

Constraints & Experiments: Writing in response to Modernist Movements

by Barbara Henning

One approach for poetry workshops that I have found particularly interesting is shaped around Volume One of *Poems for the Millennium*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris.

What follows are lists of assignments (some invented by students) for each movement, as well as some examples of poems written by members of the workshops. The assignments are very loosely modeled on or inspired by the poems in the anthology; sometimes they are syntactic inversions or rearrangements of some statement from *Millennium* or elsewhere.

The poems the students write are usually quite different from the poems in the anthologies, and they should be—the world was far different for the poets in the first half of the twentieth century. When for example the students attempt to write futurist poems, celebrating war and the advance of technology, they often write in opposition to the manifestos of futurism, but using some of the techniques (often resulting in expressionist type poems). See William Kim's "The Man Who Has a Combustion Chamber", Pamela Sudlow's "Sweet Old Men," and Jesse Ruderman's "In Between". Kim portrays a man who wins the race with technology only to be left incapable of human feeling. Ruderman's poem celebrates the speed of his inner self and its relatedness with the cosmos. Sudlow's poem is thematically closer to a futurist project; she calls for young men to forget the boring literary projects of old men and instead to celebrate the reality of skyscrapers, jets and on-line computers.

First we fracture and multiply point of view with cubist and futurist assignments (see Tondro's "India" and Libin's "Toward"); then we eliminate metaphor and sorrow with the futurists; include mysticism and emotive soulfulness with the expressionist assignment (see Ballweg's "Strands" and "Resonance"; Kim's "To Fight the Good Fight"); then we slam with unpoetic, spectacular and absurd with dadaist poems (See Ruderman's "Impractical Marshmallow Toasting Device"). With the surrealists, we return to narrative and metaphor, now exploring the grammar of dreams still using multiple points of view and fractured narrative, but now including the outrageous and marvelous (see Dipreta's "One"; Ismail's "Five Dreams"; Mihailos' "Longing"). Then with Negritude, there is a refusal to speak with the language of the colonizer (see "Affirmations" by Allia Matta; and "Mama's Lamentation" by Michael Rodriguez.) Finally, we end the semester with the Imagists and the Objectivists, grounding ourselves in the materiality of the word and the world. Then we swirl it around in the Vortex. (See Finocchiaro's "Canning Verse"; Rodriguez's "Downtown Sentinels" and "Who's speaking now?")

By the end of the semester, students have learned an enormous amount about history, poetry, language and invention.

CUBISM

Include many views instead of looking for just “one” core meaning or speaking from a central “I”. Shatter traditional ways of presenting time and space. Call sequential ordering into question. Use techniques like collage, weird punctuation, syntactic ambiguities, juxtaposition or open disposition of words on the page. Bring different genres and arts together. Disrupt logical and causal order. Break rules of conventional syntax. Present an object, event or scene simultaneously from many directions. Eliminate deep space and naturalistic perspectives. Break up, fragment, then manipulate and reorder materials. Let the reader think in a different way. Language is not transparent. Conception is more important than perception.

After Gertrude Stein—

Write a poem or prose poem using only words of one syllable.

Write a poem restricting the vocabulary so that only a few words must be repeated or take a text and create a limit, apply a constraint for transforming it. For example, don’t use words that have the letter “e” (lipogram) or some other rule you make up.

Select a poem that seems traditional and conventional. What is the intent of the writer? To strive for variety? To display a rich vocabulary with allusions? To be balanced? To instill emotion through rhetoric and flowery language? Whatever it might be doing, write a poem and strive to do the opposite.

Write a poem in which you describe something without ever mentioning or alluding to it. Remove commonality from a commonplace object and thereby accentuate the distance between the object and description. Eliminate sight and sound.

Focus on some rather mundane everyday statement. Take it through enough permutations and combinations until it glows and takes on a special embroidered form.

After Apollinaire—

Tell the story of some major event through the story of what could be an insignificant event. Include the fantastic details of the unusually unnoticed commonplace. Celebrate the present. See things new.

After Blaise Cendrars—

Cut and past fragments of another text (not yours), making a poem

Write a list poem

Collaborate with an artist to create a poem that dialogues with a visual work.

After Pierre Reverdy—

Write several paragraphs describing a provocative scene or event. Stay with the images and the objects. “Illuminate” the details. Type it up and then clip it apart and rearrange or reassemble it based on some plan or a random method.

After Langston Hughes—

Collect images and speech details (overheard, received, read) from people (in a community) who you encounter regularly. Reassemble – move, cut, jam, jump, riff, run, break with sentences, details, words, frames, etc.

