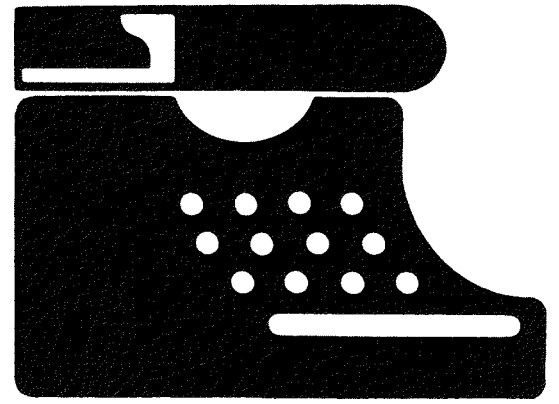


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THE LIST POEM An Introduction

by Larry Fagin

Lists and catalogs are among the oldest written documents and occur in the literature of most cultures. Originally, catalog verse was partly a means of providing information or education. Lists of islands and other locations appear in Polynesian and Abyssinian literature. The Phoenicians, among other cultures, inventoried facts and possessions to show the vastness of a battle or the power of a prince. Rhymed catalog verse often outlined conduct for youth. Lists appear throughout the Bible, as in the genealogy of the tribes in Genesis 10.

Book 2 of Homer's *Iliad* includes a long list of ships' captains and their lands of origin. In the *Aeniad* (Book VII), Virgil recalls the many names of kings whose armies "filled the plains" of the Trojan war. Ovid catalogs trees in *Metamorphosis*. In secular medieval poetry, beautiful women are enumerated, and the *blazon*—a list of the beloved's attributes—first appears. Wolfram von Eschenbach included a list of jewels in his medieval romance, *Parzival*, simply because he liked the sound of the words. François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* abounds with lists. In a recent article on this

sixteenth-century classic, Geoffrey O'Brien points out Rabelais' obsession with cataloging:

[. . .] 217 games that Gargantua played as a child, 253 types of food offered up to Master Belly on the island of the Belly-Worshippers, 70 varieties of weapons and armour, 38 healthful effects derived from a "fine green sauce" made from green wheat. These flights of enumeration are not pedantic but expansive. He isn't sealing off new possibilities but demonstrating that there's always more where those came from. Abundance in itself indicates vitality, even if it's abundance of diseases or deformities. The whole material world begs to be classified.

LARRY FAGIN's article is excerpted from his new book, *The List Poem*, which T&W has just published. The author of 12 books of poetry, Fagin has taught imaginative writing at all levels since 1969. He lives in New York.

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The list appears occasionally in Elizabethan verse. The Earl of Surrey (ca. 1517–1547) offers a catalog of what one would need to be happy:

The Happy Life

Martial, the things that do attain
The happy life be these, I find:
The riches left, not got with pain;
The fruitful ground, the quiet mind:

The equal friend, no grudge nor strife;
No charge of rule nor governance;
Without disease, the healthful life;
The household of continuance:

The mean diet, no delicate fare;
True wisdom join'd with simpleness;
The night discharged of all care,
Where wine and wit may not oppress:

The faithful wife, without debate;
Such sleeps as may beguile the night:
Contented with thine own estate
Ne wish for death, ne fear his might.

Robert Herrick (1591–1674) composed an inventory of his poetic subjects, a kind of table of contents in closed couplets:

The Argument of His Book

I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers:
Of April, May, of June, and July-flowers.
I sing of may-poles, hock-carts, wassails, wakes,
Of bride-gowns, brides, and of their bridal-cakes.
I write of youth, of love, and have access
By these, to sing of cleanly-wantonness.
I sing of dews, of rains, and piece by piece
Of balm, of oil, of spice and ambergris.
I sing of times trans-shifting; and I write
How roses first came red, and lilies white.
I write of groves, of twilights, and I sing
The court of Mab, and of the Fairie-King.
I write of hell; I sing (and ever shall)
Of heaven, and hope to have it after all.

John Milton (1608–1674) describes an entire council of fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* (Book II). William Blake used a partial catalog in his poem “Jerusalem” and in other poems.

One of the most delightful (and peculiar) catalogs in literature occurs in Christopher Smart’s *Jubilate Agno*, a long visionary poem consisting of fragments, each of which begins with either “Let” or “For.” It is a detailed portrait of his cat Jeoffry:

For I will consider my cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God and daily serving him.
For at first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For is this done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For then he leaps up to catch the musk which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.
For he rolls upon prank to work it in.
For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.
For this he performs in ten degrees.
For first he looks upon his fore-paws to see if they are clean.
For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.
For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the fore-paws extended.
For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.
For fifthly he washes himself.
For sixthly he rolls upon wash.
For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat.
For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.
For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.
For tenthly he goes in quest of food.
For having consider’d God and himself he will consider his neighbor.
For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.
For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance.
For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.
For when his day’s work is done his business more properly begins.
For he keeps the Lord’s watch in the night against the adversary.
For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin & glaring eyes.
For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.
For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.
For he is of the tribe of Tiger.
For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger.
For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent, which in goodness he suppresses.
For he will not do destruction if he is well-fed, neither will he spit without provocation.
For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he’s a good cat.
For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon.
For every house is incomplete without him & a blessing is lacking in the spirit.
For the lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt.
For every family had one cat at least in the bag.
For the English cats are the best in Europe.

