



Part VI



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6.1 Letter Shifting Game

Suppose I start moving “i” around:

In Bill’s brie, pelicans shat.

Ok. In the first word i is in the first position, then the second, third fourth. I abandon i at the end, but I did manage to move the i along in terms of position. We could make a poem that fooled around with this.

Let’s say i went first. Now my opponent as to move the last vowel, this case “a,” from third letter in the word to first:

In Bill’s brie, Pelican’s shat. i1, i2, i3, i4, a3

Bastards! Anny screamed. a2, a1, e4

Trees went elephant hunting. e3, e2, e1, u2

Ug!” cried the unhappy Jesuit,

emphasizing his preoccupation with foreign languages.

Whatever the first vowel sound of the last word of the line is, that’s the sound you have to march along. If it’s three letters in, you must move it to second, then first position. After that, you can finish the line on whatever vowel you want. The first line always has to have the vowel move three to four positions before the writer can proceed to another sound.

You can complicate this game by making a rule that all the lines have to contain a certain consonant sound, or two recurring consonant sounds. You could even disgust someone by claiming the poet was an intuitive genius because Pelican shit is of the exact consistency of warmed over brie (don’t do that). These kinds of games help you learn how to deliberate. You can get a chess timer and give each other a time limit for constructing the sentence: say one minute per sentence. Other rules for it:

- There must be no incomplete or run on sentences.
- If possible, the poem must have some sort of narrative or lyrical consistency in terms of sense. In the above example, it sounds as if they are on an expedition to some strange land (sound stage) where Pelicans and elephants commune. At any rate, good luck.

6.2 On the Importance of Redundancy

Rhyme is one of the more flashy mimetic devices, and is a sort of “approximate” repetition. Approximate repetition is that which repeats with a slight or even significant difference, but repeats nonetheless: cat and sat repeat everything but the c and s. In slant rhyme, half rhyme, etc., etc., these repetitions may be more subtle but they exist. In fact, it might be argued that language draws much of its appeal not from novelty, but from a sort of masterful redundancy. Gertrude Stein used mimesis as her chief structural agent, created strangeness: great, highly comic strangeness through loops of repetition. The subject of Stein’s sentences were very often her sentences. Wonderful things! Someone should study Stein in relation to the aesthetics of poesis as an imitation of music in such age of reason poets as Alexander Pope and John Dryden—also in relation to the minimalism and repetition of Philip Glass. I’m too lazy to do it. But I know that if I read three poems by Alexander Pope, and then enter Gertrude Stein, my pleasure at her repetitions and circumlocutions increases. I like moving forward by going round and round. It appeals to the musical side of my brain. It is almost non-verbal, and its absence in most free verse makes me sad.

So...anaphora. Anaphora is in every proclamation of state and legal document:

The End of Summer: Laura Bonheim

whereas the party of the first part in conjunction with the second part, and subsequent to the third part, agrees to said parts;
 and whereas, these parties, being of parts one, two, and three, yet not exclusive to any number of parts concur in part, in whole, or by the agency of parts being parted;
 and whereas, we enjoin, install, and empower all three parts to act upon the agency of matters pertinent to the parts, to act as one in being with the whole made of parts one, two, and three
 we, hereby, declare that the summer has ended, and all parties are by part, and by whole, concluded, suspended, and adjourned.

The repetition of the “whereas” is anaphora. It is a ritualized form of speech. In this case, it is not a mimetic device unless we consider it a mimesis of false grandeur.

Jargon can be fun, especially if you master it. Many a literary theorist hasn’t a clue what Derrida is saying, but damn if he doesn’t know the riffs of Derrida, and thereby basks in the warm glow of authority by proxy. All mimetic devices are to a certain extent about authority. Repetition, after all, is a form of insistence. Depending upon the writer’s intention, it can be an insistence of coercion, persuasion, or courtship. It can be all three at once. Let’s consider the anaphora in Whitman’s “Song of The Broad Axe:”

Welcome are all earth’s lands, each for its own kind,
 Welcome are lands of pine and oak,
 Welcome are lands of lemon and fig,
 Welcome are lands of gold...

This is ritualized speechifying. It has a ceremony to perform as important as what it is saying. It is not the typical language of contemporary prose or free verse, both of which often shun the most blatant forms of repetition. Here’s a Fanny Howe poem I like (or part of one), called “School.” Howe is being every bit as repetitive as Whitman, but it is the repetition of sounds, and the repetition is more approximate:

4.

In one child’s idea
 of paradise

there is no person
 but parchment

paper and a thumb- sized sun

like a blinking crown
 from a broken crayon.

A lesser poet would have been hell bent on keeping the integrity of the spatial repetition known as couplets:

In one child’s idea
 of paradise

there is no person
 but parchment

paper and
 a thumb-sized sun

like a blinking crown
from a broken crayon.

She decides to vary the symmetry of couplets, and to yield to the true repetition in the poem: every stanza carries a plosive: all Ps in the first three, and Bs in the fourth: Paradise, person, parchment, paper, blinking, broken: six plosives in a 26 word poem! That trumps Whitman, but its priority of place mutes our recognition of the redundancy. There is also the concluding hard Cs in the last couplet: crown and crayon, which is a form of consonantal rhyme. In fact, there are little inexact rhymes all over the place: Person, thumb, sun—inexact, approximate rhymes, and note that four of the seven lines end on an n sound: person, sun, crown, crayon. This redundancy, this approximate repetition is less obvious than anaphora, but it is just as much a part of the appeal of language.

So our first two exercises:

Exercises

1. Write a poem like Laura Bonheim's that uses anaphora in a legal structure for a very un-legal subject (in her case the end of summer). In your case, it could be asking someone out for a drink, or riding the back of a dolphin, etc., etc. You could look up poems by Christopher Smart, and look at the song of Daniel in the bible, or the song of praise sung by the two men in the fiery furnace: all of which employ anaphora.
2. **The second exercise:** pick a sound—p, d, t, s, whatever, and try to thread it through the poem. Use consonantal rhyme: creek, crack, stable, stupid, etc. Break the law of symmetry. If you are using tercets (three line stanzas), at a critical point or turn in the poem, use a one line stanza, or a two line—whichever.
3. **A third:** Look up types of rhyme, then make an agreement with yourself to spend a month rhyming your ass off, but without one exact or perfect rhyme—any rhyme but. Place these rhymes in unusual positions: at the beginning of lines or in the middle, rather than just at the end. Good luck.

6.3 I Began As a Short Story Writer

I began as a short story writer, published a couple, then realized I didn't like paragraphs, or sentences you couldn't break into rhythmic units and lines, or exposition, or any of that stuff. I was jealous of poets who got to write in lines, and isolate grammatical units, and leave so much pretty white space. Then it occurred to me you could tell a story more purely in lines and stanzas, and by using white space. I still found short stories to be my favorite form to read, but I developed what I call "vertical stories," a sort of sitcom, or pre-Chekovian, speech centered narrative that works really well at bar readings, and which gets to steal some of the techniques of poetry, especially the sense of a voice talking, but without having to be at all "poetic" or "lyrical."

In a narrative, poets ought to be lyrical only when the occasion calls for it. Too many poets get in the way of their story because they think: "Hey! I'm a poet! I'm supposed to reach the heights of poesis. Why am I telling a story? God forbid! I better throw something vague and pretty and monumental, or merely arbitrary into the works real quick before people accuse me of writing prose."

This is my take on poesis: any language whose first priority is to draw attention to itself as an act of language is moving *toward* poesis. This is a tricky concept because it validates the uber-prosaic lines of a James Tate or Russell Edson. Their dead pan and whimsy and intentional flatness is so radical that it's the language which matters more than the often

absurdist incongruities. So poesis is any act of language either flatter or more heightened than prose. In effect: language involved in its own ritual of utterance before anything else. Does this mean it is superior as an act of language? Heck no. Lots of lousy poems are far more “poetic” than some really great poems. Prose writers often write very flowery, stilted poems (see Joyce who wrote some real stinkers). We must realize an act of language is not about being prosaic or poetic. It’s about being sufficient unto its own ends, and in terms of poesis, those ends are first and foremost the means: the language itself.