FUTURISM

Be mad! Celebrate speed and dynamism. Exalt the city and technology. Move fast. Celebrate danger and energy. Modern science is transcendent. Make people laugh, spit, think! Use political campaign techniques. Slash away at the tedious past and traditional poetry. Be in the present. Celebrate simultaneity. Improvise. Perform. Move rather than standing still. Abolish traditional syntax, meter and punctuation. Instead of free verse with its “facile sound effects, banal double meanings and monotonous cadences,” destroy “the canals of syntax” (Marinette). Invent a new discourse. Set words free. Assault with words. Motion over stasis. An uninterrupted stream of images and sounds. There will be little brooding here or sadness or hesitancy or sensitivity. No mirror held up to reality. Emotions are primary. Assert them. Appeal to the crowd. Be theatrical. Spectacular. The rational and bourgeois world is not at all interesting. Disjunction and juxtaposition. Reassemble. The non-poetic and poetic on the same page. The poem as manifesto.

After the Futurists—

Write a poem in which you represent a sequence of positions in the same plane, a moving catalogue with each picture-plane frozen. Then fuse all the positions by filling out the pathway of their motions. Pregnant with lines of force. Fuse all these – body, paths and background—into a pattern.

Write a poem in which you celebrate the style and technology of our age. “A poetry whose windows are wide open to our boulevards.” Let the boundary between the world out there and the language of art break down. Question to consider: Does technology offer the same hope to us that modernization held for those in Italy and Russia prior to World War I?

Poeticize the velocity of whole environments and then freeze them.

Sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. The world’s magnificence. The beauty of speed. The speed of 2001.

Write a manifesto. Let the language bridge poetics and political speech. The manifesto was an assemblage of forms and venues from their time. What do you want to say about poetics and art? Who are you speaking to?

After Mina Loy and Ezra Pound—

Write a poem that speaks from the *logopoeia* or “poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters . . . the utterance of clever people in despair, or hovering upon the brink of the precipice” (Pound). Let one image rush into the next (See "Vorticism" section on page 15).

After Buzzi—

Write a love poem to an uncommon item or body product or part. Move in and out of different language registers and contexts, shifting and letting your words-be-in-freedom.

EXPRESSIONISM

Write a poem in opposition to the mechanical [technological post] modern world and the spiritual degradation that results. Bring out the spiritual or the eternal in new and different ways. Stand against war. Destroy form with emotion and discover some significance in the process. Be visionary. Sympathize with the poor and the lost. Attempt to go further than reproducing, imitating or repeating that which exists. Do not avoid ecstasy or anguish. Allow the mystical and religious into the poem. Be intuitive. Reveal the inner [wo]man. Essence over existence. Oppose the language of realism and naturalism. Instead turn to the soul in highly emotive ways. Freedom is primary. Use types and symbols instead of objective forms. Use modern techniques, such as disjointed syntax and dynamic imagery. In the extreme, sheer down language to only verbs, nouns and adjectives. The mystical and mysterious word. In the soft, include what is usually considered unpoetic.

After Kandinsky—

Write a poem in the voice of the representative postmodern man or woman as he or she pursues a material life as the body decomposes. Let there be—as part of the poem in the tone and the images—a lament over this loss.

After Else Lasker-Schuler—

Create a portrait of someone in couplets. Include images that resonate with the spiritual. Let the mythic, religious and analytic weave through these lines. Or write a poem in couplets to a lover, comparing his or her body (and your body too) to things of the earth, intertwined with the biblical or other religious images. (Lasker-Schuler's poem was probably considered radical in its portrayal of feminine desire).

After Klee—

Speak with a mythic voice from some deep inner spirit or instinct, as if you are standing alive, momentarily, with just enough time to whisper this poem. Along with your message, the things of the world and the stars send their eerie signals, too.

After Benn—

Write a matter-of-fact clinical examination of something that otherwise might seem horrific. Thereby expose a social reality. Include at least one unusual out-of-place perhaps spiritual image (surreal juxtaposition).

Take your readers into a seedy location in New York City and mix medical terminology with regular images. Bring out a social criticism as well as an honest look. (Assignment by Jesse Ruderman)

DADA

Now use your poems to assault art and literature (capital A and capital L), as well as the corrupt bourgeois culture (capital C). Write manifestos, phonetic poetry, simultaneous poems, noise and make a public spectacle. Oppose the violence and absurdity of war. Anti-war. Ten million were dead in WWI. How intertwined in this travesty are Art, Literature and Culture? Anti-art. The only positive aim, says Tzara, is spontaneity. No false emotionalism allowed. Use modernist

techniques. Dada as a way of being. Say yes to life. Da da is Rumanian for yes, yes. A state-of mind. Break norms. Break open categories. Release the creative forces. Modernist life is going downhill so be subversive with your collage, performance, new typography, chance operation. Be funny. Be absurd. Anything can go in a poem: a skyscraper, a machine, a sexual being. Dignify the commonplace. Slam high culture, logic and traditional language. Show how inadequate reason can be. Be spontaneous and aggressive. Art and life are one. Make a circus. Be delirious. Show your disgust for society. An experiment with chance. Oppose all programs. Even dada. Hugo Ball: "People act as if nothing had happened. The slaughter increases, and they cling to the prestige of European glory"

After the Dadaists—

Like Schwitters who gathered commonplace materials (collages, letters, souvenirs) from his life to make visual art (as an abstraction of his life), gather words, phrases or sentences from parts of your life and form them into a poem.