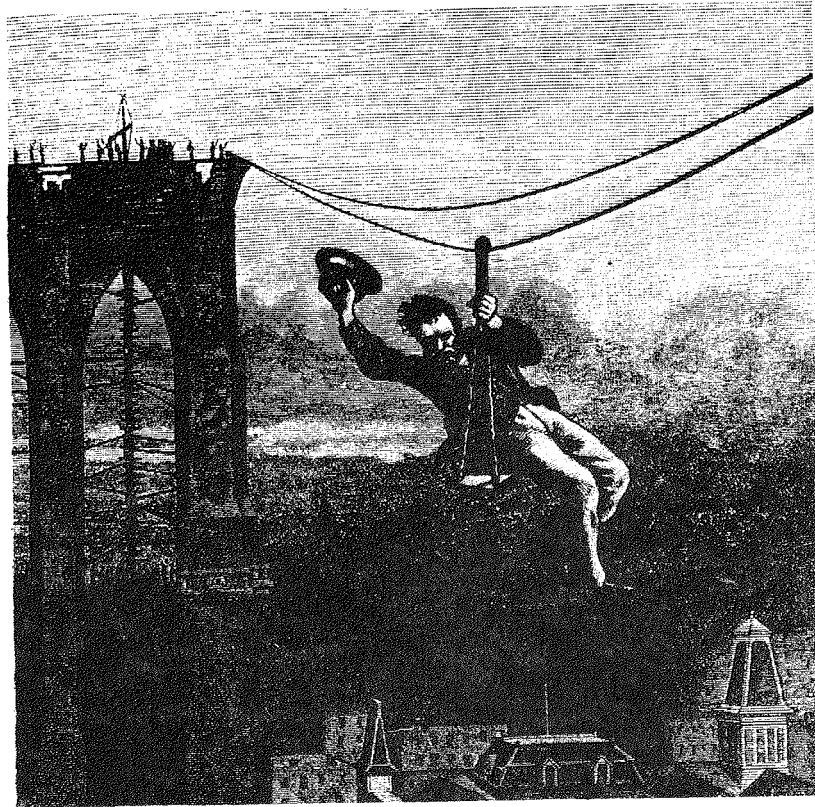
For he is the cleanest in the use of his fore-paws of any quadruped.
 For the dexterity of his defence is an instance of the love of God to him exceedingly.
 For he is the quickest to his mark of any creature.
 For he is tenacious of his point.
 For he is a mixture of gravity and waggery.
 For he knows God is his Savior.
 For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.
 For there is nothing brisker than his life when in motion.
 For he is of the Lord's poor and so indeed is he called by benevolence perpetually—Poor Jeoffry! poor Jeoffry the rat has bit thy throat.
 For I bless the name of the Lord Jesus that Jeoffry is better.
 For the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in complete cat.
 For his tongue is exceedingly pure so that it has in purity what it wants in music.
 For he is docile and can learn certain things.
 For he can set up with gravity which is patience upon approbation.
 For he can fetch and carry, which is patience in employment.
 For he can jump over a stick which is patience upon proof positive.
 For he can spraggle upon waggle at the word of command.
 For he can jump from an eminence into his master's bosom.
 For he can catch the cork and toss it again.
 For he is hated by the hypocrite and miser.
 For the former is afraid of detection.
 For the latter refuses the charge.
 For he camels his back to bear the first notion of business.
 For he is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly.
 For he made a great figure in Egypt for his signal services.
 For he killed the Icneumon-rat very pernicious by land.
 For his ears are so acute that they sting again.
 For from this proceeds the passing quickness of his attention.
 For by stroking of him I have found out electricity.
 For I perceived God's light about him both wax and fire.
 For the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from heaven to sustain the bodies both of man and beast.
 For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.
 For, tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.
 For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other quadruped.
 For he can tread to all the measures upon the music.
 For he can swim for life.
 For he can creep.

Catalog verse is, of course, not strictly a western form. The following Navajo supplication is probably derived from an oral tradition that began long before Europeans arrived in North America.