Now the closer you come to using language to convey information, a story, an argument, the closer you come to the prosaic. This includes even verse poems. Most poems, free or metered, are combinations of poetic and prosaic elements—especially narrative poems. Since written prose became the chief form of communication, poets have been trying to grapple with it. This is a narrative poem I am about to do, and I am going to show you how to use speech rhythms, and verse lines, and tell a vertical story without worrying about anything except speaking as you think, and letting the poesis and the prosaic have their way. This poem was written because I grew up reading in bars where they would tell you to shut up if you bored them—dive bars, places where a poet had to be, (how shall we put it, “overt”)? I like being overt. Good overt is better than bad covert. Amen. Now onto this vertical story:

What you will do in this exercise is another form of arbitrary grid. We’ll map out what the poem is doing, and then mimic its structure:

Elegy for Sue Rapeezi

She was the kind of girl who never
took her ugliness lying down.
Once, Jimmy Tarentino
called her a whore
and she waited ‘till he turned his head
and hit him with a four foot length
of plumber’s pipe.

Pretty simple: A statement, followed by a brief incident (illustration that fortifies the statement). With this little gatchet, we can go many ways:

Ham

I don’t think ham should be eaten except on Sunday.
For instance, I had ham once on a Tuesday, and it
ruined my week. Fought with my fiancée, and she
broke our engagement.
And all because of an ill-timed ham.

Once is a great word—my favorite cliché. I use it with little kids, and call it the “onces.” First I ask them who in the class likes the smell of gasoline. And a lot of kids raise their hands. Then I bring up putting Elmer’s glue on your hands, letting it dry, and then peeling it off. They eat this up. I start inciting them to such rhapsody, and then we do the onces: once I fell off my bike, and broke my arm. Once, I snuck into the kitchen and saw my mom picking her nose. Etc., etc. It gets them fired up and validates their right to nostalgia at the age of six. I love it. Anyway, this ham version uses skewed cause and effect—a comic device, but it’s still statement followed by illustration. Here’s another:

Widow

I don't think I can smell Lilacs without crying.
 Once, when we were first dating, my husband
 drove us up South Mountain to this deserted house
 and parked the car out front and pointed to
 this enormous lilac bush in bloom and said:
 That's what I think of you." That man
 didn't know a Lilac from a mum. Poor bastard.
 I loved him after that and ever since.

So now the next stanza:

Some claimed she was awkward,
 Others a whore,
 Still others a tease.
 (Sue was a triple threat).

So the narrator continues drawing the portrait, and he employs a technique of drama: before the main character appears, the other characters talk about him or her, giving us info, and creating anticipation. How do we do this with the Ham?

Of course, deli ham is a different story.
 I think you can eat that most days
 without doing any harm, but certain things
 belong to certain days, and she belonged to me.

I will map out the whole narrative later. I want to show how a mechanism can lead to many different variables.

6.4 Part Two on Narrative: Sue Rapeezi As a Narrative Sonnet

So, to make this a lot shorter, I'm going to list what the narrative of Elegy for Sue Rapeezi does, and then fill it in:

First stanza

1. Statement.
2. Illustration of statement (concrete incident that proves the statement).

Second stanza and third stanza:

Elaboration on the chief subject of the poem from sources outside the narrator, voices or opinions the narrator uses to prepare us on the subject (similar to the opening exposition of a play). We also do this when we gather quotes from authorities to prove our point. A summing up of the subject's nature.

Fourth stanza: The actual appearance of the subject involved in a series of actions.

Fifth stanza:

1. Statement.
2. Illustration that proves or elaborates on the statement.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth stanzas: Development of a relationship between the narrator and the subject: what they did, what they didn't do. The first real scene. An actual incident, place, time.

Ninth and tenth stanza: A change in attitude toward the subject, further things they did, and another incident (scene) that ends in conflict.

Eleventh and twelfth stanzas: Reaction to what happens in the tenth stanza, and the actions that ensue to resolve the conflict.

Thirteenth stanza: The present time, something the narrator thinks now influenced by something that has happened to the narrator.

Fourteenth stanza: Final apostrophic (elegiac) address, which is an address to something that isn't there or that can't talk back.

I called this a Narrative sonnet, and, being a narrative, I used fourteen stanzas instead of fourteen lines.

Elegy for Sue Rapeezi

1.

She was the kind of girl who never
took her ugliness lying down.
Once Jimmy Tarentino
called her a whore
and she waited "til he turned his head
then hit him with a four foot length
of plumber's pipe.

2.

Some claimed she was awkward,
others a whore,
still others a tease.
Sue was a triple threat.

3.

The other girls didn't like her.
She had a rapport with silence,
a rawbone gentleness
the world does not permit.

4.

For unknown reasons
she took a liking to me,
came calling at my house
though I did my best to avoid her,
helped my mother with the laundry,
helped my father fix his brakes.

5.

I was fourteen then, and a closet intellectual
who kept Schubert piano sonatas
hidden inside Led Zeppelin album covers.
Sue caught me listening to Schubert.
She didn't put me down.
I lived in mortal fear of losing my cool.
I thought it was my destiny to carry
Schubert through all the beer guzzling contests
and acts of hard guy bravado.

6.

"What's that shit?" She asked.
"Schubert," I replied.
"I like it," she said, "Sounds sad."

7.

After awhile, I let her come upstairs—
this ugly girl with dirty fingernails.
She sat through Schubert, Mozart,
even Bach.
"When I die" she said, "I hope they play that shit...
I mean if they play 'Kumbaya' or
some other asshole song, I swear,
I'll haunt the bastards..."

8. (the Volta, turn)

I decided she was cool,
sort of Edith Piaf
without talent.
One day she asked me
if I'd ever considered
fucking her brains out.
"No" I said, "The thought
never crossed my mind."

9.

"You know," She said, "You could
if you wanted to."
I said no thanks.
She said, "stuck up faggot,"
and walked out.

10.

Weeks passed.
I was listening to Wagner.
I started wishing she was there,
sitting on my bed, eyes closed, ears opened,
someone to share the sound with.
So I went down to the deserted train station
where she often sat,

reading her vampire novels,
and I asked her to come back.

11.

We made love in the attic.
I had never felt a naked body
besides my own.
It felt good.
As flat as she was, I learned
the noun and verb of a woman's body
are not always in agreement,
that an "ugly" girl could be
beautiful in motion. She was
graceful, warm. She didn't cause me grief.

12.

After that, we sort of just hung out,
listening to Wagner, getting wasted
on quarts of Shaeffer's beer.
Her father got a job down south.
She moved away. Ten years passed.

13.

Last week, I saw her name in the obituaries.
She'd moved back to Elizabeth,
and was killed on the parkway,
rolled over in a van.
She wasn't drunk,
just unlucky.

14.

And excuse me God,
but I feel this woman is an imposter.
The photo showed a different face
from the one I knew.
I feel they've usurped my old friend's name,
but if it's true,
I pray they carried her away to Mozart.
There's so little in this life we own.
So little that we own. I pray that, in the end,
She was saved
from bad music.

You can use this structure to create a narrative sonnet yourself. Just follow the recipe. And it can take on any number of moods or turns. I know this is a long-winded study, but let's try one that uses even stanzas, say seven line stanzas.

1. (Statement and elaboration of statement).

I don't think I can smell lilacs without crying.
Once, when we were first dating, my husband
drove me up south mountain to a deserted house,
and parked the car, and pointed to an enormous Lilac bush.
"That's how I think of you," he said, "like that."

He didn't know his lilacs from his mums..
I loved him after that, and ever since.

2. (What others think about the subject)

Some claimed Frank wasn't smart.
My father complained he never said a thing
you'd call intelligent. My mother said
his family were all mummies, shut up,
shut tight, wrapped in a shroud of silence.
My sister claimed that he was arrogant and
arrogance would kill me. I'd be sorry.