Make a sound poem. The balance of the vowels is usually weighted and distributed according to the values in the beginning sequence. You might want to take a chant or hymn, study it and replace it with a new incomprehensible sound system. "Abandon a language ravaged and laid barren by journalism" (Ball). You might want to make this into a bruitist poem which includes words and phrases, as well as sounds.

Make up some chance experiment with a text or with writing.

Try automatic writing for a long period of time. Write whatever comes into your mind without planning or erasing. Make a section of it into a poem.

Follow the instructions *from Tzara's poem* for writing a poem while simultaneously deconstructing a so-called informative discourse. Find a news article in which you are suspicious of the reporting or you have strong objections or suspicion. Cut it apart and put it in a bag, shake it up, then pull out each word. Arrange the poem into stanzas. Try this with a few articles until you find one you think works. You might also try dumping the bag and sorting the words into lines based on the way they fall on the table.

Cut up a text into words or phrases and purposefully make a collage.

Take a page of your own automatic writing or journal writing, and do the same thing with it – cut it up and work with it purposefully or with some method of chance. You could collage the newspaper article with your journal entry.

After Arp

Write a poem (1) ridiculing overly serious culturally normal people, and (2) celebrating those who by choice live the absurd.

Write down ten nouns (you should use adjectives with some of them). Then write ten completely separate verb clauses. Now put each noun on a separate piece of paper into a hat and pull them out one at a time. Write them down on a separate piece of paper in the order in which you pull them. Do the same with the verb clauses, writing them beside the nouns in the order that you select them. Don't make sense. (Assignment by Amy DiPreta)

SURREALISM

Poem as process. Play! No work, no lyricism possible. Reveal hidden dimensions of the mind. Collaborate. Anybody can write a poem. A roll of the dice. One image next to another. It's about inspiration, spontaneity, improvisation. Be transgressive. Speak fierce unconscious desires. Use wild metaphors. Not out of skill, but out of energy. Break the norm. The marvelous is always beautiful. Create rather than represent. The multiple over the one. Nonconformity. The real and the dream in the same plane. Play it out against logic and rationality. Against the staid and the traditional. Use superstition and magic. Without inhibition. Distant realms side by side. No more realism. And yet here is the "real" functioning of the mind, soul, or spirit. Revolutionary writing. Anarchy. Outrage. Amoral. Spoken thought. Automatic writing. The insane and the primitive privileged. Collage. Start out sensationally—then quickly switch registers. Be clairvoyant. Speak the occult. Improvise. A strange sleep. With uncontrollable laughter. A conglomerate of normally disparate things. The strange juxtaposed with the ordinary. Just like we usually think, especially we mad ones.

After the Surrealists—

The poet, *Louis Aragon* writes, "Those moments when everything slips away from me, when immense cracks appear in the palace of the world, I would sacrifice all my life for them" (Millenium). Write a poem in which everything slips away and these marvelous cracks remain.

Poetically undo or overdo a logical structure.

Let the poem enact the process of making.

Set your alarm for a precise time in the middle of the night. Wake up and for a precise amount of time, write whatever is on your mind—fast and without erasing. Do this for three to five nights in a row. Shape your material into your poem.

Write a poem enacting the marvelous in an ordinary everyday experience. Perhaps you are in the middle of your lunch hour or your walk to the subway. Include stunning poetic images. Bring unusual images together into one.

In a story poem, let the unconscious (or a dream) break through the narrative of daily life.

Write freely in response to a series of visual images (surrealist paintings, for example). In this encounter, let your unconscious speak with your conscious and shape into prose or lined poems.

Like Max Jacob, record your dreams (day or night). Let each object, person, or other image in the dream speak. Construct a prose poem from each dream.

NEGRITUDE

"We accepted surrealism as a means but not as an end, as an ally not as a master. We were willing to find inspiration in surrealism, but solely because Surrealist writing rediscovered the language of Negro Africa" (Leopold Senghor in a letter to Lilyan Kesteloot, 1960)

"European surrealism is empirical. African surrealism is mystical and metaphysical" (Senghor, Millenium, 565)

“The word, the spoken word is the expression *par excellence* of the life-force, of being in its fullness. . . . For the human being, speech is the living and life-giving breath of man at prayer” (Senghor, *Millennium*, 564).