A Prayer of the Night Chant

Tségihi.
 House made of dawn.
 House made of evening light.
 House made of the dark cloud.
 House made of male rain.
 House made of dark mist.
 House made of female rain.
 House made of pollen.
 House made of grasshoppers.
 Dark cloud is at the door.
 The trail out of it is dark cloud.
 The zigzag lightning stands high upon it.
 Male deity!
 Your offering I make.
 I have prepared a smoke for you.
 Restore my feet for me.
 Restore my legs for me.
 Restore my body for me.
 Restore my mind for me.
 This very day take out your spell for me.
 Your spell remove for me.
 You have taken it away for me.
 Far off it has gone.
 Happily I recover.
 Happily my interior becomes cool.
 Happily I go forth.
 My interior feeling cool may I walk.
 No longer sore, may I walk.
 Impervious to pain, may I walk.
 With lively feelings may I walk.
 As it used to be long ago, may I walk.
 Happily may I walk.
 Happily, with abundant dark clouds, may I walk.
 Happily, with abundant showers, may I walk.
 Happily, with abundant plants, may I walk.
 Happily, on a trail of pollen, may I walk.
 Happily may I walk.
 Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk.
 May it be beautiful before me.
 May it be beautiful behind me.
 May it be beautiful below me.
 May it be beautiful above me.
 May it be beautiful all around me.
 In beauty it is finished.

Catalog verse began to change in the nineteenth century. Walt Whitman broadened the spectrum of things and experiences that could be included in list poetry. In his work there is a realization of the interconnectedness of all life's aspects; the individual becomes aware of being at one with the world. (Native Americans realized this too, long before Whitman.) The final section of his "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" contains a list of dramatic commands that celebrate everything he can see as he crosses the East River:



Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
 Flow on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
 Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!
 Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
 Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!
 Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
 Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
 Gaze, loving and thirsty eyes, in the house or street or public assembly!
 Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my nighest name!
 Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
 Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it! [. . .]
 Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;
 Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
 Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water!
 Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters!
 Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!

Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses! [. . .]

Randall Jarrell's essay "Some Lines from Whitman" (in *Poetry and the Age*) takes a close look at how Whitman proceeds with his panoramic list-making:

Whitman is more coordinate and parallel than anybody, is *the* poet of parallel present participles, of twenty verbs joined by a single subject: all this helps to give his work its feeling of raw hypnotic reality, of being that world which also streams over us joined only by *ands*, until we supply the subordinating conjunctions; and since as children we see the *ands* and not the *because*s, this method helps to give Whitman some of the freshness of childhood. How inexhaustibly interesting the world is to Whitman!

Jarrell goes on:

Very often the things presented form nothing but a list:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,

The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
 The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
 The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and rye,
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
 (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)
 The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
 He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blur with the manuscript,
 The malfom'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
 What is removed drops horribly in a pail; . . .

It is only a list—but what a list! And how delicately, in what different ways—likeness and opposition and continuation and climax and anti-climax—the transitions are managed, whenever Whitman wants to manage them. Notice them in the next quotation, another “mere list”:

The bride unrumple her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
 The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,
 The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck . . .

The first line is joined to the third by *unrumple* and *draggles*, *white dress* and *shawl*; the second to the third by *rigid head*, *bobs*, *tipsy*, *neck*; the first to the second by *slowly*, *just-open'd*, and the slowing-down of time in both states. And occasionally one of these lists is metamorphosed into something we have no name for; the man who would call the next quotation a mere list—anybody will feel this—would boil his babies up for soap.

Ever the hard unsunk ground,
 Ever the eaters and drinkers, ever the upward and downward sun,
 Ever myself and my neighbors, refreshing, wicked, real,
 Ever the old inexplicable query, ever that thorned thumb, that breath of itches and thirsts,
 Ever the vexer's hoot! hoot! till we find where the sly one hides and bring him forth,
 Ever the sobbing liquid of life,
 Ever the bandage under the chin, ever the trestles of death.

Since Whitman, lists have been used more prevalently by twentieth-century European poets, especially those influenced by him, such as Valery Larbaud, Federico García Lorca, Fernando Pessoa, and Pablo Neruda.

Allen Ginsberg's poetry has Whitman's inclusiveness and generosity, and something of Whitman's incisiveness. He, too, is a writer of the biblical long line—a tradition typical of American poetics, from Whitman through Edward Carpenter, Vachel Lindsay, Robinson Jeffers, Marsden Hartley, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery, and in the expansive prose of Herman Melville, Thomas Wolfe, and Jack Kerouac. Ginsberg's most well-known poems, “Howl” and “Kaddish,” are fine examples of long-lined catalog verse, using phrase repetition to create dramatic intensity:

[. . .]
 who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall, suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark's bleak furnished room,
 who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts,
 who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night,
 who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kaballa because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas,
 who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels,
 who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy,
 who jumped in limousines with the Chinamen of Oklahoma on the impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain,
 who lounged hungry and lonesome though Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa,
 who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind nothing but the shadow of dungarees and the lava and ash of poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago
 [. . .]

