Twenty Actions

- Overhead transparency of your “Twenty Actions”—a list of your everyday actions over one weekend that could become poems
- Overhead transparency of a poem about one of the actions on your list
- Transparency of “Twenty Actions That Could Become Poems: A Sampling of Student Ideas” as examples for your kids
- Optional: Photocopies of action-inspired poems: “Beach in Winter” (Erin Witham), “The Perfect Opportunity” (Meg Benton), “Soccer Again” (Jacob Miller), “Still” (Jed Chambers), “Mirage” (Marnie Briggs), and “Ode to Ovaltine” (Siobhan Anderson) as examples for your students of what’s possible
Twenty Actions That Could Become Poems: A Sampling of Student Ideas

Styling my hair with the usual gel and finishing spray, and not once thinking about the ozone layer
Blowing bubbles in a glass of Ovaltine
Playing Go Fish backstage at Peter Pan, all of us in thick stage makeup
Falling asleep with my dog on my stomach
Practicing the same piece over and over on my violin
Eating a very sweet orange
Smelling spring
Riding my bike over snow
Finding bookmarks with messages on them left behind in books
My cat crawling all over my pen when I’m trying to write
Kicking a soccer ball for the first time since the fall
Making brownies with my sister
Reading a whole book in one sitting
Shopping for makeup at Rite Aid
“Kissing the surf” on the beach in winter

Finding my old stuffed animals under my bed—growing up
Eating my birthday cake: when the last piece is gone, so is my birthday
Trying on a dead, 105-year-old lady’s hats
Eating Skittles by pouring out the bag and making a rainbow
Walking outside barefoot in a tank top because it’s a sunny day, then freezing
Trying to put on a too-small sweater
Waking up to wind and rain and staying in bed because it’s so nice to be warm and listen to the weather outside
Loading firewood at sunrise
Trying on my dad’s shoes
The moments just before falling asleep—that silence
Mom hitting a bird when we were riding in the car
Eating a chocolate biscotti dipped in cold milk
Squishing crab apples underfoot
Beach in Winter

I kneel down on the shore
and offer myself to the sea.
A wave spits surf at me
as it rages in to greet my vulnerable sneakers.
I bend my head, nose almost brushing the sand,
and touch my lips to the water.
I kiss the surf.

When I stand I feel the bubbles on my face
reduce to a beard of sticky ocean.
I lick my lips and bounce along the shore like a puppy,
young and free.
Again and again,
I kneel and kiss the salty sea.
Until it’s time to go.

Walking back,
I keep my eyes peeled for places where the tide rises high.
Finally, I find one and ready myself.
But this time
the surf laps up and soaks
my mittens, knees, and feet.
I open my mouth to complain,
but instead of a grumble, a laugh erupts,
and I turn and skip
back along the beach
not yet ready to leave my lover.

—Erin K. Witham
**The Perfect Opportunity**

Is it every cat  
or just mine  
who watches the writing pen  
as if it’s the mouse  
of all mice?  
His hunched shoulders  
shift back and forth,  
get ready,  
wait for the perfect opportunity  
to pounce, claw, and gnaw  
again, again, and again.  
Once he’s tired  
of the pen game,  
he sits right on top  
of my poem,  
purrs,  
demands affection.  
I pet his black back  
until I am motivated  
to work again.  
Then I push him off the paper,  
and the writing pen begins its dance.  
So is it every cat,  
or just mine?

—Meg Benton
Soccer Again

I pick up the soccer ball.
It feels cool against
my palm as I walk out of the garage.
I throw the ball away from me
and catch up to dribble it
between my legs
to get the feel of soccer again.

I kick it over to where a penalty shot should go.
And before I realize it
I’m taking the four customary steps back
at a slight curve to my left.
I kick the ball hard
toward the side of the house
that I use as a goal
and stare in disgust at what
three months of winter
have done to my game.

Already I’m swearing
I’m going to practice every day
to get back to what I think
I should be able to do—
I know it’s going to be
a busy summer.

—Jacob Miller
STILL

It’s not always the
good things
that make life amazing.

Yesterday
I fell asleep on the couch
with the dog asleep on my stomach,
a look of solemn contentment
riding her face.

And today
I went outside
and startled some deer
into flight—
white tails waving like banners.

Although these events
aren’t life-changing
they are important to me,
small signs that the world
is still beautiful.

—Jed Chambers
I peel open my eyes
to the bright gleam
of early morning sun.
Its warm beams hit my face
as a breeze blows blissfully
through the long hair of the grass.
My calendar says
March,
but the sky and the scent say
summer.
I pull on a tank top
I’d shoved messily
into the bottom of my drawer
(suspecting summer
was a long ways away)
and grab a pair of shorts,
hoping they still fit.
I bound down the stairs,
feeling the freedom that summer brings,
as eager as a little girl
to feel the pinch of wind against my face.
I pull the sliding door aside
and step, barefooted,
onto the sunlit deck,
epecting a warm embrace.
Instead a shiver crawls up my spine
as my body hits a rush of swift wind
and the bitterness of cold
March,
March,
March.

—Marnie Briggs
Ode to Ovaltine

I can see it.
On the top shelf of the pantry,
heaven waits.
As my hand slides toward the glass jar,
deep chocolate memories come swirling back
of the times when I couldn’t reach the shelf.

I remember the sheer brilliance
of stuffing the dark brown jar
inside my shirt,
then secretly scooping a few extra
flaky chocolate spoonfuls
into my cup when Mom was in the other room.

I remember thirteen years of drippy mustaches,
thirteen years of committing the same
dreaded lunchtime crime—
blowing bubbles in my Ovaltine
through a purple straw.

Now my fingers slide easily around the thick brown jar.
I glance around to make sure
no one is watching.
I spoon four scoops
of crumbly chocolate
into pure, white milk.
I lean into my straw and blow gently.
Thin elastic bubbles pop up
across the smooth surface.
I look up
and smile.
Still heaven.

—Siobhan Anderson