Refuse to accept a borrowed personality. Reject literary models of the colonizer or the class that dominates. Reject bourgeois conventions, lives of conformity and humanitarian hypocrisy. Stay near to your original song. Transgress. Remember the importance of the rhythm beneath the surface. Remember the African drums. A poetry of flesh and death. Introduce African elements into your poems, but not as exotic or primitive. Search for and rediscover early rhythms and sounds. Born of emotion. Refuse to assimilate. Rejection of the other is a self affirmation. Eliminate the collective white image of the black from your poems. Use sound repetition – think drums and African languages. Reject early models of the colonizers. Replace them with the surrealists and with the radical Harlem Renaissance writers . Be on the left & be surrealist. Defy racist use of labels. Negritude instead of Negré. Run from accepted traditional forms of poetry like a slave runs from the master. Then create your identity anew. Mystical and logical transformation. Decolonize consciousness. Struggle against alienation. Do away with that inferiority complex formed from living in an atmosphere of rejection. We have a beautiful history. Tell the world about it. European surrealism is empirical and visible. African surrealism is mystical and metaphysical, visible and invisible.

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After Negritude—

The language we use (form and content) is determined and shaped (in subtle or not so subtle ways) by the privileged culture, class or race. To exorcize this domination, invent new forms and ways of using language to express your particular identity.

If your people didn't come from Africa, question who has colonized (or dominated) you and those with whom you identify? Whose language and culture has been forced on you? You can look at gender issues through this same paradigm. If you are a member of the privileged culture and do not experience your language or culture as being colonized or oppressed, you might try assuming the identity of an oppressed group. Or you might write in sympathy with the group.

After Césaire—

Choose a word from another forgotten or suppressed language and write a poem, bringing the word alive and into the our language with a multitude of associations that are impossible with empirical definitions.

Use repetition of lines and phrases. Let a large, powerful and mythic voice emerge, the physical and dream worlds as one. Now you can see beyond the illusions of an ego that was once shaped and dented by the economic and racial oppression, from one century to the next. Who are you? How are your arms like the trunks of the trees, your tongue a “seaweed tongue”? And what do you see now that you are in the “likeness of God”? And what do you have to tell us in your poetic surrealist vocabulary?

Write a poem in which the oppressed language or dialect emerges here and there through the standardized language of the colonizers, like those mythic beasts and glorious beings, simply words, powerful words, perhaps taking a new form, some hybrid born.

After Senghor—

Write a poem in which the mythological beings and beasts that populate and battle within the speaker's inner world are present and emerging. Again use words from a language that is being suppressed or forgotten.

After Damas—

Write a poem that recognizes oppression in the images of one's body. Let there be a glimmer of freedom behind the shadows. Or write a poem that cuts to the truth, as an expose of socially condoned violence. Or write a poem depicting and exploring situations in which an oppressed group demands that their children learn and obey the rules, etiquette and language of the oppressors.

IMAGISM

Reject 19th century poetry and cloudy verbiage. Strive for a new clarity and exactness. Be brief and precise, lyrical and direct. Build your poem around a single image with a classical unity of theme and time. The language should arrest the reader. Get close. In an instant, present an "intellectual and emotional complex" (Pound). To see a physical thing. Evoke a state the author is feeling. Be non-referential. Non-symbolic. Non-expressive. Include no word that doesn't contribute. Avoid metaphors. Don't be excessive with your use of adjectives. Avoid all that 19th century philosophizing and moralizing. No more "dim lands of peace." Reduce and simplify. Direct treatment of the thing. An image is not an ornament. No poet intervenes. Don't stop each line at a dead end. Say yes to free verse and rhythm by the phrase. Say no to the metronome. Rare things or/the local, ordinary and colloquial. Pristine & delicate or rapid & vivid. Look at H.D., Pound or some early WCW, even though ultimately Williams doesn't like the formlessness of most imagist poems.

VORTICISM

In poetry this means: an image as "a radiant node or cluster . . . a VORTEX, from which, and through which and into which ideas are constantly rushing" (Pound). Political, mythic, and ordinary day-to-day details. The past into the present. All times are contemporaneous. High energy. Emotion. Get close/stand back. Beside and with the glut of knowledge. The ordinary and the extraordinary. All times together. Into the vortex. Into the mind of the poet. Into the poem. Typographical explosions. Jagged. Collage. Risk incoherence. No more logocentric poetic subject. The poem is the process. No representation, similarity or analogy. No single path. Look at Wyndham Lewis's magazine, *Blast*

Vorticism means that one is interested in the creative faculty as opposed to the mimetic. We believe that it is harder to make than to copy. We believe in maximum efficiency . . . We go to a particular art for something which we cannot get in any other art. . . . If we want an image or a procession of images, we want poetry . . . (Pound, "Vorticism," In *Millenium*, 16)

To be civilized is to have swift apperception of the complicated life of today; it is to have a subtle and instantaneous perception of it, such as savages and wild animals have of the necessities and the dangers of the forest. It is to be no less alive or vital than the savage. It is a different kind of aliveness. (Pound, "Vorticism", In *Millenium* 20)

After some of Pound's more complicated poems, such as *The Cantos*: Write a poem in which an image of the present includes a multitude of details, rushing into the poem from the present and past. Make a collage of all this knowledge, all this print, these computer windows, all the modern world into fragments. Perhaps this means jagged lines spread all over the page. Or lists. Include everyday as well as political details. Mythology. History. Economics. Your own history. Allow the difficulty of the many and the real to co-exist. Tolerate ambiguity.