(from “Howl”)

The inclusiveness of long lines seems to encourage catalogs, but contemporary list poems can be short too, as you will see in some of the examples I give later.

Lists and List Poems

The first thing I did in preparing material for *The List Poem* was to make a list of ideas and arrange them in order of importance. I barely noticed that I was making a list. List-making is such a familiar activity that most of us take it for granted and seldom, if ever, pay attention to the list or catalog as a form in itself. Lists are the stuff of everyday life: shopping lists, stock inventories, rosters and attendance sheets, reminders, telephone and address books, travel itineraries and other schedules, price lists, dictionaries, vocabularies, instructions, tables of contents, indices, bibliographies, card catalogs, mail-order catalogs, recipes, menus, rules and regulations, contest results, top tens, hit parades, best dressed, worst dressed, most wanted, blessings, wish lists, resolutions, deadly sins, commandments, musketeers, dwarfs, seas, winds, Days of Christmas, Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Pillars of Wisdom, Wonders of the World. And there you have it—a list of lists.

Good lists and catalogs are compelling. Witness the popularity of *The Guinness Book of World Records* or *The Book of Lists*. Some lists are personal notes, reminders jotted down randomly on scraps of paper. Other lists are carefully considered, detailed, prioritized, typed or even published, posted or distributed. Most lists are practical, though some people keep lists compulsively, or for no apparent reason. F. Scott Fitzgerald, throughout his life, kept a descriptive list of all the many shoes he owned. P. F. Herman of Hull, England, recorded each time and place he sneezed. Many people keep diaries that note everything they eat. Making lists begins early in childhood. Toddlers learn to keep track of their toes (“This little piggy. . .”), rudimentary counting, and the ABCs. Certain nursery rhymes and songs, such as “The House That Jack Built” or “Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” are catalogs of a sort. This rote learning may involve ordering items in sequences and groups, giving the list a particular shape or character.

Having considered the list as a natural form and indicated some of its uses in society, we now come to the list *poem*. What exactly *is* it, you may well ask, and what is the difference between a *list* and a *list poem*? Here are some basic types and functions of the latter:

1) to define a concept, person, or thing (e.g., beauty, a teacher, a submarine) by listing its different facets, characteristics, actions, or effects.

2) a listing of things to show progression, generation, or commonality, usually without transitional ideas or phrases (to further compactness and dramatic effect).

3) instruction, prescription, guidance—things to do and how to do them.

4) a display of order and classification; inventories.

5) chronologies, milestones, history records.

As to when or how a list becomes a poem, there are a number of opinions and considerations. A mere shopping list or recipe doesn’t necessarily add up to a poem. Something else must happen along the way.

Surprise in the sequence—a poetic bump in the road—is often desirable. The inclusion of something that doesn’t belong will appeal to the eye, the imagination, and hopefully a sense of humor:

wolf
bear
ant
turkey
leopard
shoelaces
whale
anteater
skunk

—Anonymous

In the list above, the placement is of vital importance. If *shoelaces* came first it would be anticlimactic; if last, too obvious. A certain amount of build-up (expectation) and release gives the list poem a shape, in which surprise is possible.

A list poem can occasionally *begin* with a surprise: “I am afraid of being trapped in an umbrella.” It’s often a matter of choosing what to spring on the unsuspecting reader and when to spring it—timing. You’ll find many of the poems in this book teeming with unexpected words, images, and even sounds.

Sometimes an odd concept for a sequence can qualify it as a poem. For example, a combination of real and imaginary haircuts is not exactly a run-of-the-mill poetic topic. Among other offbeat ideas: Anne Waldman’s “Things That Go Away and Come Back,” Charles North’s “Lineups,” David Antin’s “Delusions of the Insane,” and Paul Simon’s song, “Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover.”

Gertrude Stein wrote, “Poetry is loving the name of anything.” Names in themselves can have an evocative quality and a list of them can constitute a poem, depending on the treatment—their juxtapositions, sound, rhythm, and certain indefinable associative characteristics. Names of places along a route or on a travel itinerary often stir the imagination. Lists of place names appear commonly in popular and folk music, as well as in poetry. Johnny Mercer’s “Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe,” Bobby Troup’s “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66,” and Hank Snow’s “I’ve Been Everywhere,” are fine examples of the genre. John Ashbery’s poem “Into the Dusk-Charged Air” contains the name of a river in each of its 152 lines. The lines wind and flow like a river:

[. . .]

The Rhone slogs along through whitish banks
And the Rio Grande spins tales of the past.
The Loire bursts its frozen shackles
But the Moldau's wet mud ensnares it.
The East catches the light.
Near the Escaut the noise of the factories echoes
And the sinuous Humboldt gurgles wildly.
The Po too flows, and the many-colored
Thames. Into the Atlantic Ocean
Pours the Garonne. Few ships navigate
On the Housatonic, but quite a few can be seen
On the Elbe. For centuries
The Afton has flowed.

