometimes casual or inattentive. But, paradoxically, this rhyme also magnifies the pathos at the heart of the poem (*year after year after year after year*). History and its enigmas may be reduced to rhyming ditties and anecdote.

## *Writing and presenting*

Writing a poem within a prescribed structure can be challenging. There are usually a number of things to juggle: stanza length, rhyme schemes, repetitions, etc. But parameters can also be oddly helpful. They narrow your options (lots you don't have to think about), and they require you to be inventive, which can be exciting. With a bit of sweat, you can surprise yourself!

Rondel means round. The form has many variations (the AB pattern, for example, changes from poem to poem), but it's helpful to think of the rondel as a round thing, a poem that circles back on itself. It does this by using a refrain, beginning with a line that repeats itself at the poem's end.

1. Using Bill Manhire's 'History Lesson' as a prompt, try writing your own rondel in which you observe the following requirements:
  - a. Begin and end with the same line (a refrain). Think about how you might use that line elsewhere in the poem.
  - b. Use four quatrains (four-line stanza) along with a quintet (five lines) or a sestet (six lines).
  - c. Use an AB rhyme scheme. You can vary that arrangement: do AABB or ABAB or ABBA. Up to you.
  - d. Think about what subject might lend itself to, or benefit from, a refrain. Repeated lines can be useful for suggesting a number of powerful emotions: longing, envy, greed, anticipation, attraction, guilt, anxiety, a recurring memory ...
  - e. Your poem will need several drafts. Think of the first draft as getting the bones of your idea – and your structure – on paper. Happily, you already know what your final line will be (something to write towards). But don't try and get everything 'right' in this draft. The subsequent drafts are for adjusting: trying out alternative rhymes, line lengths, repetitions, and vocabulary. The poem may change in emphasis over several drafts. Writing is, after all, an exploration!

School Caretaker  
by Tim Upperton

*Thinking and discussing*

1. Read the poem. Note down your thoughts or any questions.
2. Listen to the poem being read aloud. What *sound* effects did you notice throughout? (End rhymes and internal rhymes, assonance.)
3. Whose point of view is the poem from? What do you learn about the caretaker? How would you describe the caretaker's *tone* throughout? What is the mood of the poem? How does the caretaker feel about his job? (Pride and perhaps a little futility.) Which parts of the poem tell you this?
4. This is a villanelle – a poetic form with a strict structure. Can you track the two rhyme schemes? (ABA through the first five stanzas, which are three-line tercets; ABAA in the final stanza, a four-line quatrain.) Look at them closely – they're clever. (The rhyme often goes over two words: *wakers/make is, sake a/wind breaker*, etc.) Why do you think the villanelle's strictures might work well with this poem's subject? Read Tim Upperton's thoughts on villanelles (page 100).
5. Other effects are less obvious but add considerably to the tone and mood of the poem. Can you see what they are?
  - Humorous, dead-pan oppositions, with hints of bathos: *What I make is/soon unmade; the enamel gleams/But not for long; a cake is made/It's sometimes a flop*. The caretaker consistently undercuts his 'achievements'. He's wilfully, or helplessly, downbeat.
  - Ironic deflation: *I come from a long line of caretakers*. 'I come from a long line' is generally used to describe the continuation of a family tradition and to imply a sense of pride in longevity of practice. Our caretaker *may* come from a long family line of caretakers, but it's much more likely he's just the latest in a long line of unrelated caretaker employees at the school, and this perhaps suggests a kind of anonymity, even solitariness.
  - Borrowed phrases are buried in the caretaker's story: *the kids are all right* (the name of a song by The Who, in which the singer is rationalising leaving his girl; a sentimental movie in which the kids may or may not be all right); and *green acres* (a slightly grandiose 19th century term for a large estate; also a tv comedy from the 1960s). How would you describe the poet's use of these phrases? (ironic)

## School Caretaker

6. The final stanza arguably summarises the caretaker's complex feelings about his job. What's going on in that stanza? (It's showing the kind attention paid by the kids who made and decorated the cake, but the caretaker decoration on top of the cake is tiny... implying the caretaker is mostly on the periphery of everyone's attention. Yet his final words are: *'They know I care. I am the caretaker.* Both things are true. He lives in paradox.)
7. Think about the title in relation to the last line. What's different about the two uses of 'caretaker'?
8. Read Tim Upperton's other poem 'PE' (page 64) and the notes on blank verse (page 101). What elements do his two poems have in common? (Humour; playing with the rules of their form; use of deflation and inflation; both look at familiar things in unexpected and ironic ways.)