Read Ezra Pounds "Vortex" . (Millenium 527) Remove all articles, prepositions and pronouns. Then experiment with the arrangement of the remaining words. (Assignment by Michelle Edwards)

Write two separate poems, each about specific things (ideas, images, moments in time, etc.). Then shuffle them together like a deck of cards, integrating them, not necessarily line by line, but rather, thought by thought. Each poem should build in momentum so that when they are mingled, the momentum is intensified. (Think of it like water going down the drain – it moves slowly on the outer edges, picking up speed as it reaches the center.) (Assignment by Mary Ballweg)

OBJECTIVIST

Write a poem (make an object) concentrating on the luminous details in the present conscious world. Include historic and contemporary particulars. All into and out of the "vortex." Organic. No parts to analyze. Social statements. Empirical. Historical. Vernacular. Images. "No idea but in things" (WCW). The opposite of symbolist and surrealist poetry. Instead the immediate conscious reality. No streaming consciousness. Here the object is primary. No metaphors. Non-referential. The material quality of the word. The poet in the background. As collector or arranger. Newspapers. The talk of people. Usually urban. Local speech. Immigrant particularities. Documents. Taken from the records. The rhythm of the neighborhood, like Hughes's "Montage of a Dream Deferred." Aesthetic of condensation. And collage. Contextual. "The poem as a field of action" (WCW). Shape grows organically during the process of making. All at once. All together. Intellectual & moral.

After the Objectivists—

Write a poem in which the everyday details and language of the here and now, the familiar conscious world, becomes luminous. Break the boundaries which define so-called art. Transgress against the high and dominant class culture.

Collect fragments from one day's newspaper and/or television news and construct a poem that holds all in one. (Or use some other documents which are available to you.)

Assemble the fragments of your day into one rambling poem—include politics, voices of people, casual talk, ruminations, memories, things, etc. Collage. (You might want to collect language from newspapers as well.)

Isolate one area and subject and collect as many particularities as possible. Begin with things in the world. Make sure the language is not all "about" the topic, but instead "of" the topic. Collage into an objectivist whole. Emphasize rough edges.

Make a poem from a collection of small paragraphs or stanza stories that you have found, or overheard or remembered.

Tape a conversation (your children, parents, friends, co-workers, students, street) and make an objectivist poem out of it (assignment by Andrea Libin)

Write a poem about something you see. Make the poem jagged, so it is not a sentence, but instead a word in each line contributing to the "sight." (See Williams's "The Locust Tree in Flower") The object is not to clinically describe. It is to get to the thing itself by lifting up the details that strike you as real and letting those make the poem. Williams writes, "The thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose."

William Kim

THE MAN WHO HAS A COMBUSTION CHAMBER

Do you know a man whose heart becomes iron?
Do you know a man whose eyes become glass?
Do you know a man whose legs become rubber?
Did you ever see a man who could not laugh?
Did you ever see a man who could not weep?
Did you ever see a man who could not feel?
When fifty sedans rush along the road with a roaring sound,
The first gorgeous sedan runs over the man.
The second marvelous sedan runs over the man.
The third fabulous sedan runs over the man.
It doesn't matter if the man is crossing the road
or has already crossed the road.
The fourth dazzling sedan runs over the man.
We don't care if he dies or not.
The seventh magnificent sedan runs over the man.
The eighth brilliant sedan runs over the man
The ninth excellent sedan runs over the man.
The tenth elegant sedan runs over the man.
You may assume that the man is waiting for the Man
or is not waiting for the Man.
The eleventh great sedan runs over the man . . .
The forty-ninth wonderful sedan runs over the man.
The fiftieth beautiful sedan runs over the man.
You may believe that more sedans will come or are coming.
But before that, let me tell you something.
What if the man was a car when he was bumped by the sedans?
The man who has a combustion chamber in his heart is able to supply energy to his whole body.
The man who has tires under his belly is able to run as fast as the sedans.
The man who has a windshield over his eyes is able to penetrate into the air without resistance.
I gasp with surprise at hearing that a man is making such a man.
I assume that the man may do that because he is sick of waiting for the Man or he forgets whom
he is waiting for

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Jesse Ruderman
IN BETWEEN
Neptune

&

Pluto

Stars
Mimci the sun-
The One.
But One.
Multiplied by zero
Always = zero.
Not everything shines.
I too
Am prime
Like
1
3
13
23
eternity
lacking longevity.
Calmly count
7
8
9
10
and then
when
my rocket ship stops
and infinite
is less than me
and I am the One
and there is only the sun
divided by light.

