

Strategies of Composing Poems

To poem (and it should be a verb) is to think both deep and sideways. It's making a snowstorm. I like starting with some dust for my snowflake to form its geometries rather than only spurt like sleet. Maybe its piece of dust is a prompt word, or a epigraph or a form, some technique like search strings through texts, or oulipo replacement of a text. Maybe it is overheard conversations that somehow get quilted into a superflake that coheres.

What is your primary unit of composition? You can observe it as you write or during the editing. It varies of course but what's in the toolbox. Is it the line or the grammatical phrase? The sentence or the fragment? The mood, the argument or the image? Life-wide, anecdote or source material? The form or the idea, the metaphor or allegory? The sound or the rhythmical unit?

When I look at how I think poetically, or generally, there's a lot of constraint, but also a pattern of deconstructing and reconstructing strategies. I work with the fragment and stitching incongruous parts into a sort of harmony. I use rhythm and idea. Anything can't help but leak in about what matters to me, experiences and beliefs. Consider Austin Kleon's *Steal Like an Artist* (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0761169253/>) where nine times out of ten, he says, when someone calls something "original" they just don't know the sources. There's no creative. We aren't gods creating from nothing. It's all combining what's there. What's outer is inner because of perception. What is inner is outer because of past or hopes to step past.

One can use any constraint, timer, size of page, to suit an occasion or audience. A form is just another construction constraint of how to take something large and amorphous as the world and find pieces that fit something so small as a poem's constraint for what sense is. It doesn't shut out autobiographical. What can? What draws your eye is what matters to you, or the negative spaces around what matters. It's on one end or another of a teeter totter of reactions. What starts the composition can be the decision to create. You have 10 minutes. Free write, go. It may be some sensation that is a portal back to a memory that is dislodged. It may be rules governing a formal structure of haiku or sonnet or cento.

Cento

A cento is where you take one intact unaltered line from each text as it pops out to you, each line from a different book, found as you go through a pile of books. If you believe you have writers block it is a way to work around around yourself. You don't need to have a starting idea. You aren't allowed to change the text or go extemporaneous. But it is generative.

I like cento because it shows just how skewed each eye sees. It demonstrates how we are all blind men with an elephant. Given any texts, on any number of subjects and styles, what we pull out will be ourselves. With a cento you can be a bower bird and see the poem form before you, surprise you with its reveals as you take chunks of language at the line-level instead of the usual word level, or for some mood level. You keep taking bits, accumulating until as with lines that came "only from within" you'll feel the click in your gut when it is done.

To today's rusty gate

*I gave the disorder of my studio
our mixed messages*

*poking flashlight light
ever-deepening shades of avocado*

*bit of lava from cold volcano
because this seems to be how i keep going
clouds flutter relief*

*the ceiling opens
present but isn't*

It's a remarkable sensation being in a group of writers where each knows the other's go-to ideas and style and how that projection produces a poem from cento process like a thumb print from each. The effect among people who are strangers isn't visible in the same striking way.

The parts in new combinations adds up to different direction and effect. In order of lines above including title: *The Irrationalist* by Suzanne Buffam, p. 29 (Anansi, 2010) *The Cabbage of Paradise* by Colin Morton, p. 48 (Seraphim, 2007), Elizabeth Fanto in *Take-out Window*, p. 55 (Haiku Society of America, 2014), George Bowering in *Love Where the Nights are Long* p. 50 (M&S, 1966), *Paul Muldoon Poem: 1968-1998*, p126 (Farrar, Straus & Gireaux, 2001), *Blue Light in the Dark* by Brenda Brooks, p.44 (Polstar, 1994), *Casemate Poems (Collected)* by Joe Blades, p62 (Chaudiere Books, 2011), *Ecstatic Torture Gratitude* by Jill Battson, p. 27 (Guernica, 2011), *Margaret Atwood: Selected Poems*, p145, (Oxford, 1976), and *In the Laurels, Caught* by Lee Ann Brown p 74 (Fence, 2013).