3. (Further Elaboration)

But talk is cheap. I knew a lot of clever boys.
They liked to hear themselves converse,
they loved to make me laugh,
to make me sit and think,
impress me with a wise crack.
My Francis wasn't wise, he wasn't quick,
He wasn't anything but mine.

4. (Actual appearance of the subject)

He showed up at my house that first time
wearing a blue tie with a polka dot dead center.
I asked him how long it took for him
to get that polka dot just right.
He smiled, a sort of slow, and lanky grin,
"It took awhile," he said, then touched my arm
and opened up my door.

5. (Statement with elaboration)

I never liked to dance.
My left leg's longer than my right,
and, every time I did the twist,
I listed to one side, threw out my hip,
and, by night's end, I walked like
Quasi Motto. My body leans. It
makes all pictures crooked.

6. (Development of a scene, with the subject)

I never told any boy that I was lopsided,
for some reason I told Frank, and he said:
"put one foot on my shoe,
and see if things even up."
And we tried that with "The Twelfth of Never"
and laughed for half the song, his arms,
around me, my eyes level with his perfect polka dot.

7. (Further development)

I'd never felt so comfortable, and safe,
but when his hand touched the small of my back,

sweet Christ, it made me want to take my
clothes off—right there, in the Royal Palms,
strip all the layers of my dress, grow,
cross eyed staring at his tie
kiss his polka dot. And I grew dizzy.

8.

And so we sat the other dances out,
ignored the man being hypnotized
during the stage act, ignored my friends
who called him Mr. Mumbles.
At one point, my foot touched his
underneath the table, and I didn't budge,
and, as easy as all that, he took my hand.

9th and 10th stanzas: the turn, a change or deepening in attitude, a conflict.

9.

We didn't go steady right away.
Back then you dated boys, and kept it up.
Like an assembly line, but
no one made me feel the way he did,
that almost painful joy, the way his collars smelled,
the way he looked at me—not checking out my boobs,
but steady, with such pleasure that I lived.

10. (The conflict)

My family attacked him like white blood cells
defending a body against some rank infection.
They called him Mummy, mumbles, Mr. Stiff. They
told me to stop being serious, his family was
“socially inept.” I was a coward and I told him.
That's when he drove me up South Mountain
to see the Lilacs. I think he almost cried.
Then he stopped calling after that.

11. (Resolution, final scene).

I couldn't see, or call him, I couldn't stand
my face. I broke a mirror. My mother who
was always so sarcastic said: Stop playing
Connie Francis. Grow up. He's just a boy.
And so I grew up, gave Rick Delvechio
a hand job, drank myself sick, and then
one night, Frank called from a phone booth.

12.

It was raining so hard I could hear
the rain pelting his jacket through the phone.
“I'm sorry,” he said, “I shouldn't call. I—”
“Shut up! Shut up! Where are you? I said:
Shut up!” Oh I was crazy, ran six blocks

in the rain, without a coat, huddled in his
Junker Ford. And we got married after that.

13 (The present)

Last week I finally gave his suits away.
I packed his things. The dead don't need to dress.
I'm practical. Our daughter says I'm cold.
I've never hated her so much as I do now.
What does she know? She married an English Prof,
talks all the time, and seldom ever listens—
Frank liked him, yes, but Frank liked everyone.

14. (Apostrophic address)

Sweet Christ, It's getting dark out, and the Spring
is scaring me. The way the leaves just come,
and all the flowers blooming. It seems obscene.
Will you call me from a phone booth, silent God?
Forget it. You're not much for talking back. You're the strong
and silent type. I wish you well. Go rise, Sweet Christ.
Go do your thing. I hate the smell of lilacs.

6.5 Some More Prompts and Patter

I worry about graduate students. When intention, and goals, and focus outstrip the accidental, the possibility of falling into exactly what you need to trip over, you ought to take stock: what do you just allow to happen? Some students will say, "Easy for you. You have a job." They're right. But I never planned my life—ever, and I think anyone who knows me, knows this is true. I'm not advocating that anyone be as accidental as I am, but there needs to be some carelessness. The true power of money, or fame, or talent is that it gives wiggle room for carelessness. I've been poor most of my life—sometimes dangerously so, and what I felt most deprived of was the right not *to care*. A writer needs carelessness to a certain degree. They need to write just for the heck of it—without the pressure of publication, or "workshopping," or a grade, or because it's "worthwhile." No child kicking a can wonders if it's worthwhile. Can-kicking is a value in its own right. So I like to instill in my students a sense of "just for the sheer white heck of it."

This is what Flannery O'Connor was getting at when she spoke of developing a "habit of art." So much of the industry of poetry is about "Work." Being goal oriented and focused can be detrimental, if taken too far. As my grandma always said: "A dog chasing his tail loses the yard." I hate work. My idea of a meaningful life would be to receive a spell that allowed me to lie down beside a beloved in a field of timothy grass, sans the bugs, and every so often, she would tenderly tickle my cheek with a blade of grass, and we would make out until our lips were swollen, and then walk hand in hand through blue chicory and ascend to the bedroom where we'd have sex for six hours, in perfect bliss, fully realizing the tantric ideal, and then there'd be a movie, and perhaps a beverage, and the last rays of the sun would fall upon our noses just so, as we lay naked and tangled in each other's limbs in abject splendor, and angels would come with rock glasses full of Jameson—perfect little ice cubes that maketh sweet melody! Oh yes! Being short, and bald, and utterly un-tantric, I am forced to write this, rather than live this, which brings me to the point of my rant: writing is a compensatory act—an augmentation to a life that is not lived. It is what is missing. It is a void through which the hand moves, and when the hand moves just so, the void allows the faces and landscapes to appear. To be vivid for a moment until they fade and are replaced by bills and obligations, and the voice of the world telling us to keep busy.

Oh busy, busy world which hath not love, nor hope, nor Jameson: what does it avail thee?
My true motto: “Lighten up and despair!”

This leads me to a writing prompt called “despairing more deeply into joy.” All you need to do in this writing prompt is be undignified. James Tate is never dignified. He indulges himself. That’s why he’s famous: You need a cookie for this writing prompt, or anything you might eat when you miss someone—a cookie, rice pilaf, whatever. You need to realize life is both beautiful and hopeless, that even if you win the Pulitzer, wrinkles will come, and body parts will fail you, and you’ll become King Lear and insist utterly false people pay you homage until you drop dead and they forget you. If you’re lucky, you’ll be hot for about 20 years, and your reign of terror will be extended. If you’re not lucky, you’ll be less than hot, and that will mean you’ll have to be really smart or very kind to all sentient creatures just to get a little taste of what hot people get by simply breathing. Yes. Life is unfair. Ho hum. You have been cheated. You were born for greater things! Why doesn’t anyone realize it? Get yourself into a state of absolute indignity. Right now. You can begin this prompt with any of the following three lines:

“You were snow that year and fell on me at all odd hours of the morning.”

“You sat naked on my sofa, all except for your glasses, and you asked me to remove them.”

“Why is that fig in your hand, instead of me?”

When I think of snow, I think of a navy blue P coat because I once loved a girl who always wore a navy blue P coat, and in my warped mind, a couple flakes of snow are always falling into the darkness of her coat and disappearing. I see her sometimes in dreams, and she is wearing the coat, and a little knit ski cap, and calling me: “Booshi!” I touch her hair. It is damp and wren brown, and it makes me feel weird, and tender, and sadder than I have ever felt in my whole fucking life. Every time I go to touch her hair, and feel the damp, and watch the snow melt into her coat, she undoes the buttons, and lets me put my hands around her waist, and then she disappears. This is easy to do, this dreaming awake. I have given up all control of what should happen, and yet I am the only creature of what happens. Writers are often introverts who secretly want to rule the world with an iron fist. They need to stop trying to control everything, and then they will have the absolute power of a hollow pipe through which the wind blows, and little children peer to look out the other side.

Anyway, by now, you are probably wondering where the prompt is. It is in the lines. Let’s look at the first line:

“You were snow that year and fell on me at all odd hours of the morning.”