 If the Rio Negro
Could abandon its song, and the Magdalena
The jungle flowers, the Tagus
Would still flow serenely, and the Ohio
Abrade its slate banks [. . .]

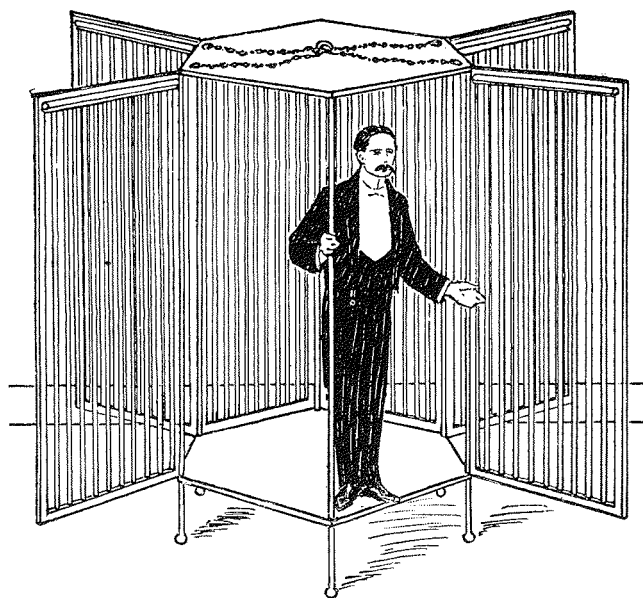
Henry Thomas's song "Railroadin' Some" is little more than an itemization of the towns he passes through on a train ride, but it has the joy of travel in it:

Leaving Fort Worth, Texas!
Going through Dallas!
Hello, Terrell!
Grand Saline!
Silver Lake!
Mineola!
Tyler!
Longview!
Jefferson!
Marshall!
Little Sandy!
Big Sandy!
Texarkana!
I'm on my way but I don't know where!

On occasion, one runs across a published list—a found item—so strange and exotic that it's like a poem, such as this excerpt from a magic shop catalog:

Electronic Lucky Light
High Sign
Spear-it Knife
Trapezy Ribbon
The Rattle Box
Chapeaugraphy
Melto Ring
Sucker Chinese Paper Tear
The Scotch Purse
Crystal Fire Bowl
French Paddles
Technicolor Thimbles
Glorious Beer
The Crawler
Nest of Alarm Clocks

Fraidy Cat Rabbit
Popsy Pegs
Spotted Milk
Eerie Ribbons
Improved Proxy Substitution Chest



The Appealing Orange Box
Mental Epic
The Goofus Plant (Deluxe)
Invisible Bovine
Rubber Canaries
Flash

The word combinations themselves are magical; and one wonders what all this stuff *does*.

The attraction of such "found poems," other than their strangeness, is in their variety and randomness; they have many unanticipated "bumps in the road." On the other hand, obsessive organization in composing is also fascinating, especially when it goes to extremes. Swiss philosopher Max Picard's *The World of Silence* obsesses over the word *silence*, which appears in almost every sentence in the book! Of course, catalog verse often takes on a slightly hypnotic or crazed quality through systematic repetition or an accumulation of images and sounds.

Another way for a list to become a poem is through heightened emotion, a cumulative build-up of excitement or excitedness. One thinks of the epic-scale, long-lined poems of Walt Whitman or Allen Ginsberg, but even a simple list can possess this quality. The bone-bare itinerary of Henry Thomas's "Railroadin' Some" becomes charged with emotion—even if one disregards the exclamation points—as his trip continues.

As I mentioned earlier, list poetry can also occur in prose. Rabelais is the first author who comes to mind.

Writers as diverse as James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Kerouac, and Donald Barthelme delighted in lists of all kinds. John Cheever once said, “You can use an invitation list as a lyrical poem. A sort of evocation.” In his story, “The Swimmer,” Cheever includes a list of names representing stops on the protagonist’s route as he tries to swim across town via his neighbors’ swimming pools:

The only maps and charts we had to go by were remembered or imaginary but these were clear enough. First there were the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups. He would cross Ditmar Street to the Bunkers and come, after a short portage, to the Levys, the Welchers, and the public pool in Lancaster. Then there were the Hallorans, the Sachses, the Biswangers, Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins and the Clydes.

Jack Kerouac’s books abound in poetic lists of things seen, heard, eaten, or imagined. This is from *Lonesome Traveler*:

I saw that Frisco California white and gray of rain fogs and the back alleys of bottles, breens, derbies, mustachios of beer, oysters, flying seals, crossing hills, bleak bay windows, eye diddle for old churches with handouts for seadogs barking and snurling in avenues of lost opportunity time, ah—loved it all . . .

There is no absolute way of telling when a list becomes a list poem: it is often a matter of individual perception. Some lists remain just lists, while others “take off.”