## Writing and presenting

Villanelles are quite the challenge – but poets seem to love the demands they make. They also play round with the rules if it suits them better. As the notes on villanelles say, 'Tim declined to fully play ball'. He declined the two repeated lines requirement. Online, you'll find dozens of examples of villanelles from poets of the world. Many of them adapt the rules. [www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/villanelle](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/villanelle)

1. Using Tim Upperton's 'School Caretaker' as a model or prompt, write your own villanelle observing the following restraints (and it's your choice whether to use the two repeated lines).
  - a. Write five tercets (three-line stanzas) and a quatrain (four lines).
  - b. Use a rhyme scheme: could be ABA like Tim's (ABAB in the quatrain) or AAB or ABB in the tercets, and ABAB or AABB in the quatrain
  - c. What's your subject? Like Tim, you may want to write about a person whose work or daily life has repeated, ritualistic aspects to it, in which case, the repeated lines could be useful (it might be yourself!). Or you could look closely at an animal (a pet) in their habitual round. Or you may want to consider an event that can be highlighted by the use of repetition: lockdown level 4, exams, sports practice, maths, eating breakfast, church, the rituals of gaming.

## School Caretaker

- d. As with the rondel exercise, this poem will need several drafts. There's a lot of trial and error when you have a rhyme requirement. You delete and reinstate. Shift lines around. Banish them forever and try something new. Keep at it. It's thrilling to behold your finished villanelle.
  - e. Don't forget a title. How will it work with the rest of your poem? Think of it as *part* of the poem, a hat that sets off an outfit – not a mismatched one snatched hastily from a hook.
2. Write a poem about a recurring person in your life about whom you know very little. Someone like a bus driver, local dairy owner, doctor, courier driver, teacher, neighbour ... someone you see regularly enough to have noticed some details about.
    - a. You'll need to imagine/invent aspects of this person, blend what you know with the imagined parts to create a portrait.
    - b. Write the poem in the first person from *your subject's* point of view.
    - c. Choose your own form: rondel, villanelle, free verse, acrostic, alphabet poem, etc.
    - d. Keep it to one page.
    - e. Expect to do several drafts, editing, tightening, elaborating until you think the poem is the best it can be.
3. Perform your rondels, villanelles, and poetry portraits to each other. Think of this performance as a public poetry reading. Introduce your poem with a few words about the subject – why you chose it, any particularly tricky bits in the writing, anything that surprised you about the finished poem.



### Follow Up

Pantoums are close cousins of villanelles and rondels. Check out the notes on pantoums (page 99). They also have requirements for stanza lengths and repetitions. In all three forms, the repeated lines give a cumulative power to the poem, heightening the emotion at the heart of the piece – longing, puzzlement, urgency, madness, dread, excitement, etc. *Skinny Dip* has two pantoums, ‘Full Spectrum Career Highlights’ by Sam Duckor-Jones (page 74) and ‘Pot Plant’ by Rata Gordon (page 72).

1. Read both poems and consider how each of the poets has adapted the form.
2. What would you say was the emotion, or emotions, at the heart of each poem?  
How does each poet convey this?
3. Find a copy of James Brown’s pantoum ‘Spamtoum’ from *The Year of the Bicycle* (Victoria University Press, 2006). It’s also a found poem, made up of spam subject lines, and very entertaining. What emotion/thoughts do you think are at the heart of that poem?
4. There are several examples of pantoums on the American Poetry Foundation website: [www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/pantoum](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/pantoum). Read some of the following and ask yourself the same question. What are the prevailing emotions of each piece?

‘Pantoum of the Great Depression’ by Donald Justice

‘My Brother at 3am’ by Natalie Diaz

‘Incident’ by Natasha Trethaway

‘A Ride in the Rain’ by Blas Falconer

### Finally

Read your way through *Skinny Dip*. Do you have a favourite poem? Several favourites? Do some online exploring and see what you can discover about the poet(s). Do they work in other forms? What else do they do besides writing? Have they written about or commented on their poetry?