Okay, we know someone is snow (not uncommon in a poem). We know it is “that year.” We know the snow fell on the speaker of the prose poem, and it appears to happen in the morning. What’s an odd hour? Perhaps we can do without the word *odd*, but *odd* sounds nice. We shall see.

If you choose this prompt, pick a year in your life that the reader need never know: 1991, or 1967, or whatever. List three things that made that year significant: you got laid for the first time, you came to know God, your father had a heart attack in his lover’s bathroom...whatever. Anyway, list. Put the list to the side. Now, consider snow in terms of all the five senses.

- *Sight*: how is it falling? Is it swirling? Are they fat flakes, little icy pellets? Is it lake effect snow and blowing sideways? Does it fall in a still semi-darkness of winter, 7 am? Does it fall under the street lights? Are you noticing how vividly green and red and amber the traffic lights are during snowy days? Is the wind blowing?

- *Smell*: wet wool perhaps, the smell of the cold. We know it has a smell. What is it? The smell of wood smoke, etc.
- *Taste*: Is the snow salty, sooty, icy metal? Did you suck wet wool as a child? (I did). Children are always tasting the world. They're like catfish.
- *Touch*: Does it sting your face slightly? Does it fall on your hair, so gently yet somehow perceptible? If someone should suddenly put cold hands on your face, would it piss you off?
- *Sound*: And has God put a mute in the trumpet of consciousness? Is the snow like a damper petal? Have you ever stood in silence on the porch, and tried to hear a single snowflake among thousands?

Now, the good news is, you don't have to use any of this stuff. This is what I call gathering. You're stalling. You're picking up strays. The main purpose of this is to build the thing inside you—to trust that the truth of this dream is growing. "Fell" can be aggressive: it can mean attack, or affectionate ambush, or passion, or playfulness. In this one line, you have a lot to work with. I've been gathering by helping you gather. I have a blue cup full of coffee to my left. My heat is working. I am ready!

Prose Poem

You were snow that year and fell on me at all odd hours of the morning. I came to rely on it, and took my blue knit ski hat off, and let you sting my ears. But tell me, if we come to rely on being ambushed, is it ambush? The snow falls now. It isn't you. Perhaps it is someone else's dead. Perhaps it's become the fingers of a clumsy child, a child who can't button her coat, and must pretend for the rest of her life that she likes being cold. How many things since you stopped being snow have I pretended to like? I put my hands over my ears. I don't want to hear myself. This is sad. This is always sad. I stand at the bus stop, expecting you to fall, to touch my bare neck—to give me the good pain. I say "cut it out." In the language of sad this means: "Come here!" Look! The traffic light is more green, more red, more amber than it has ever been. It is a record traffic light! I am sick with love. Terrible things happen to people, or maybe they don't. Perhaps that's wishful thinking because a truly terrible thing would give me full permission to cry. I need permission. Something is locked inside my scarf—something that trembles, and smells of wet wool, and doesn't know the lock is broken. It could come out—if it wanted to. If it was that child, I would offer to button her coat. I would kiss the dark wool where the flakes were disappearing. No wonder I lose scarves—all those prisoners inside them! I can't bear it any longer. Whatever it is, I want out. The bus is coming. Inside, in the still semi-dark, the green yellow ancient light of the bus, and slushy foot prints, and somber morning faces. Fall on me. My hands are cold. The buttons won't obey. I am wide open. I refuse to listen. My hands are over my ears. What is it I am so afraid of hearing? There is nothing terrible happening—nothing anyone can see. That's what makes it so terrible. That's what makes it snow.

Okay, so try one of these, and give yourself permission to digress, and if you are a busy human being, give yourself permission to digress even further. Digression is nine-tenths the law. Forget the manuscript. Forget the curriculum vitae. We serve them bitterly. We have to work, but it isn't our true kingdom. It isn't snow.

6.6 A Cento Activity

Many years ago, before David Lehman made the cento popular, I developed a form of it myself while doing Geraldine R. Dodge workshops for teachers called "Tending The Spring/Building The Fountain Sessions." My Cento is based on a sort of controlled chaos, and it is best to do this after a few weeks with students whose trust you have gained. First

I will explain how it works, and then I will give a primer to prepare the students to engage in it.

Listening Cento

The students bring in up to five poems they like (not their own). This works great with as little as four students, but is best with at least ten. There are three rounds. Either I or someone I pick as a moderator agrees to control the flow. This is how:

1. Beginning clockwise or counter clockwise, you go around the room. Each participant picks one of their favorites and starts reading. When the moderator thinks we have heard enough, they shout “stop” or “shut up” or “Enough!” and the next person reads. When we have gone around the room once, the moderator “tags” another to moderator and enters the cento circle themselves. We go around this way at least three times.
2. While the poems are being read, the other participants jot down lines, or parts of lines they like. Unlike with a classical cento, they can change the lines, modify them, or they can change the tense from past to present, etc., etc. I give them freedom to write the lines down, but not be slavish.
3. When the third round is done I give the students a few minutes to shape what they have jotted down, and they can even add lines of their own if they wish. They can also add lines from the poems they brought in.
4. A student is never made to read from one poem only, but can read bits from any of the poems they have brought to the class.
5. After the third round, and the time taken to shape the Centos, the students now do another round of two, but this time, reading from their cento’s rather than the poems they brought in. So a new layer is added to the centos. When this is done I give more shaping time, and then have them read the final centos they have created. This works wonderfully if the students are open to fully entering. It helps improve their reading and listening skills, helps them in terms of selections, gets them in touch with their own likes and dislikes, and it relieves the burden of a blank page.
6. The listening Centos may then be taken home and worked on.

Things to Do to Prepare the Class for Listening Centos

I believe in having my students memorize poems. At first they are reluctant but once you make them comfortable with the idea that they need not be embarrassed if they forget mid-poem, they feel a sense of accomplishment in memorizing a poem. It gets to the point that when I stop making them memorize, they ask to continue.

The next step is to have them only say aloud a line or two of the poems they’ve memorized. I invite the other students to answer these bits, with bits of their own, so before we ever write down a listening Cento we are already creating transitory Centos through call and response.

I find this gets them used to seeing poems as living things—organisms that can evolve and communicate with each other. Try it. The Centos produced are often extremely beautiful, and they bear all the marks of original composition.

6.7 What Are the Values of Small Triumphs?

A poet I always return to the way I might return to a baseball field in spring to watch a good high school outfielder is Robert Francis. Francis is a poet of small triumphs, which is to say, beauty. He notices the thing before him and renders it without his own ego getting in the way. Nothing in the natural world is fodder for his “significant” ideas. At the same time, unlike Haiku junkies who affirm the elephant shadow of their egos by always making sure they are not “there,” Francis is not about to abdicate his intelligence, his ability to manipulate, to judge, to express reasoned appraisal. If there is a greater ontology to the outfielder (the brevity of his youth), or to the Lilac bush (its proximity to ruin) he trusts that this ontology will be brought out best by attending to the surfaces. I tell my students: *surface becomes interior*. If you have to look for an ontology or meaning below the surfaces, then I suggest you are treating the world around you the way certain guys in my neighborhood treated others who could not pay the vig: you are beating the bushes for “meaning” the bushes might not contain. You are treating the details as wage slaves, and since you don’t care for those details except that they “convey” your “truths,” they will not have the accuracy to do the work you want them to do.

Francis remains a “minor” poet in the best sense: not lesser, but minor, a poet of small triumphs, a poet whose work at its best makes Robert Frost sound a little over-the-top, who makes Galway and Donald seem just a bit fat and sloppy by comparison.

All great poets are galaxies of minor poets with the addition of gravitas. Their poems are necessary. A great minor poem never traffics in the necessary. No one asks of beauty that it be significant. Beauty humbles significance. At worst, this can lead to shallowness. At best, it can lead to the remarkable play of light and dapple and shade that shallowness confers: the mountain stream, the dazzle of quick light on rocks.