Taking Off from Sei Shonagon

Sei Shonagon was a lady-in-waiting to Empress Sadako, 1,000 years ago during the Heian period in Japan. She is the author of *The Pillow Book*, a large collection of notebooks containing diary entries, nature descriptions, portraits of court figures, gossip, anecdotes, and incidental impressions. They were jotted down in haphazard fashion throughout Shonagon’s ten years’ service at the Imperial Court, and kept near her bedside in the privacy of her room. She described the writing as “odd facts, stories from the past, and all sorts of other things, often including the most trivial material. . . . I concentrated on things and people that I found charming and splendid; my notes are also full of poems and observations on trees and plants, birds and insects.” The poems were disappointingly conventional, but the great scholar Arthur Waley called her “the best poet of her time, a fact that is apparent only in her prose.”

Shonagon was a fanatical list-maker. *The Pillow Book* contains 164 lists, many with commentary or description. Her topics include: *Things That Make One’s Heart Beat Faster*; *Clouds*; *Poetic Subjects* (“Hail, bamboo grass”); *Rare Things*; *Oxen Should Have Very Small Foreheads*; *Things That Arouse a Fond Memory of the Past* (“Last year’s paper fan”); *Unsuitable Things* (“Ugly handwriting on red paper”); *Insects* (“I feel very sorry for the basket worm”); *Things That Have Lost Their Power*; *Things That Give a Hot Feeling*; *Different Ways of Speaking*; *Illnesses*; *Things That Are Near Though Distant*; *People Who Seem to Suffer*; *Things That Give a Clean Feeling*. This potpourri of themes is unified by Shonagon’s concise, limpid prose style.



Elegant Things

A white coat worn over a violet waistcoat.
Duck eggs.
Shaved ice mixed with liana syrup and put in a new silver bowl.
A rosary of rock crystal.
Wisteria blossoms. Plum blossoms covered with snow.
A pretty child eating strawberries.

Things That Give a Clean Feeling

An earthen cup. A new metal bowl.
A rush mat.
The play of light on water as one pours it into a vessel.
A new wooden chest.

Things That Give an Unclean Feeling

A rat's nest.
Someone who is late in washing his hands in the morning.
White snivel, and children who sniffle as they walk.
The containers used for oil.
Little sparrows.
A person who does not bathe for a long time even though the water is hot.
All faded clothes give me an unclean feeling, especially those that have glossy colors.

Adorable Things

The face of a child drawn on a melon.
A baby sparrow that comes hopping up when one imitates the squeak of a mouse, or again, when one has tied it with a thread round its leg and its parents bring insects or worms and pop them in its mouth—delightful!
A baby of two or so is crawling rapidly along the ground. With his sharp eye he catches sight of a tiny object and, picking it up with his pretty little fingers, takes it to show a grownup person.
A child, whose hair has been cut like a nun's, is examining something; the hair falls over his eyes, but instead of brushing it away he holds his head to one side. The pretty white cords of his trouser-skirt are tied round his shoulders, and this too is most adorable.
A young Palace page, who is still quite small, walks by in ceremonial costume.
One picks up a pretty baby and holds him for a while in one's arms; while one is fondling him, he clings to one's neck and then falls asleep.
The objects used during the Display of Dolls.
One picks up a tiny lotus leaf that is floating on a pond and examines it. Not only lotus leaves, but little hollyhock flowers, and indeed all small things, are most adorable.
An extremely plump baby, who is about a year old and has a lovely white skin, comes crawling towards one,

dressed in a long gauze robe of violet with the sleeves tucked up.

A little boy of about eight reads aloud from a book in his childish voice.
Pretty, white chicks who are still not fully fledged and look as if their clothes are too short for them; cheeping loudly, they follow one on their long legs, or walk close to the mother hen.
Duck eggs.
An urn containing the relics of some holy person.
Wild pinks.

I once asked my students in a college poetry workshop to write, as a means of getting acquainted, a list of fifty things they liked a lot. (We also wrote lists of what we didn't like.) Fifty is a high enough number to ensure variety. Alison Burns' response covers a broad spectrum of abstract concepts and concrete images:

the land	sari lounging
black	national forests
walking	listening
driving large cars	leading people
dirt floors	early morning fresh fruit
dreaming	holding books
the ocean	reading
backpacking	Pernod
crowds	kindness
amusing men	to play
onyx	my writing
olives	experiments
private libraries	people watching
relaxing on mountaintops	airports
three weeks camping	masquerade parties
dogs following me	music
movies	intimate friends
devastating dresses	antiques
gracious women	marble
old houses	ancient graveyards
gentlemen	window seats
madcap journeys	intense discussion
grapevines	animals
jasmine	lace (black)
rich travel	revolution

Alison's poem was composed on the spot; the order is random and there's a little overlapping. The items veer from the general (play, experiments, listening, music) to the precise (Pernod, jasmine, dirt floors, window seats, olives). One can appreciate the distinction between "holding books" and "reading." And "sari lounging" sounds like exotic fun.