Surreal: Scrabble and Matryoshka

A surreal poem seems like nonsense yet you can't fully step outside of sense. Even the most absurd thing reads as symbolic truth, foils it, is tea leaves of it. It is obliquely true as much as it tries to be false and I find that a little fascinating. The back door friendliness of it, the casual friendship with language instead of trying to make it be your mouthpiece. (We are always the mouthpieces of things bigger and older than ourselves.)

I like surrealism partly because things are more fluid than fixed, which seems intuitively more true. There's a dream state of possibilities where I can transform things from "un œuf" into "un neuf" into a 9 into a 6 into a comma or back (as a poem in the pet radish, shrunken). I like where boundaries blur between what is, what is something else, what is believes and what is make-believe.

What could the word combinations mean? Thinking linearly can hurt in that case. Your gut may know. There's a rhythm. Rhythm is a meaning, is a sensation, is a communication. As in music. But instead of drum and guitar you're using English sounds. Which you do with formal poetic devices of assonance, consonance, meter, except there you make more lyrics of meaning on top of your sound. Here, in surreal, you might think of the language as instrumental.

The surreal appeals partly because it can be oblique, so you can speak without the penalty of direct speech, as you would with allegory which is more popular in politically dangerous places. You make allusions and let ideas exist implicitly, but still can't be pinned down for having said something. When done well, it gives a charge.

I guess that framing towards surreal started further back for me, with *Boathouse* (above/ground, 2008), (pronounced oath in the boathouse).

No, wait, it started further back in playing scrabble and trying to extend words from other words. And that migrated to poetry. When I scrape word combination that come from different purposes, whether blackout poems from newspapers or scrabble boards, I am limiting the infinite possibility, and anchoring in specific words. Scrabble tends to have concrete words. There's variability, depending on who one is playing with, towards uncommon words or monosyllabic words. I may use 20-40 boards and how words cross and touch each other as if saying a prayer.

I played with rhythm units and scrabble word combinations and spin-off debates that came out of word combination in making *polyphonic choral of civet tongues and manna* (unarmed, 2014). Here's one of those poems,

this manna of being together

*easeful grumble lies.
a heard of sass scratches.
nuzzle the tine of holy grunts
that croon the jukebox. spoon
jam with the biceps of dice.
bear the burnt toast of the brain,
a millionth understood by
the wowed and by those paid in
the spun tangle of winked arrivals.*

The mind argues for resolution with itself regardless of input given. It tries to make sense from random incongruity because that is the same process as living globally. The result is a little surreal but surreal is marked by being hyperreal compared to the conscious stereotypes we broker in, call up about what a girl is like, or what a motorcyclist is like, those consciously articulable things that look like satire when you look directly.

If you play anti-scrabble you can mix in words and “non-words”. You can scaffold by affixes to know grammatical structure and put new parts of the world in juxtaposition. It gives a semblance of meaning. It comes from words you saw when looking at random letters. (Yes, jabberwocky, folks. But it can be used for any effect. Think of it like doing targeted muscle exercises that are good in themselves or can be used for a stronger body to do a wider range of mechanical strength.)

After a certain age, the trauma of childhood or whatever early pivot settles or is boring. What next then? I compose to exercise more than exorcise but the unconscious slips in. Rather than take self apart, there are many ways in which I like to take words or worlds apart. Incorporated into some poems in *the pet radish, shrunken* (BookThug, 2015), are matryoshka words.

If you collect words in scrabble as the game proceeds, you see words that chime in the ear like scratches and ratchet or you get matryoshka words like the urn in burnt that get set off imagist runs of plots. These matryoshka words may break across the original syllables or change the vowel sound like, “Well, at the heart of improper is rope”, “Well, that puts the cram in

sacrament” or “Well, deep inside the spondee you’ve got to have the pond.” These phrases came from a bot hubby and I built. WellThatPuts generator page (www.pearlpirie.com/wellthatputs) or at twitter.com/wellthatputs (which autoposts to twitter on the hour), I am looking for words embedded in words that aren’t the root word. These give a little pleasure burst.