I bring out Francis whenever students think they have original ideas. I tell them “original ideas” is always an oxymoron. Poets write as much from their stupidity as from their intelligence, but I must define stupidity here: all that can halt the smugness of an idea, suspend the smug certainty of the idea, and plot for the fluidity of thought. A person who already “knows” has lost the scholarship of his stupidity. To study what we already know is to review at best. At worst, it is vain redundancy. What is it in the thing we know that still ceases our imagination, which makes us “stupid” with pleasure? Francis is a poet who makes me stupid with pleasure, so I am going to place one of his small gems here, and then see if I can come up with a prompt that goes with it:

Time and the Sergeant

To take us in, bully and bawl us
Out was his official
Pleasure.

And he was beautifully built for it,
That buffed brass hair, that
Tuba voice

And those magnificent legs on which
He rocked he rocked. He never
bent a knee.

How is the anal oriented humor now?
Fresh and exuberant
as ever?

Or has Old Bastard Time touched
Even you, Sergeant,
Even you?

First, unlike free verse writers who use tercets merely to make a poem look neat and pleasant, Francis' tercets are justified. The word *pleasure* isolated on its own line in the first tercet tips us off that Francis knows English still carries a charge of durational as well as accentual sound. *Pleasure* is drawn out enough to be on its own line, and it is the plosive of the B sounds realized (P's and B's are plosives). Notice what he is doing with the B sounds. They get less emphatic, weaker as the poem goes on. The sound aids and abets the meaning because time has done the same thing to the vibrant sergeant. There are three plosives in the first stanza, all on the first syllable of the words. There are six in the second, all except one in the initial syllable. In the third tercet, there is only one—"bent." In the fourth tercet, the plosive has faded to tertiary placement in the third syllable (*exuberant*). In the final tercet, only the word *bastard* aptly carries the charge of the plosive. This might not have been conscious, but craft, practiced over the years, becomes muscle memory. He knows what he is doing even if he is not fully conscious of it. The T sounds are also doing great service to the poem. Its theme is an old war horse: how time diminishes, the same theme of transience as in "A Shropshire Athlete Dying Young." So what? The execution of this old trope is magnificent, and the sergeant has been brought to life by the B and T sounds as much as by anything else. **So here's the prompt:**

Prompt

Take a common trope of poetry: how time diminishes, or seize the day (*Carpe Diem*) or how we don't know what we got till it's gone, and yoke it to a single figure who represents it. Make a portrait of some vivid character, and aid and abet that portrait by sound threads. Francis uses the B sounds. Think what consonant sound you can thread through the poem to do the work for you. Justify the stanzaic structures, which is more than just a spatial neatness, so that it aids the meaning of the poem. Try tercets or couplets, or whatever will suffice, but don't let it be what Paul Fussell called "false form." Let the consonant sounds you have picked diminish or increase throughout the poem, depending on how it aids the sense. Look how Francis creates the effect of incredulity: "Even you?" Try something like that in the poem. Good luck.

6.8 Using the Word "and"

Often, a student knows how to make connections, and transitions (too well), but they do not know how to make those wonderful disconnections, digressions, and outright absurdities that often take a poem out of mere information or expression and make it come alive. I have a way of getting them to practice the sort of disconnects, and unusual combinations practiced by the futurists, Pasternak, the surrealists, and so on and so forth. I call it the "and" game. They first write down a series of things linked by "and" that have no apparent relationship to each other:

Snowflakes and summo wrestlers
Dental floss and the grey eyes of a women you loved who died in a gas chamber
Wet laundry and the smell of candle wax
Girl scouts and surgical equipment salesmen
Barnyard animals and the complete works of Igor Stravinski
Fireflies and the chance that my mother might come home to find me being
undressed by an amorous dolphin

Singing in a high falsetto and stomping on rabbits
 Antique furniture and the voice of God singing into a fan

Alright, so now we have snowflakes, summo wrestlers, dental floss, the grey eyes of a beloved who died in a gas chamber, wet laundry, candle wax, barnyard animals, Igor Stravinski, fireflies, a mother coming home to find me (or whoever) being undressed by an amorous dolphin, singing in a high falsetto, stomping on rabbits, antique furniture, and the voice of God singing into a fan.

They can't say they don't have a lot of material to work with! I tell them they must get every image and act into the poem except one (that's their safety). I help them out with a trick I call "instant authority." It's just an imperative sentence followed by a simple declarative sentence:

Lay down, law down, my beloved!
 Nothing can absolve us.

Shemah! Listen!
 In the woods, oaks hiss at the stars.

So here's what the kid, Leonard Savan, did with this bag of images:

Hark oh snowflakes and Summo wrestlers!
 Do not despair!
 There is dental floss and the grey eyes
 of a woman you loved.
 Meanwhile, everyone dies in a gas chamber,
 while little barnyard animals breath
 softly through the night.
 Do not succumb to fireflies!
 Live for the wet laundry and the smell of candle wax.
 Even if you should never hear the complete works
 of Igor Stravinski, or be undressed by an amorous dolphin,
 still you shall know the voice of God, singing into a fan,
 ten chopped off fingers worth of sound!
 Listen! Shemah! Always, in the woods
 oaks hiss at the stars. Do not despair.
 Stomping on rabbits will not avail you.
 Look. Your mother is coming.
 Lay down, lay down, my beloved.
 Nothing can absolve us.

The poem is fun, and unpredictable, plays with some old devices of rhetoric (exhortation being one of them) and it uses all the disparate images, and actions. You can try this. Remember the rule of imperatives followed by a declarative sentence every so often. This is one way to get a student to vary his or her images and associations (and disassociations). Good luck. Oh, and you don't have to use the archaic forms of address.

6.9 More Structural Prompts

In the late nineties I invented my own form of Fibonacci poem because I had to do a workshop called arts across the curriculum. Yes, I know there is a "fib" out there (don't know if it was out there when I first came up with mine) but I consider it to be too little fib for me. This one uses syllable or word counts with the following pattern:

1 word or syllable

1

2

3

5

8

13

8

5

3

2

1

1

If the lines are all flush left, then it goes (use the word version):

Falcon
wings
unfurled above
the insurance company
dive bombs on a squirrel
at two hundred miles per hour. The squirrel
never knows what hits him. There, close to the hot dog vendor and
the attractive girl holding the bag full of
salt peanuts, the falcon feeds.
Fierce, the girl
unable not
to
stare.

We can skew the lines:

Falcon
wings
unfurled above
the insurance company
dive bombs on a squirrel
at two hundred miles per hour. The squirrel

never knows what hit him. There, close to the hot dog vendor and
the attractive girl holding the bag full of
salt peanuts, the falcon feeds
fierce the girl
unable not
to
stare.

I draw a rectangle around the poem and show how the penultimate 8 syllable lines are roughly sixty to sixty six percent of the length of the rectangle—a Fibonacci fraction. If I skew the lines, we can play with the sequences even more, breaking it down into fractals and Fibonacci proportions. If I have the right computer graphic, I can spiral the lines. At any rate, the number of syllables or words follow Fibonacci number sequences, and I can

talk about this sequence in nature in relation to the radial flowers of flea bane, or reproduction in rabbits, etc. I've used this as low as fourth grade, and the kids enjoy the pattern making very much. A good computer graphics program can show the interrelationships of the words within the rectangle, and a lot of interesting patterns can be found.

Anyway, this can be a fun way of explaining both Fibonacci sequences, and fractions, and shapes. It also gets the student to think of the poems in terms of shape and word choice.

6.10 On the Ontological Fear of Death

We tend to have forsaken Western spirituality—contemplative prayer, the belief in supernatural grace, for what we believe is a more sophisticated and enlightened eastern mysticism (less dogma, heavy on the serenity). My grandmother would reach alpha states of consciousness, true sitting, through the rosary. Her mantra was the prayers peculiar to the rosary. Her yoga was the way of the little flower, the belief that the physical acts of cleaning, sewing, cooking, scrubbing, dusting were all forms of body-prayer if done in the right spirit. We associate Western religion with atrocities and violence. We forget that its spiritual practice, if entered fully and with the same discipline as Eastern meditation, is rich and deep and has little or nothing to do with the moral outrage and conservative right-wing anger that now passes for a “love” of Jesus. I thought I'd quote my grandmother on spiritual matters:

Practice

I answer Jesus with my life. What else has he given me by which to answer him? Philosophy belongs to the geniuses and to the drunks at the pub. God bless them. A good barroom philosopher is always wonderful company... until he comes home to bed.