Feather pillows, full moon, memories, cleansing cream, black (lace, velvet, ribbon, dress), mermaids, first cigarette when I wake up, Korean pottery, Big Mac, old

theatre, Rocky Mountains, wild trees, vapor trails, shadow of the clouds, bridges over rivers, clear sky on a chilly night, signal at sunrise and sunset, red lipstick, Japanese old vocabulary, ruby-colored drinks, candles, pearl necklaces, tulips, piano, white linen, fragrance, crystal glasses, backstage, swings, 50¢ coffee from the deli, discords, balance (space, rhythm, color, movement), high ceilings, continuous numbers, chocolate cake with milk, outdoor swimming pools at night, white radish, poppies, hot baths, supermarkets, Evian water, letters, rivers, matches, school uniforms, white walls, blue lights, boxwood combs, big windows, shadow of myself on the wall.

—*Kumiko Ueki*

This “50 Things” poem by another workshop member has a fragile, floating (dare I say Shonagonesque?) quality. Kumiko, who was born in Portland, Oregon, and raised in Japan and India, mixes her Eastern and Western sensibilities here. “Big Mac” creates a thud, coming just after “Korean pottery.” I love the oddness of some choices (continuous numbers, cleansing cream, school uniforms). “Discords” refers to music, but I’m not sure what the “signal at sunrise” can be.

“50 Things I Like” may not be the best assignment for young children. Why? Their limited experience might result in less diversified and detailed catalogs. I’ve used other generalized themes for lists, such as beauty, ugliness, and sadness; they’ve worked fairly well, especially when I’ve taken dictation on the blackboard from an entire class, or, as in the following example, from smaller groups:

Beautiful

I am beautiful
 So are you
 He isn’t so beautiful
 She is only kind of beautiful
 That dog is really ugly
 What is really beautiful?
 Butterflies with their pink and orange spots are beautiful
 Roses blooming in a pot in the spring
 Hamburgers dripping with ketchup, pickles, and onions
 are beautiful when you’re starving to death in front of
 McDonald’s
 Imani is beautiful right now
 She will be beautiful tomorrow
 And forever
 Coney Island is beautiful with rides and games, sand and
 waves, treats and prizes
 Those beautiful green waves are rapid and salty
 Stars when they glow in the darkness like Winnie’s eyes
 are extremely beautiful

Kittens when they roll a ball of yarn and make a big mess
 in your living room
 Beautiful purple screaming firecrackers
 Gleaming jumping jacks
 Santa Claus when he shoots down the chimney and plops
 like Jello at the bottom
 Circus clowns smiling you to the wacko house
 Your beautiful heart pounding important blood through all
 the sections of your big fat body
 Hair in a pom pom
 Hair in a flattop
 Hair in a gumby
 Hair in a twist
 Dances of all the states are wonderful
 The Georgia Break
 The Mississippi Backflip
 The Alabama Lambda
 The Connecticut Hula
 The Virginia Bump
 The Kentucky Funky Chicken
 The Texas Electric Slide
 The Louisiana Bus Stop
 The California Heartbeat
 And the extremely elegant ballet of the nations all across
 the concrete surface of the earth
 Just beautiful!
 Ducks as they wobble into their slimy pond
 Lightning bugs lighting up as you sit on a bench and stare
 into the night
 The beauty of milk
 The beauty of lowfat ham
 Gorgeous girls with lips of glass
 Cute little baby blue jays
 Pretty bunnies hopping in your flower garden
 Nice old fat ladies with baskets of candies
 Handsome men and boys in ties and pants
 Perfect circles
 Special insects with bubbling backs and sticky antennae
 Neon hats
 Quiet lakes
 Helpful schools
 Superman rejects
 Rap and reggae
 Colorful balls bouncing down the stairs
 Yo-yos
 G.I. Joes
 Fingers and toes
 Rainbows so bright your eyes go blank
 Black Beauty
 The Beast who is a very nice protector for the woman
 who loves him even though nobody else can stand
 him
 Designs of shapes and colors that sparkle in silent
 museums
 Painters with their beautiful brushes making bowls of fruit
 to entertain and please the people
 Good teachers are beautiful
 Money—but only if it’s used right

Sleep is the most beautiful thing when your bones need to stretch out on cool sheets
 My mother is really beautiful
 In fact, just about everything can be beautiful
 If you give it a chance
 —Carlton Selby, Gregory Hamberry, David Lee Waters, Imani Prysock, Winnie Burgess, Ruth Kendall, fourth grade

Despite its conventional ending, “Beautiful” is very dynamic. At the end of the delightful minilist of dances, it peaks in a Whitmanesque crescendo with the “extremely elegant ballet of the nations.” Then, the more varied catalog starts up again and, along the way, we encounter some strange surprises: “Neon hats,” “lips of glass,” “bubbling backs.” I guess someone thought of “lowfat ham” as a beauty aide.