*

Pamela Sudlow

SWEET OLD MEN

Old men with long
Beards
Dominating
White beards
Dipped in ink
Rhyming
Canto this, Canto that
Then the fearsome ballad
The ode
Awake young man
Shout with the fingertips
Creating, destroying
Postulating, screaming
This is your world
Today
The skyscrapers stabbing the skies
Bleeding on the jets flying at 180 decibels
Loving the on-line computers
The music of anarchy
The poetry of life
Reality
You will be heard

*

Dondi Tondro

INDIA

Prayer, Train Window, Tiger, Heart, Bandit, Farmer, Caste, Grain Truck, Monk, Copper Plate,
Cow, Hay, Rice, Light, Penance, Bullock Cart, Monsoon, Famine, Ghee, Serpent, Yoga,
Jasmine, Spice, Heat, Himalayas, Red Panda, Sand, Sage, Tribe, Forest, Color, Time, Third Eye,
Chakra, Language, Lotus, Religion.

*

Andrea Libin

TOWARD

the last days
of the century

XX

at the turn of the turn
i ride a little bike
 round

the

streets

 of

my school days

unseen patches of
cobblestone appear
under my tire

rough and uneven

forgotten

causing my little bike to rumble

[horse hoofs carriage wheels skirt hems lamp oil bare feet]

a past epoch [not mine]

smothered in smooth tar
sky scrapers scraping the air
scraping the light scraping a bird scraping the endless

pedaling

flashes
of river and sky

pedalling

concrete

pedaling

a sailboat immobilized

luffing

brick blocks

pedaling
shinning mountain of glass mirrored walls
tinted translucent green

turn of the turn

1. tenements 2. water towers

a faux waif
i was
and just yesterday a friend my friend tells me she is moving back
here to these streets I have turned onto
she is moving here days before the
turn of the turn

i remember turning htis corner
at fifteen
on this corner
on the curb
i see her
my friend
ready to
willing to
do anything
eyes empty
I ride past this curb where I saw my friend
ready to
fall to
fall

falling hard

pedals turn

air presses my face
leaves still green
barely tinged with red
not quite autumn in
nyc

pedaling through these streets
once a battlefield
of sorts
now plastered over by
boutiques and bar saloons

for upstanding citizens who never stood on
this curb
falling

i ride my little bike
my tire turns through a pool of water
a puddle
moving from masquerade to masquerade we rambled
down these streets
very late
costumed
[torn combat boot]
we felt old
so we imagined

i ride my little bike
the air
presses
my face

*

Mary Ballweg

Strands

a vagabond's harmonica
drew ladybugs and butterflies
while they drank from the teapot of pity
watching fire's tropical fish translucency

the street lamp licked the raindrops
the wind ripples the folds of my soul
while turtle sages
sway
to the vagabond's harmonica

*

Mary Ballweg

RESONANCE

--for Kenneth Wheeler

his voice rolling
a shower of diamonds
poured into a wooden bowl

his voice rolling
the whitewater raging
over the rocks at night
swollen with a winter's thaw

his voice rolling
a pair of mourning doves
cooing in the deep forest morn

his voice rolling

*

William Kim

TO FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

Federal Reserve Note

The United States of America

This Note Is Legal Tender

For All Debts, Public and Private

H68243106E

In God

We Trust One,

One Dollar left in my hand tonight.

With one Washington,

I don't know what I can do this time of night,

except just wait for the morning,

though I don't know when it comes up in this deep dark night.

This City, New York, seems to be a deep tunnel,

which is drawn with a linear perspective.

I carry my body of the way to the tunnel.

I am a wandering hero

who wants to be a hero in Camelot.

The hero of Excalibur!

The Sword, Oh, what a nice weapon to cut off your head! You, freeze there!

You enemy! Show me your shape!

You invisible you!

Poverty—

It is an inborn legacy flowing in my blood.

Winter is the strongest enemy to the poor.

But I know that . . .

when the Night is getting deeper,

the Morning is getting closer.

My starvation is not from one of four seasons.

My enemy is you, demon!

I know that you are hiding

curling arms and legs to spring up against me.

Yeah!

You're always trying to possess me.

I'm fearful of you.

The fear increases on my skin like leprosy.

I want to fight you and fight over again a good fight

on a chariot with the sword high.

On the long trail in the tunnel,

as the F train arrives at Delancy station as usual,

I wake up to get off there with the one portrait of Washington.

The Hero of this modern day Canaan—America,

flowing with milk and honey,

which are not mine at all.