Compassion

Never judge a whore, a drunk, or mentally ill man or woman. The clucking of your tongue and the taste of your own disapproval means you have been dining with the devil. All murder is judgment. All war is judgment. All grudges and rivalries are judgments. Judgment is the greatest sin and yet we find our judgments sweet, and chew them like a good piece of rock candy. A man can never know he's shat himself if his nose is so high in the air and he is judging those who cannot bear their cross. He forgets his own stink. To forget your own stink is to despair of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit cannot be found unless you know your stink and wash yourself—not others. The devil is a very moral spirit. He does not drink, or curse, or fornicate. All he does is accuse God's creation and hate God with his whole heart, and mind and soul. That's worse than swearing and drinking and falling down drunk at the bishop's doorstep. Nothing is as evil as thinking evil of another and wearing the mask of a saint.

On the Difference Between a Saint and a Moralist

It is hard to tell the difference between a saint and an uppity goody-two-shoes since both have their faces lifted to heaven—one to pray and the other to slaughter.

Contemplative prayer

When I pray, I let my mind roam about like a dog leashed in the yard. After he has smelled the coming and going of his fellow dogs, and found a bone to dig, and scratched an itch, he lies down in his shadow on the grass, in a warm bit of sunlight and falls asleep. And

when the dog of me is finally asleep, then God's voice is everywhere—even in the barking of the dog.

The Dark Night of the Soul, My Grandmother's Version of Spiritual Dryness

You must remember the lesson of Saint Peter. Once he realized he was walking on water, he began to sink. This is why God gives the saints no comfort, and leaves them high and dry, and makes their prayers and acts of charity as dry as dust—because in that dry time, like Peter, they cry out to him, and they remember the one thing you can forget if every day is a revelation and an ecstasy: that you do nothing by your own power. All good actions come from the one toward which you walk. You can't pick up a spoon to eat a bowl of soup unless the Lord gives you the grace. When you know this with your whole heart, dry and wet no longer matter, and everything is grace—including the father who turned his back to you as you hung from your cross. *My God, My God, why have you abandoned me* is a love cry. If you don't believe me, listen to all the love songs on the radio. They're full of lovers going on and on about the one who got away! Help! Help is the best prayer I know. It's always honest.

On the Difference Between Conceit and Humility

Be careful your humility isn't a form of bragging. I've seen people be so humble they were braggarts. You'd have thought they were at the humility Olympics and had to prove they were lower than everyone else to get the gold medal! I don't trust the so called lowly which means I don't trust myself. You'll see a priest act humble when someone is paying him homage. Listen, Joseph, it's easy to say food is not important when you've got a burger in your mouth. Ah, but when you're chewing dust, and you go to pray, and all that is on your mind is a good piece of ham, then you say: Lord, to be honest with you, I could do with a bit of ham. That's when you're humble—when you don't fool yourself or the rest of the world. A baby bird with its beak wide open and crying out for a worm is humble. Many men and women live ten floors above their lives, and many live ten floors below their lives, but to live in your life—neither above or below, but exactly on the floor to which you're a tenant—now that's humility.

The Parable of the Gambling Butcher

Now Mr. Schmitt was a fine butcher. He could turn a side of beef into a gold Cadillac could that man. God rest his soul. He was the best butcher in town, but a little off on his figures. He didn't have the mathematical mind. He was a poet—sure enough, and with a cleaver in his hand. Usually, his dear wife handled the register, but she had a cold, or perhaps she was laid up with a swollen ankle. Anyways, I go to pay for a cut of meat with a fifty dollar bill, and he hands me my change. Usually I don't count it, but since his figures tend to be creative and I've never so much as held a 50 in my hand, I count it out. He's given me 66 dollars back instead of the 34. So being an honest woman, I tell him: "Mr. Schmitt, you've given me too much change. I gave you a fifty, and you hand me back 66 dollars." Wouldn't you know he's a little tender where it comes to being wrong. "Young lady," he says, "you gave me a hundred dollar bill." I say: "Mr. Schmitt, even if I gave you a hundred dollar bill, I'd have to buy a cow to spend 34 dollars. Since when does anyone but Al Capone go about with hundred dollar bills? With all due respect, you gave me too much change, and you'll be little short in your register at the end of the day." So he grunts, and he turns a little red around the ears, and he takes back the 66 dollars, and hands me 34, and you'd have sworn I'd spat on the picture of his mother. I go out thinking what an arrogant and prideful man Mr. Schmitt happens to be, and me being all honest and beyond reproach. I could have used that 16 dollars. I'd have done better in his prideful eyes if I'd robbed him. So I'm on

my high horse, when it occurs to me that I'm just as puffed up as the German. He was a very good man really, but he had a temper. Whenever he was in his cups and raving on about the sorry state of the world, his wife, who was from Donegal, would sing out: "Go to bed you German!" That's why your mother says "Go to bed, you German!" whenever you're acting a bit out of sorts. Anyways, I realized I'm just as prideful as him, and so I stop by the church that is on the way home—St Mary's, our church, and I light a candle for the man. I know he liked to bet on the horses and I say: "Jesus, forgive me my arrogance, and give Mr. Schmitt a good day at the races." Wouldn't you know it, but the good butcher hits the tri-fecta the very next week, and he comes by the house, ringing the door bell, hat in hand. He says to your grandfather, he says: "You've got a good wife Thomas, but she's a little off on her math. I owe her 16 dollars, and I'm giving you a 20. I had a good day at the races." So my husband invites him in, and I decide to bite my tongue. The men have a drop of the whiskey in their tea, and I cut them a couple slices of cheesecake, and no one is the wiser, except I know the lord works in mysterious ways. We needed that money. Our son, your uncle Charles, had a punctured ear drum from the Scarlet Fever, and that helped pay the doctor's bill. Mr. Schmitt hit the tri-fecta and I learned a lesson in how wrong you can be when you're right. It's all a comedy. That Shakespeare was right—a comedy of errors, and its rounded with a little sleep. He had that right—and him an English man! Someday, I hope you'll remember the things I told you—just to be kind to this old bag of bones. Now go to bed you German!

6.11 On the Bias Against Narrative Poetry

Many young poets cannot accept that telling a story or relating some sort of narrative arc is conducive to the highest aims of poetry. Of course this is a confusion between story-telling and narrative. They are not the same. Narrative is the pulse and rhythm of being. Whitman was an intensely narrative poet, as was Emily Dickinson. Stories stay in touch with this pulse of being in the most obvious ways. The great triumph of Chekov is that he muted the obviousness of story, blurred the distinctions between plot and character, and took prose into territories of consciousness previously known only to the most subjective and simple of lyrical poems. Story may be destroyed, but never narrative. If I write:

Oy vey! The sun is batting its eyelashes
and I am a tired tree

I am, for all my pretentions to surrealism, still in the arms of narrative. The sun is doing something (batting its eye lashes). This is the action at the scene. "Oy vey" is an ejaculation that means, roughly: Oh brother, or for crying out loud, or "Oh my God" so it implies an attitude. If I say I am a tired tree, then I am implying a state of being, and the reader will connect the dots. The batting of eyelashes is an age old signifier of vanity or flirting. I may not follow this line consciously, but it is there. So let's continue:

Oy vey! The sun is batting its eyelashes
and I am a tired tree.
Strange omens creep forth from Canada.
The sky is dressed in drag.

How shall I desist from wandering the earth
in search of pomegranates?
Death to stars and cardboard!
Death to the wane smile of the lost.
Forgive me my trespasses.
I am a tired tree
half in love with sudden lightning
and the vagrant grin of years.

