

## TEN-MINUTE SPILL

Rita Dove

Write a ten-line poem. The poem must include a proverb, adage, or familiar phrase (examples: she's a brick house, between the devil and the deep blue sea, one foot in the grave, a stitch in time saves nine, don't count your chickens before they hatch, someday my prince will come, the whole nine yards, a needle in a haystack) *that you have changed in some way*, as well as five of the following words:

cliff

needle

voice

whir

blackberry

cloud

mother

lick

You have ten minutes.



This exercise is an adaption of one I was given as a creative-writing student during my undergraduate years. I usually write the words on the board and spend a few minutes inviting the class to suggest proverbs to put on the board, though I also encourage students to use another adage if it occurs to them. I announce the time limit as the very last thing, and while they are gasping, I

usually tell them not to worry about making poetry—just put it in lines and write whatever comes into their heads.

I think you'll find the results consistently astonishing. In the list are "buzz" words like *mother*, *needle*, *cliff* as well as several words that can function as verb or noun. There's a nice balance between fuzzy, dreamy words (*cloud*, *whir*) and concrete, vivid ones (*blackberry*, *needle*). The saying is there to give you a unit of American speech, a homespun rhythmic line to spin off from. If you don't freeze immediately in terror—and the ridiculously short time allotment usually allays panic, since you know it's impossible to write a poem in ten minutes, right?—what tends to come out are scary and wild chunks of psychic landscape.

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