I am a man who is searching for the Holy Grail.
I am a man who is poor in spirit.
With the wine cup, I will surely fight the good fight again.
If not, Oh Lord, I hope to be there, but the river, Lethe. It's a long river.

*

Dondi Tondro

INDIA TODAY

Atomic Jihad
Vulnerable Nuclear Weapons
Grotesque milestones
By the end of the evening it's a stalemate
It is not the final war
He's been fighting for the last 22 years
At 14 fully grown, boy or girl
Caught in a time warp
A dollar is worth 80,000 Afghanis
Yellow food packets and Pepsi as relief

An extension of the body
Or to die for
Battlefield a daily chore
There is an equal foreign reaction
To every action a triple cross
Clockwise from right—
A big loss
Bonds riddled with question marks
Coffins of 16 Christians
A jail on the picturesque banks
99 names for Allah
Bread like rock in a hard place

Make shift shelters
Rocks for wheels
Going no place
Once a proud race
In Panjshir Valley two girls wait
Write your war diary
Ground to a halt
The carpet bombing so near and yet so far

*

Jesse Ruderman

SEE ATTACHED POEM TO BE INSERTED.

Amy Dipreta

ONE

The girl with the single blue eye mumbled an Italian curse under breath. A sturdy, pre-war brick building. Forgot to pick up the kids at school. Anyone? A ripened apple. Was tempted to retire for the evening but decided against it. *Nobody in particular ran along the unlit alley.* The garbage cans—Stanley's arrogant son acted as if nothing unusual was going on! the distant moon stared out into the night while a slovenly old lady shuffled farther away from sanity. I ate a dinner fit for a king—our neighbor elevated her feet. The grocer strummed on an off-tune guitar.

TWO

A maple tree forecasted disaster while a shimmering lake sang a lullaby to the children. The gong. Not a soul played with the dogs. The midday sun ran for cover—town dump. *Everyone forgot their worth.* He tripped along the way and an automobile moaned out loud. All of the young men never understood things! Our friends were caught up in a fantasy. The local disco fell.

THREE

Heaven forgave us our sins but the Apocalypse fought for justice. A newspaper reporter wiped his brow. Potholes! We tired not to see the helpless girl—our neighbor lit a single candle. *An unlikely hero prayed for salvation.* Six angry skinheads rendered the townspeople mute. Throw out the leftovers! A melancholy reverend went hastily on his way as forlorn widows dropped change in a beggar's hand.

*

FIVE DREAMS

1. On a bench

a jar of gum
a giant glaring black
a shark tooth necklace
level
everyone.

2. Having a Ball

Ernesto holds runners tight. He pins wrists, confers kisses on knees, plants a pinch off the shoulder. Runners pry loose and have their legs cut out from under them. Ernesto heads for the mound where there is a very small margin for error. His pitches go way to far, aren't even close, outside and low. Ernesto then holds the runners even tighter, rallies in the bottom half, quells the uprising, which make no mistake, will be brief. He lays off as long as he can, then gets rid of it quickly, a successful sacrifice. The runners move closer and draw even, which is wise. In truth, this is dangerous and dirty.

3. Trunk Fish

When bets on guessing the following day's post headline are off
then rich people deserve more space than the rest of us
When the seaweed served is musty
then finish the wool red socks for dinner
When a commercial blimp operation is downed by a cruise missile
then adore the lotus of the wonder law
When a peacock's promotional leprechauns ask for a cigarette
then don't drink so much
When the teenager's Internet sex bill is infinite
then a level beyond definition has been reached

4. Being happy with who you are is priceless

Avocado soap, Shvitz, gym membership, Creatin, Viagra, Propecia, hair replacement, pectoral implant, belly liposuction, penile extension, corrective eye laser surgery THEN electrolysis, tummy tuck, breast augmentation, reduction of eyebrow ridge, cheek and jaw sculpting, nose job, move the hairline, point the jaw, lift hte eyebrows, vocal chord operaitons, shorten the male genitalia and replace with a neo vagina fashioned from small intestine: Femme fatale.

5. At the Tompkins dog run

A terrier darts under a bench to the outfield to find a ball
the Yorkshire does not have time to run the ball down
it slices into a corner and leaps into a bull pen
the pen gates swing open and the bull
a valuable asset bought from a Chinese professional
hustles into the dog run
squares, mounts the canine and does a job
while a 17 year old Siberian Christian reads me Pushkin

I loved you silently, without hope, fully
in diffidence, in jealousy, in pain
I loved you so tenderly and truly
else you be loved by any man.

This is an odd cigarette.

*

Athena V. Mihailos

LONGING

Pacing at a natural rhythm
I notice flawless scratches
upon a pear shaped
sable hide
I try to walk
without that rhythm
but nature fights with me
and wins.