There is no story told here, but there is narrative arc. The poem might seem nonsensical, especially if you insist on logical exposition or a concrete point (which is journalism and information—not narrative). If you meet the poem on its own terms line for line, you may notice a strange lament. The tree is tired. It is half in love with lightning (death wish) and the vagrant grin of years. The voice is vehement in what it wants to die: stars, cardboard, the wane smile of the lost. This is an arbitrary list, but have you ever listened to a cranky sick person complain:

To quote my Aunt Mary two weeks before she died: “No soup! The hell with soup and styrofoam. Where is my bone china? You’re killing me!”

The problem students have with narrative is its mundanity. It is not the narrative, but the absence of verbal surprise they are missing. Verbal surprise is always overrated by young poets. They mistake confusion and flash for lyricism. Lyricism breaks forth when the narrative arc—the interior laws organic to the poem—are compelled, even forced to sing, and this singing is so close to insanity or sheer ecstasy as to risk the loss of sense. Take this snippet from Hart Crane that baffles many a sensible soul:

“The mustard scansions of the eyes.”

It is, indeed a strange phrase, but let’s consider (beyond Cleanthe Brooks) where Hart Crane lived. He lived in the same apartment that had been occupied by the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge. He knew scansions (bridge abutments) like no one else. They could have been painted a mustard brown or yellow—in keeping with hazel eyes. When I first read this line I was in awe of his accuracy, a precision so intense it blighted the sense and construct of the actual thing described. Of course I was reading my own life into the poem. I once loved a girl who stood at dusk under the el, and she had yellow or mustard specks in her eyes, and the scansions were reflected in her irises. When I read this line, I thought Hart Crane had hovered like a ghost over my experience. I was reading into the poem which leads me to another point:

Even if you provide no story or narrative, the reader will provide one, and if not, then the reader is immured in a construct of non-narrative so pure as to be pissant.

John Ashbery, the darling of many poets opposed to storytelling and narrative is an intensely narrative poet. His narratives shift from line to line, moment to moment, disappearing and dissolving in the current of the poem. He is the master of the story that “almost” happens. He makes a gesture towards story and betrays it, but he does not betray narrative.

Many poets try to escape narrative by destroying syntax. Let’s try it:

Orion of graves
 graves of the discontent
 water melons in the breeze
 breeze absolving the moon.
 and the hermit
 and the celebrity
 and the soul survivor of the war
 and the judiciary
 and the past—enormous—lopsided tits
 Pray! Pray for the thigh I am licking.
 Pray for Betty Crocker!
 And the and and the and and the and
 loose cowboys
 suspended adorations.

Ok. Only a couple of sentences. Why pray for Betty Crocker? Yet the poem obeys its own immutable laws of disconnection. That in itself is a ceremony and a narrative. Ask: How do we make narrative beyond mere story telling? I tell you, no good story obeys story telling. It obeys narrative—the arc of being.

6.12 A Necessary Practice (from 2011)

I always liked making things up, improvising, using my “imagination.” I do not remember my dreams because I spend the greater part of my day restructuring the past and fitting it into schemas of relationship and dis-relationships, and not to any discernible end. In short, I am always in a dream. Perhaps it is the ends of art I hate—the way it is “valued” rather than integrated into the dynamic of being alive. You have to be careful saying art is for everyone because this is a sales pitch from the creativity experts and another way to make money. Art is not for everyone. Many people are happy never to have a moment with art if they can possibly avoid it. Heck, I am happy to never have a moment with art if I can possibly avoid it. If you define art as a judgment of aesthetic value, then this is the least interesting part of the experience of making things up, improvising, and using your imagination. This is the morning after when you look at the thing you made and say: “What the hell was I thinking?” Almost everything I have ever made—songs, poems, stories, has elicited this response from its creator. I am disappointed in all but perhaps 4 poems, one story, and a couple of music compositions. I have never liked the poem of mine that is most anthologized: “Ode to Elizabeth.” I know it is the perfect “representative poem”—not my best poem, and honestly, all it truly represents is a moment in 1980 when the chemical fires in Elizabeth, New Jersey, were inspiring *Time Magazine* to refer to my home city as “grimy Elizabeth.” In the poem I never talk about the chemical fires, and I never argue against Elizabeth being grimy. The whole poem is an answer to one question: given that something is grimy, can it still have value—and not the value of feeling sorry for it, or wanting it to be other than it is—but the value of what no one but a consciousness that has been formed by that place can see? The poem praises Elizabeth, New Jersey, by saying: yes, it is grimy, and unartistic, and full of people who have lousy taste in furniture, but I saw Amarcord there, and with a bunch of friends who had no idea about the snobby distinctions between movies and cinema, and we had a true experience of the film. We responded to it: “if art moved us at all, it was with real amazement/we had no frame of reference.”

Art then that does not delight, move, amaze, or engage one’s most active intelligence is what I call aesthetic bureaucracy—the means that have forgotten their original ends and serve only their own process as “value.” Such art needs experts and gatekeepers, and protectors and advocates. It needs prestigious presses, and “award winning authors.” It makes me ill—not because I have been excluded from it (I have been allowed through the back door of this world, and can flash certain badges such as a *New York Times* articles on my poetry, featured with Allen Ginsberg, Stephen Dunn, etc.) but because I never thought I was insignificant to begin with. Consider my mind, flawed as it is, to be in communion with a living God, and know that I never wrote a single poem, song, or story for “publication.”

Everything I did was out of Lordly, Godly, and arrogant impulse to waste time—to spend my time making things up, using my imagination, and scribbling on my tomb so to speak. Death is coming. It will be our only permanent accomplishment. Everything then, beyond this is a scribbling on the tomb, a sort of ferocious, desperate, and yes, holy/sacramental graffiti. Everything, including how your friends remember you, is a version of “Kilroy was here.”

This personal essay then is inspired by something that happened to me last night. One of my best friends, and former students, Adam Fitzgerald, wrote “call me!” on my facebook. So being me, I thought something happened to him, and being an insomniac who had just enjoyed the only two hours of sleep I was going to get, I called him. He was en route.

People in Manhattan are always en route. He was with Bianca Stone and going somewhere, but he wanted me to know that *Bomb* magazine had said something wonderful about the chapbook we published through *Monk Books* by Mark Strand, called *Mystery and Solitude in Topeka*. Great! I tried to be enthusiastic, but all I really wanted to do was Google Long Branch, New Jersey and remember which president died there (James Garfield). I was a little ill, and a little weary, and the book is beautiful, and the fun part was instigating it, funding it, watching Bianca and Adam do all the real work, and seeing the result. Affirmation of Mark Strand seemed beside the point. The guy has had his share of affirmation. I was thinking, “what about Bernadette Meyer’s chapbook, or even more importantly, Ben Peace’s chapbook which contains one of the best and most adventurous long narrative poems I have read in years?” I was being a party pooper, a role I find myself playing with increasing frequency. On paper I should be thrilled: I am the “publisher” of a Pulitzer Prize winning poet and the book I helped bring into being is being lauded by *Bomb*—a well known literary zine. But whatever this is, it didn’t register as deeply with me as my then urgent desire to remember that Long Branch was once the summer resort of presidents and that James Garfield went there to recover from a gunshot wound, and well, he didn’t recuperate. I attempted to imagine Long Branch then—late 19th century swimming, the anciently sudden and suddenly ancient smell of salt marsh and wave spume. It was a rude way to behave towards a friend. As Shakespeare said: “you treat comfort like cold porridge.” I behaved like my Irish relatives, who when informed that you won the Noble Peace Prize, would remind you that your cousin Pete was a state champion spoon player, and much better looking besides.

