

POEM 3 Assignment Sheet: List/Catalog Anatomy

(As always, these anatomy assignments are optional. If you choose, you may instead work on another anatomy project, revise last week's poem, etc.)

From Ron Padgett's "List Poem" entry in *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*:

The list poem (also called "catalog poem") is a very old form of poetry. It consists of an itemization of things or events. List poems can be of any length, rhymed or unrhymed. The original purpose of this descriptive, repetitive verse was often functional. For example, Polynesian list poems formed an inventory of all the islands in Polynesia. List poems have also been used as a hybrid of history and entertainment, as in Book II of Homer's *Iliad*, in which the poet lists all the major Greek heroes come to fight in the Trojan War. In the Bible, the book of Genesis can be seen as a list poem that traces the lineage of Adam's family. (100)

Prior to beginning the list/catalog poem, it is important that you determine a certain field or range (e.g., soft things; words that begin with the letter 'w'; the names of trees, synonyms for the word 'red'), as well as a procedure (see below for procedural variations). Feel free to then work back into any one item or image within the anatomy, creating a whole other poem in the process.

Variations

Instead of determining a particular procedure and range/field prior to writing, try creating a list poem from found materials (lists, catalogs, prose, etc.). Here's Padgett on the found poem:

A found poem is a piece of writing that was not intended as a poem, but is so declared by its "finder." Parts of newspaper articles are often declared to be "found poems," as are lists, notes passed among children, scraps of conversation, and other incidental uses of language. The closer the original intent of the language comes to that of poetry, the less likely it is to qualify as true found poetry. The odd thing is how the found words seem to take on an added power when removed from their original context and presented along.

"Writing" a found poem requires simply that you stay alert to those exceptional uses of language or sharply presented, telegraphic stories that create a poetic effect or an emotional response as strong as that made by a poem. The effect or response may or may not have been intended, but the notion of the language as "poetry" must not have played a factor in its original creation.

Writing a found poem often requires creative skills similar to those used in the actual creation of the art, deciding the poem's limits and linebreaks. (79)

For other ideas, see the sample list/catalog poems (Shonagon, "The Calendars," Kelly, Featherston) in the coursepack, as well as handouts of catalog poems (e.g., Lisa Cooper's "The Names of It").

Please bring multiple copies of your list/catalog anatomy to class on 11 June. Also, please type your name at the top of your poem.

Other possibilities: If you feel stuck or unable to write based on the restrictions of the assignment, try working off of your earlier writings or someone else's. Here is a modified version of an assignment I gave to students in a creative writing course several years ago. Feel free to use any previous writings for the following procedure.

Oulipo X+5, 7, etc.

Assignment: The mantra for this assignment is "Stop Making Sense," or "Start Making Nonsense Sensible." Rimbaud: Poetry is "an ordered disordering of the senses." The key word is "ordered": Anyone can make "nonsense," but the key here is to make a *higher* order out of disordering. We have been discussing in class how to get away from ego-driven, cliché, and orderly/sensible language. We have also been talking about the so-called "irrational" role of play (child's play, sex, drugs, nature, talking to one's self, dreaming, etc.) as a mode of inquiry that allows you to step out of rational, predictable language and thought processes. In the spirit of play, take your love poem (assignment 2) and locate all nouns. Go to a dictionary and look-up each noun. Go forward or backward five/seven/ten/etc. nouns in the dictionary and replace the original noun in your poem with this new noun. The only criterion is that you adhere strictly to a displacement formula. That is, choose to go either forward or backward, either five-nouns or seven nouns, etc. For example, going forward ten nouns:

The past 9 months
Have been a dream come true

becomes:

The past 9 monuments
Have been a dreariness come true

If you chose not to do the love poem assignment, take someone else's in class and rewrite it for this assignment, or find a love poem you admire and rewrite it using the Oulipo method.