The following third grade collaboration has something of Shonagon’s lucid, contemplative feeling:

Quiet

Restaurants are quiet when people are dating
 A motel is very quiet
 In the dark there is always quiet
 A snake is silent
 An ant is quiet
 It’s quiet in the park
 A lamp is quiet
 A window is quiet
 It’s quiet when you go to your house by yourself
 It is quiet when your mother is sleeping
 Rabbits are quiet
 It’s quiet in church
 Winter is quiet
 The library is very quiet
 The quiet deer
 Slowly moments are quiet
 A hotel is quiet
 The sun is quiet
 A harp is quiet
 A lizard is quiet
 A turtle is quiet
 Plants are quiet
 My friend Mary is peaceful and quiet
 The moon is quiet
 —Third grade group

List Poems and Fixed Form: Rhymed Couplets

In a fourth grade class, around Thanksgiving, we were trying to work up a list poem of things the kids were thankful for. The results were predictable and flat. I can’t

remember how, but we kind of spilled over into speculating what Superman would be thankful for: “his cape.” Then, one rhyme-happy kid said something silly using a cape/grape rhyme. We wound up with “Superman is thankful for his cape / Wine is thankful for a grape.”

That started an avalanche of rhymed couplets. As in the Whitman couplets, we began by asking who or what was thankful for what (the first line of each couplet)? Then we’d get the rhyme for the second line, then complete the couplet. The kids loved the shifting, gamelike activity.

Grateful Words

The dog is thankful for his bone
 The sculptor is thankful for his stone
 The snake is thankful for its skin
 The shark is thankful for its fin
 The mustache is thankful for its lip
 The jump rope is thankful for its skip
 Airplanes are thankful for the air
 Heads are thankful for some hair
 Pencils are thankful for their points
 Knuckles are thankful for their joints
 A copycat is thankful for his neighbor
 A baby is thankful for its mother’s labor
 A worm is thankful for dirt
 A water pistol is thankful for a squirt
 Arms are thankful for a hug
 A frog is thankful for a bug
 A flag is thankful for its pole
 Rock is thankful for roll
 A chicken’s thankful for its wings
 A park is thankful for its swings
 Electricity is thankful for light
 Manners are thankful for “polite”
 The dinosaurs are thankful for their museum
 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is thankful for his dream
 A teacher is thankful for her brain
 The tracks are thankful for a train
 A studio is thankful for its art
 Love is thankful for a heart
 —Third to fifth grade group

As a warm-up, you might want to read the first lines of some of these couplets to your students and have them supply new second lines. ●

Larry Fagin’s new book, *The List Poem: A Guide to Teaching & Writing Catalog Verse*, is now available from T&W. The \$11.95 price includes a free 30-minute audiotape and free shipping.

Two Books of Lists

The ESL Miscellany: A Treasury of Cultural and Linguistic Information

by Raymond C. Clark, Patrick R. Moran, & Arthur A. Burrows

Pro Lingua Associates, 15 Elm St., Brattleboro, VT 05301

\$14.95 paperback, revised edition, 292 pp.

This is one of those books that you casually pick up to glance through and later realize that you've been reading it for over an hour and you don't want to stop, it's so interesting. It's so interesting because it puts you in the place of the reader for whom its information is ultimately intended, immigrants who are trying not only to learn English, but to absorb, as quickly as possible, the whole American cultural milieu. Much of the information is presented in the form of lists (entertainers of the 1940s, contemporary insults, etc.), some of which read like list poems. In fact, the enterprising teacher could use many of these lists as the basis for teaching list poetry. Never mind that this book was originally intended for ESL teachers. Like a Swiss Army knife, this big book, now back in print, could prove useful at unexpected times and in surprising ways.

One Who Goes Everywhere: the Ubiquaraian's Dictionary

by Susanna Cuyler

B. Rugged Books, 11 South Adelaide Ave., Highland Park, NJ 08904

\$11 paperback postpaid, 160 pp.

If you've ever played Scrabble or Dictionary and found yourself grabbing for the dictionary in disbelief, or if you just like weird, or old, or uncommon words, then you'll like this book, which was compiled by Susanna Cuyler from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, *Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary of Unusual, Obscure, and Preposterous Words*, and *Webster's International*. Here are a few examples and their meanings: izzat (prestige), sloom (to doze), gongoozler (one who stares at something for hours), scoon (to skip a stone on water's surface), rencounter (sudden fight), quop (to throb), paraph (the flourish at a signature's conclusion). But what about ort, moliminous, and fliffis? You'll find them, and about 1,500 others, in this funny little book.

—Ron Padgett ●

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