Wet blanket? Far beyond that. I realized that achievement to one who has lived all his life in loss and failure, and who has experienced more or less constant rejection is itself anti-climatic. The joy exists in the possibility of things—in their “perhaps.” Years ago, I read at an event called the *Paterson Poetry Marathon*. I did well, and Philip Levine, the head liner, came over to me and shook my hand and said: “I want to thank you both for your humor and your outrage.” I should have been thrilled. Instead I went into the bathroom and cried because my parents were dead and my grandmother was dead, and everyone who could have been happy for me and who I wanted to be happy for me (the people who stand and wave at you while you are going around and around on the kiddie ride) are dead. I felt desolate—destroyed. So-called success seemed to have all the flavor of cardboard. If no one had come up to me, it would have been worse, of course, but I realized the losses and years of being a tool grinder on the night shift had rendered me incapable of being achievement oriented. I am “possibility” oriented—“doing the deed” oriented. While I am reading, writing, or playing a piano, all is possible. After that, it’s hard to take anything seriously. If I had to think of truly meaningful moments in my life as a so-called artist, they’d be some of the following:

The last time Joe Salerno came over my apartment in Elizabeth with a mixed cassette tape of music he had been recently excited by. It was truly mixed: Hadyn, Mozart, and Charles Ives. We drank Sake and talked about music for hours. Joe liked trees the way I did, and I took him drunk and a little unsteady up the block to show him a full grown American Elm (rare after the Dutch elms disease of the 40’s). I didn’t know it, but the city had cut the tree down that morning. There was only the stump. We held our glasses full of Sake. We reflected like two grown men standing over a blown engine. “Well,” I said. “There’s the stump!” We laughed. Joe reminded me of the great Chinese poem in which the poets get drunk and go into the garden to admire the flowers and the flowers lament that they have gone to all that trouble of blooming to be admired by a bunch of drunks. He quoted the poem. We laughed some more. Joe was dying of lung cancer, but he had not yet been diagnosed. Six months later he was dead, and I played that mix tape for years until it felt apart. The possibility of talking music and poetry late into the night with a friend and neither of you are talking about the art business...that has meaning. It is the not graffiti on the grave. It is the eternity hidden in transience—what Keats best expressed.

Back in 1988, Dave Roskos and I are in Manhattan placing our new magazines *Big Hammer* and *Black Swan* in a bookstore. It may have been St. Mark's books. Anyway, Gregory Corso is in there talking with the manager, and he's pretending not to be Gregory Corso, and we're pretending not to know he's Gregory Corso, and he leafs through our magazines and says: "I don't know these guys...wait, I heard of Keith Sheppard." He reads the poem by Sheppard. "Not bad," he says. We place the magazines on consignment and split into the hot summer's afternoon. We are laughing because Keith Sheppard is one of my aliases, and I am new to the poetry scene and have filled one quarter of my first issue with poems I wrote under aliases (including a nun who is an expert on Hopkins and George Herbert). We have good Mexican food and meet up with my painter friend Eileen Doster who has hair the color of new pennies. Great day—again—nothing to do with achievement, but with possibility.

1985: I'm with my friend Marco Munoz in a long defunct art gallery called O'Roe Electric in Hoboken. The clarinetist, Perry Robinson is playing with his father, Earl Robinson, winner of an Academy Award, and a man who played with Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, and whose songs were performed by Paul Robeson and Frank Sinatra. Earl is an old radical and union man and calls me brother when he finds out I'm a tool grinder on the night shift. The party after the event hosted by Susan Shafston includes a lot of wonderful musicians, including Gary Schneider, conductor of the Hoboken symphony orchestra. I am young and arrogant and happy and drunk enough to play piano among them, and sing my songs, and Perry joins in, and Gary likes the way I play piano, and Earl shakes my hand and beams. No hierarchy; none of that stupid, god forsaken, spiritually bankrupt pecking order we call "The Arts." We play for hours—folk music, atonal music, hard bop, weird mongrel versions of all of the above. I am dressed in a cool suit, and so is Marco, who skats happily along. Joy, art. Not "The Arts." I hate "The Arts." It takes all the fun out of things.

1977: the year my mom died. My friend Huey is over my house, and I am playing a song I wrote. I hear blubbing, and I look over and Huey is crying—this big, good looking jock. He says: "that's beautiful." I never had a friend say that to me before. Where I come from, it takes great courage and a good heart to say such things openly. 34 years later, it means more to me than getting nominated for Pushcarts. You can put Pushcarts on a curriculum vitae, but it's not what makes you create. If it is, then you're pretty fucking pathetic. Nothing is more pathetic than someone who achieves and is not alive except for their achievements. Such a person is a slave to the wrong master. It is terrible when no one appreciates your art or wants to hear or see or recognize it. It is more horrible when that's all that matters.

1999: my first year as an instructor at Arts High. The students don't want the class to end and I teach a summer program (for free) in a wonderful place called Rutgers Gardens. There are kids playing guitars, and writing poems, and hiking through cedar and bamboo forests, and I am not making a dime, and they are not getting a grade, and everyone shows up every Thursday for no other reason than we are making stuff up as we go along, and enjoying the energy of making shit up as we go along. The next year, I have forty kids in the woods—Adam Fitzgerald being one of them. My former friend's son, Danny Salerno comes by to visit and recites *Beowulf* in the Anglo Saxon, and the girls (and probably some of the boys) all swoon because he is good looking. Later, at the pizza joint we repair to after working on being artists, Danny and Adam get into a huge fight over whether Falstaff or Hamlet is the greater character. They almost come to blows. I am not there since I have to go to my 4 to 12 shift job in the factory, but I hear about it from the other students, and I am delighted. What teacher would not want 17 year old students almost coming to blows over Falstaff and Hamlet?

I am not knocking people who are achievement oriented. I wish I could feel proud of anything I achieve. I can't. Even if I won awards, and became a "living legend," I'd still be short and balding, and full of the grief I experienced, and I'd still be most excited by a chord progression I accidentally stumbled upon. I'd still miss the people who died and whom I loved—which is almost everyone I ever loved. The best thing about being famous would

be the money. I'd blow most of it on instruments and art projects, and taking my wife out to eat. I'd give money to artists I thought were unrecognized, and I'd be able to shit on the heads of all the so called big shots who snubbed me over the years. Being "snubbed" is part of "The Arts." I dislike the arts. I love the possibility of 40 young people in a field messing around with paints and guitars. Maybe only one of them becomes well known, but it took all forty to create that one well known artist. Desire is never isolated. Three years after I started teaching the summer program, the school made it official, and put it in doors, with air conditioning, ruined the integration of painting, poetry and music, and put each in its proper hole. They had the best intentions. I hate intentions. I had only one—to waste time. I was teaching my students how to hang out. Who the heck died and left the experts to decide what is significant or worthwhile? If no one invites you to the party, throw your own and forget them! This is what I was teaching. I was trying to teach my students the necessary arrogance of art and its humility. The humility is this: nothing will ever feel as good as actually doing it—not awards, not achievements, not anything which results from doing it—nothing, and if the other things begin to take precedence, you are in danger. I hate "The Arts." Right now, I wish I knew a good cello player, and one who could wing it, and they'd come over and play with me for a couple hours. Sometimes, while I'm playing the piano, I can hear the cellist beside me playing other riffs. I get excited and I start to dream of the possibility. If a real cellist came over they would want to work towards a goal. But a truly accomplished cellist would probably snub me, so a half-assed cellist would do just as well. As my grandmother said: "If the picture is crooked, and you can't adjust it, adjust your head." My standards are low. A 17-year-old student so passionate about Shakespeare that he takes on a 22-year-old guy who can speak Anglo Saxon is as exciting to me as *Bomb* magazine praising a book I was involved with. Whenever that isn't true, I begin to feel spiritually sick inside. So my apologies to Adam. What really thrills me is that I knew Adam when he chewed key chains incessantly and played Visions of Johanna 20 times a day. I am happy to see him flourish. It's like being a parent and watching your kid go around and around on a ride, and suddenly, you realize he isn't a kid, and he's calling you up when you're ill and tired and lonely for a world that was not all achievements and kudos. You ought to wave—even if you're half dead. I feel more than half dead. Possibility is hard to come by, especially when everything is to a purpose. I believe in wasting time. I am trapped in a goal oriented, sick America of insane positive thinking and achievement psychosis...*someone get me a half-assed cellist*. Quick! Someone get me a park and 40 young artists wasting time. I love making stuff, writing, composing, and cultivating my garden. Students: cultivate the garden of your best art. It just may be the only aspect of your lives which keeps you vital and still dreaming.