The phrases act as if they have found a truth of the roots. “Well, the etymology of jauntily *is* aunt...” It’s something of The Clipboard Effect (as in walk in hard-sole shoes with a clipboard and sense of belonging there and you can go anywhere). There’s a posture that what the etymology is is true. This amuses me because of how sure people are in general about perfectly foolish things, mixing up cause and effect and coinciding events, but are equally sure of etymology because the dictionary vouches for it as real. The bot questions the real, tongue in cheek.

For years I have had a chapbook underway which plays false etymologies of words or phrases. For example, to stagnate: to be like a stag deer. How that metaphor would expand if we pretend a folk anecdote of etymology were true? The nonsense appeals partly because sensical narratives don’t make sense without a shadow of everything chaotic around it. What your world view may inform you to do with the same data may be entirely different. We each sift for or against particular significances. But thinking about that stumps your trunk and tree. Better to play through the golf course than be existential at the second hole.

Homophonic Translations

In poems made for *Roman Feuilletton*, presented at the AB Series in June 2014 in Gatineau Quebec and in January 2015 in Ottawa, Ontario, I used homophonic translation of Michele Provost’s surreal text.

Roman Feuilletton is a surrealist text which Provost herself has composed out of lines from four of Québec’s literary landmarks; Anne Hébert’s *Kamouraska*, Michel Tremblay’s *La grosse femme d’à côté est enceinte*, Réjean Ducharme’s *L’avalée des avalés*, and Marie-Claire Blais’ *Une saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel*. She dissected the text and alphabetized by first letter of the sentence and then translated the resulting texts.

To respond to another text you could retort, resist, continue the intent, dissolve it into components, take one small part of springboard. For my part in this, I used the French version of some of the texts, tried to reconcile sounds as if heard by a deaf person, a sort of whispers game where the assumption is that there is a narrative when the source text has no narrative or continuity. I pretended to presume that I am listening to an English text. What doesn’t make sense to the confirmation bias is distorted or thrown out as it would in many iterations of machine translated text. Eventually junk text migrates in through the distortions, as with genes when errors are made, some cells become useless.

In this homophonic translation or naive translation it is hard to keep yourself from translating for real. If you break it down to syllable or sound and ignore punctuation, instead of seeing morpheme and phrase units it can help. So here, for example, is part of *texte-s*, heard on slant, aided by the computer reading with its anglo software that gets confused by any diacritic.

1. Soudain, de proche en proche, le ciel est ébranlé. « Silence ! » crie le prêtre, et il
 - 1.0.1. susan the brioche of the brioche, the seal is buttery silence. gruel

- was prepared and it
2. referme son livre. Sa main éprouvait la vibration de la sonnerie par petits coups
 - 2.1. reaffirmed our life. some man proved the vibratio of the sound in little hits
 3. décroissants. Ses sœurs au regard sauvage et aux lèvres boudeuses approchaient sur
 - 3.1. of croissants. hunger regards us all as savages and the lip buds that approach tehm
 4. la pointe des pieds. Six d'entre elles étaient dans le début de la vingtaine et ne
 - 4.1. like tiptoes. six appraoch them like stars in the bright sky, like Susan Sontang and
 5. savaient pas ce qui les attendait, et la septième, qui aurait pu être leur mère, le leur
 - 5.1. a savant who seems not to pay attention but on the september 3 orally put butter's mother and lemur
 6. expliqua. Sera-t-elle fidèle pour si longtemps ? Sa pitié excessive, les privations
 - 6.1. who explained that sara will fiddle for as long as she can, a pity would be an undue a privacy for a family meals
 7. qu'elle s'imposait, attiraient l'attention de la Supérieure, qui n'aimait pas que l'on
 - 7.1. which impose themselves and attract extra attention (for this isn't Paris where good food is taken as a rule) the love of rot
 8. dérange l'ordre établi par des élans personnels. Surtout ne pas passer en jugement !
 - 8.1. that destabilizes the order with corn sugar, part of one's personal touch. over everything. but who passes judgements
 9. Sur le balcon, Thérèse, Richard et Philippe riaient comme des petits fous.
 - 9.1. on the bacon. theresa, richard and philip react by scarfing back petit fours.