Assignment, Part 2 (Poetics): Staple a copy of your original love poem to your "ouliipo" poem. Then, on a separate sheet of paper and stapled to your love poem and "ouliipo" poem, explain the procedure you adopted and write a one-paragraph reflection on the process. Some things to consider: What did you learn about yourself using this procedure? How has the poem changed under this procedure? What new images and imaginative potentials were discovered in this procedure? Basically, tell the class what you've learned from this "ordered disordering" process. Hopefully, you will see how this experiment both **preserves** the form and tone of your original poem and **erases** cliché subjects, objects and images of love (dove, dream, hearts, and so on). The experiment invites you to say what you didn't want to say (or imagine saying), which is oftentimes more interesting than what you did say. The experiment should open your imagination to new potentials— a kind of translation of yourself into a foreign tongue. For more on such language-play, see the Padgett readings on syllabus, as well as *Novices* on psyche, cliché vs. imaginative writing, etc. Also, I invite you to visit websites devoted to OULIPO, a group of French writers who created many such language-play procedures, often based on mathematical models.

OULIPO Displacements

Your sweet, sweet purr
Sweet, sweet pursuer

Circle of love
Circumference of lowland

Blessing
Bliss

Like daughter, like mother
Like daw, like mother of pearl

I want a man, not a boy
I want a malt, not a brain

Not cause I am the shit
Not cause I am the shoe

I will treat him like he is the shit
I will treat him like he is the shoe

el amor de mi vida
the lottery of my licorice

Love of my life
Amo de mi victimario
(Master of my "person responsible for somebody's suffering"; tormentor?)

...mi eterno amor
...my eternal lottery

you are even more elegant than the starry sky
you are even more elegant than starry skunk cabbage.

You are my precious girl
You are my precious guide.

time would freeze into eternity.
timbre would freeze into ethane.
(ethane: "ether," used in refrigerants)

Seeing you puts a smile on my face
Seeing you puts smoke on my fabric

I feel that you could be my soul mate.
I feel that you could be my soul match.

And for that, this poem is dedicated to you.
And for that, this pod is dedicated to you.

People also say they will change
Peppers also say they will change

Nobody says they are wrong, but someone always is
Full of passion turns to full of anger

Somersault says they are wrong, but somnambulism always is
Full of passion turns to full of anger

I understand that in order to love someone, you have to make sacrifices
Udders understand that in order to love youngsters, you have to make sacrifices

Like giving up something to make the other person happy
Like giving up something to make the other personality happy

For my poem I chose to use a patter where I went up and down

Notice how the introduction of a new noun (person, place, or thing) turns the poem in surprising ways. If a pattern is a patter, suddenly you hear rain falling through your poem. Also, note how vague/abstract words become concrete and specific: "people" become "peppers," and "eternity" turns into "ethane," which "rhymes" with "frozen in eternity" (i.e., "frozen in ethane"). Suddenly, you have questions that your imagination (your poem) must answer: What do refrigerators have to do with love? what if peppers and somersaults could talk? what if your lover were a shoe? what if a blessing were bliss, or a pattern a patter? what if your lover's smile were smoke and your lover's soul a match? what is starry about skunk cabbage? what if a poem were a pod, and is a clam the mother of pearl? what does a daw and pearl have in common? how is love an eternal lottery? In other words, notice how new words bring in new possibilities, new juxtapositions that allow you to imagine outside the circumference of love, creating lowlands of udders and skunk cabbage, where perfumed women turn into flowering woodbine.

I invite you to take individuals lines from your oulipo poem and create new poems. Start with the "logic" of imagination. For example, what if a woman were a woodbine?

I am a woman

I am woodbine

Think analogically: How is a woman like woodbine? Look up the word "woodbine" and discover that it's climbing honeysuckle with fragrant yellowish-white flowers; she's a "Virginia creeper," and sometimes she's even Spanish suckle with greenish flowers and dark-blue berries. Like dream-logic, your new images may permit you to wander into new discoveries.