My hair is clinging
to the nape of my neck
down my back
dampening my silk blouse
the wind touches my face
brushing my eyelashes
I listen closely
in the quietest of prayers
and heard its long breath
from the sweetness of the seashells

Not often can I, do I
stroll so leisurely
skip the cracks—good luck
or count the squares—
no luck, eyes too slow
the mind is always too fast
How many steps
starting from now?
Six hundred fifty

I see a young boy
we're face to face
he can't, won't stroll leisurely
dried tears are fossilled in his eyes
almond casted eyes
with sapphire fillings
In the deepest sea
Sleep's fingerprints
hiding in the corners
Human diamonds
Nor do they require

millions of years
to drip their natural sap
from their womb

The blinding orange in the sky
rests on misty pillows
held up by Atlas's brother
Today the sun goddess
lacks timidity
She boasts with
such a stunning immaculate glow
her nose is high
too high for some
Flashing her incomparable power
and loyal honor at me
Reaching her Medusan rays
Rapping herself around me
in lustful rapture
Opening my jacket
which is rare for me

A weed green color stone jade in texture
out of a concrete crack
I was easily enchanted
Half of a blueberry muffin
decorated the sidewalk
An army of ants attacked
I have to be careful
not to crush
their fragile little spines
not to twist
their bubbly little necks
I've murdered them before
why not today?
Too many to slaughter
or is it the sun
I guess it's
the impressively warm glow
of the basking day.

I think sooooo much
my brain like a roller coaster
for my thoughts
Mind you, a roller coaster
without an off switch.

STOP!

Nice try, fortunately unsuccessful
A roller coaster without an off switch
is like an apple without a core
Listening to the birds walk
and watching the people fly
on the inside
It must be the orange Queen
Imagining everyday as gently simple
as this one.

With my jacket opened
scratches on my ebony boots
stride on natural rhythm
I will probably remain the same
not always, not every day
Maybe every other week
on a Wednesday or a Friday
My blood will always boil
shielding the dust of my flesh
beneath a bed of satin sunflowers
Hoping her rays hug me tighter
Perhaps one day I will repay her
when I choose to soar
as close to her wings
as she will allow
where I will never rest
on misty pillows
only upon a crib of tender grace

*

Allia Matta

AFFIRMATIONS

Black sistah
Dontcha sweat
DreadLocksChinkyEyesCheekBones

brownyellowblack sistah
jungle songs
timba tamba
redwood roads
tarblackened trails
clear rainfalls
burnt sunlight
arid darkness

blackness
bluegreen blessings
sunfilled gifts
light . . .

Africana
divine
daughter Earth
female, black & beautiful,
birthing
beige chocolate tones
tales of truth/love
N verse.

yellow curry sunsplashes
brown eyes, black skin, pure soul
mother's
sweethoneykisses
nilepassionrivers
smooth
 wet
 touches . . .

heaven beams
supreme darkanlovely
mad black rainin
DreadLocksChinkyEyesCheekBones.

*

Michael Rodriguez

MAMA'S LAMENTATION

Mama's voice
Brillo against an old pan
Sweet potato pie
Collard greens too much vinegar

Mama's voice
Skipping double-dutch
Loud domino's game
Silky night with Marvin Gaye

Mama's voice
Vaseline on ashy elbows
butter on a burn
Pick with a fist in it

Sit our ass up straight!
Come and give mama some sugar
Baby don't yell in public

Good lord, the bill gas people called
Pick your goddamn feet up!
You know you mama's baby boy

Wash behind your funky-ass ears!
Stop dragging your feet
Comb them naps out your hair, boy

*

Andrei Finocchiaro

CANNING VERSE

Unsure of rules, rules, rules
Don't follow any, don't follow me
Sugar down and
I'm sooooo tired
Whoah Man!

Whoah

Man

It has nothing to do with Sunkist or Dr. Pepper or Blood or Jairo Rodriguez
That Puertorican looked so cool, but I think his friend was, not him
I wish I could grow Sideburns like that
In fact, I don't think he was Puertorican, but I think his friend was, not him
Could be lines os effective lines if he and I and linus burned his and mine sides
Unsure of your tothpaste, use Midas, thepottery that helps you sleep medicine

*

Michael Rodriguez

DOWNTOWN SENTINELS

1

immortal
twin
goliaths

2

immovable
dynamic
imposing

3

sentinels
silence
metropolis

4

piercing
willful
observant

5

assemble
communal
contemplation

*

Michael Rodriguez

WHO'S SPEAKING NOW?

The Alpha speaks
Stretching my hands outward
I make love in sunflowers
Ocean breezes in coconut trenches
Bagels and muffins in a liquid raisins
Lips like long legs in brothels
Wicked shoulders slicing through day break
I scream when I hear the onions
Dark eyes never listen of the bee gees

Hair falls from my face in clumps of sweat filled breaths
Big brown hips dance with rhino's
Sunday ice cream cake and liver pills
Omega falls silent.

*