And then the second step of transformation to a more internal consistency.

hunger regards us all as savages

on the high end of the flakey scale, Susan, the brioche of the brioches, was sealed in her buttery silence. Sara would fiddle as long as she could with her little hits of croissant and crassness. pouty faces tire. at least she didn't have to take recourse to coarseness or crassness, but for the lower classes

*of the poor; outcasts, freaks, a gruel was prepared
and that would reaffirm our pale lives. our lip buds
approach the spoon like stars in the bright sky,
lean like Susan Sontag under trailer fluorescents.
she observes the spillage, corn syrup strands
as part of one's personal touch over everything.
Theresa, Richard and Philip react to her hand, steady
cam, by scarfing back grocery store petit fours.*

An interesting side effect of it is that some of the poems read with a French flavour. Because I am mapping to match syllable stress and directly or by effect the grammar I get a lot of prepositional phrases. I get a structure that isn't typical for me as I tend to have more stressed syllables per line than English and this makes it all softer, more floating with less stressed syllables.

It is new for me and yet within the normal of how I process. I like looking at components.

Corpus Search and Pwoermds

I like scavenging for elements, for the invisible parts. I like using what is out there to collage. What is there may be any content. In *over my dead corpus* (AngelHouse, 2010) I ran search strings through years of my reading notes files (my digital common book). In that, for example, every instance of "ack" was collated, the grab going around the words on either side.

In that process I'm selecting for interesting word combinations without an eye of how it could all possibly fit together. Dragged elsewhere, making a new context it works against the original intent, works as material. The logic is that if something stood out to me, surely the end product using that material will also be interesting to me if I mix all the elements. Sometimes it works, sometimes it's a sauce with too many ingredients. The poem's tone by my rules should relate to the core sound; ack would be dismay, but if the search string were ooh, it would lead a tone of surprise or pleased. As a by-product of process, the poems that result have built-in a higher than odds assonance or consonance because of the root.

The chapbook is out of print but to demonstrate, I went thru half a current reading notes file and pulled out "ack-strings"

- the market isn't going to offer anything affordable off the rack that varies enough
- feedback animation
- young when he died. wonder what I can pull back.
- seems to mean a backhand compliment
- indicate on package: Ottawa
- videos here will be tracked by YouTube/Google.
- all is white noise and background radiation
- isn't somewhere you can get back to
- pack, to silent again,
- Rob Mackenzie shared

- black comedy but it's terribly earnest
- stuck onto the back of
- The instructor's adorable, a snack of chocolate pretzels
- still tarp as a shack
- acknowledge resistences
- lack of trust in
- get your vegan snack attack on
- flashback by refusing to release from
- paperback backwards
- Not that I have anything against the fine and noble animal, the jackass.

Maybe it generates something else interesting, sparking a springboard idea that becomes a lyric poem. Or a pwoermd. Like, right there in the penultimate string, "paperbackwards". I'm also doing a chapbook from portmanteaus I've done; these pwoermds are as addictive as puns. And there's puns. The word play, visual or sonic litter my poems. And come out elsewhere. For the food blog I pun a headline whenever I can "beware all who lentil in" for a lentil sauce, or "grit and bear it" for making grits.

Taking what is there and twisting it like a lemon is part of the basic elements of poetry but it may be the take-away line, jamming the knife home, or widening to cosmic significance that does the spin. In pwoermds it's turning around on a time of nanoseconds instead. It's a variant on pleasure of play.

As you write you may roll the sounds inside your mouth. This is more of a mouthful, shuffling ideas against each other so there's enough gap to make an electrical arc, something like bastard ghazals. The puzzle pieces of phrases get shuffled until a click. You can't use it all. Too much muchness. Maybe all the pieces aren't the same puzzle, as with writing any kind of poem. Maybe it's 2 or 3 puzzles.

But back to the exercise of corpus searching, what would I do with the ack-string results bulleted up there? So ack:

Flashbackforward

*Mackenzie shared black comedy, but it's
terribly earnest. (what is more solemn
than satire.) non-plussed at the lack of trust
the government flushes from us, our trust
returned? brass-knuckled backhand compliment.*

*we who pack our selves to silence again
aim to become hiss, vinegar in this
context where all is white noise and background
radiation, set dressing of signal*

lost.

*except for that boosted and glossed by the
crown corporations for public coop-
eration and viewers like you. you heard*

*that videos here will be tracked by You
Tube/Google. their track record is clear.
big data of day to day, indicates
on its digital package: Ottawa.*

*yet we, bronco-riders of the coin-slot
saloon, outlast on the back of this fine
and noble animal, but the jackass
market for info isn't gonna offer*

*affordable off-the-racks, tortuous
that slog-grind minding of google results
of previously primed. feedback spiral*

*to less to none, to one born-pessimist
who builds dungeons in the iClouds. what can
I pull back while I'm still tarp as a shack
and remember what danger is; my face.*

Sound gives a seed star then a constellation to shape a myth around. Some things drop. Some things give structure to other things. Sometimes it falls flat. It gives time to look at language up close, to consider ideas, to look at language syllable by syllable which allows me to appreciate its strengths and qualities, to emulate or move away from. It allows the ideas to be tasted longer.

Reverse Infill Plunder

There are many ways to approach language with a dog biscuit. Some of you may recall we made a shuffler game for that that was in line with the composition methods of some poems. (www.beenshedbore.com/shuffer.php) In *been shed bore* (Chaudiere, 2010), I did plunder verse and used a poem's word bank as my set of materials to work with. (It is like anagramming at word level.)

I also did reverse infill plunder verse, where I take a poem by someone else, read it backwards word by word, as you would to proofread an essay. Some poems under this fell apart, and some were as tightly dovetailed in reverse as forward. That was illuminating of the craft being read. I took a phrase from each of that poem and left the rest of the line as blank.

The phrase from the last line of the original poem is in the first line of mine until we work our way (the poem and I) to the original poem's top line and my poem's bottom line. An example of the technique for going somewhere using e.e. cummings, [love is more thicker than forget]

love is more thicker than forget
more thinner than recall
more seldom than a wave is wet
more frequent than to fail

it is most mad and moonly
and less it shall unbe
than all the sea which only
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win
less never than alive
less bigger than the least begin
less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly
and more it cannot die
than all the sky which only
is higher than the sky

I might proceed (to poem on the fly) to step 2:

sky the _____
_____ sky the _____
_____ cannot it _____
_____ most is

_____ litter less
begin least _____

And so on. then using it as a framework to in-fill to write towards the phrases as one would with a glosa. With a longer lined poem there's more wiggle room. To make it work the phrase can be in the line but not the same mirrored place, depending on the needs of the poem that comes. A syntax has embedded possibility. As in *If*, a collaborative chapbook (available on etsy from phafours press) where we have the grammatical frame of one person writing "if _____" and another writing "then _____", blind of each other. When combined it makes a sort of horoscope-general-true sensical. We know what a opening hook should feel like. We know what a closing latch should feel like. Those two orations in combination make a sort of authorial sense. Hopefully in the process, you make actual truth, or pass close by.

if forgiveness is a purple flower, its beauty slightly bruised then the tea will be strong and bitter.

~ Robin Macdonald and LM Rochefort

With cummings, what to extrapolate from the syntax here? By the inversion of phrase, I verb some nouns, and for the sake of this exercise, pretend the original was 6 lines long:

*sky the face that pillow-rises
and sky the traces of that yes
narrowed into sleep. cannot it lift itself
centipede's race to maybe. most is
a crack, a hole unseen. litter less
begin least, become wholly seen.*

If you start with the conscious mind and aim where you want with a poem, not allowing in any leaks or sploogies, you may end up with something hermetically sealed, artificially homogenized, but you want to balance to have order enough that it is signal not noise. If you let too much in, it may be a slippery mess that needs a mop.

How much leaping or leading a person can tolerate is part of a person. No poem suits all. (Yes, even that poet that springs to mind that everyone knows and likes. There are people who don't.)

The aim is to be in the writer's happy medium where you go somewhere you didn't know you were headed, enjoying the journal and getting something out of the destination. That can come from any process, any compositional method.

Hope the ones here sparked some possible routes.

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